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Women Lack 'Natural Ability' In Some Fields, Harvard President Says

Comments Came At Economic Conference

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass -- The president of Harvard University prompted criticism for suggesting that innate differences between the sexes could help explain why fewer women succeed in science and math careers.



AP Image

Harvard President Lawrence Summers

Lawrence H. Summers, speaking Friday at an economic conference, also questioned how great a role discrimination plays in keeping female scientists and engineers from advancing at elite universities.

The remarks prompted Massachusetts Institute of Technology biologist Nancy Hopkins - a Harvard graduate - to walk out on Summers' talk, *The Boston Globe* reported.

"It is so upsetting that all these brilliant young women (at Harvard) are being led by a man who views them this way," Hopkins said later.

Five other participants in the National Bureau of Economic Research conference, including Denice D. Denton, chancellor designate of the University of California, Santa Cruz, also said they were offended by the comments. Four other attendees contacted afterward by the *Globe* said they were not.

Summers told the *Globe* he was discussing hypotheses based on the scholarly work assembled for the conference, not expressing his own views. He also said more research needs to be done on the issues.

Conference organizers said Summers was asked to be provocative, and that he was invited as a top economist, not as a Harvard official.

The two-day, invitation-only conference of the Cambridge-based National Bureau of Economic Research drew about 50 economists from around the country to discuss women and minorities in science and engineering.

Summers declined to provide a tape or transcript of his remarks, but he did describe comments to the *Globe* similar to what participants recalled.

"It's possible I made some reference to innate differences," he said. He said people "would prefer to believe" that the differences in performance between the sexes are due to social factors, "but these are things that need to be studied."

He also cited as an example one of his daughters, who as a child was given two trucks in an effort at gender-neutral upbringing. Yet he said she named them "daddy truck" and "baby truck," as if they were dolls.

It was during such comments that Hopkins got up and left.

"Here was this economist lecturing pompously (to) this room full of the country's most accomplished scholars on women's issues in science and engineering, and he kept saying things we had refuted in the first half of the day," said Denton, the outgoing dean of the College of Engineering at the University of Washington.

Summers already faced criticism because the number of senior job offers to women has dropped each year of his three-year presidency.

He has promised to work on the problem.

SURVEY

Do you think Summers' comments about women were offensive?

- Yes
 No
 Not sure

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