Why are there so few notable academic women? - Language on the Move

By Ingrid Piller

Goose Lizzy Fountain, Goettingen: in a city full of memorials to notable men, the most prominent memorial to a woman is to a generic peasant girl.

March 08 is International Women’s Day. Therefore, we will explore gender aspects of academic excellence in a loose series throughout this month.

In January, I was invited to speak at the University of Göttingen. It was my first visit ever to this famous German university and the city that is built around it. For those who don’t know it, one way to think about Göttingen is as the German equivalent of Oxford or Cambridge.

Göttingen is steeped in academic excellence: the university boasts 45 Nobel Prize winners, and wandering through the city and looking at all the names on the commemorative plaques that indicate where a famous person lived or studied is nothing less than awe inspiring. Anyone who has ever used a Bunsen Burner, figured out a Gaussian Normal Distribution, or tried to understand Planck’s Constant has engaged with knowledge created in Göttingen.

Wandering through the city and being wowed by all the big names, it did not take me long to notice that all these names seemed to belong to men. In fact, the only memorial to a woman I saw on my (admittedly not very extensive) walk was not to a pioneering thinker but to a generic peasant girl, Goose Lizzy.

I only had a few hours in Göttingen; and so later I went to check out the Wikipedia list of famous members of the University of Göttingen. There are a breath-taking 637 notable academics on that list, starting with the founder of paleo-biology
Othenio Abel and ending with the polymath Thomas Young. The latter, incidentally, was the first to propose an international phonetic alphabet, which he appended to his 1796 medical dissertation “so as not to leave these pages blank”.

Dorothea von Rodde-Schlözer is not on the list (Image Credit: Wikipedia)

So how many women are there among all these great thinkers, pioneering discoverers and trailblazing researchers? A paltry 23. An unbelievable 3.61 percent.

Can it be true that academic excellence in women is so rare?

The list includes current and former academics. So the lack of opportunity faced by women until the second half of the 20th century might be one explanation. Indeed, 14 out of the 23 women on the list are still alive today. The first woman on the list (in terms of her birthday) is the mathematician Emmy Noether, who was born in 1882.

In Germany, women gained the formal right to study at university only in 1908 although various exceptions had been made before then. If women couldn’t go to university, they obviously had no opportunity to demonstrate academic excellence.

Sofja Kowalewskaja is not on the list (Image Credit: Wikipedia)
That’s not the full explanation, though, as the case of Dorothea von Rodde-Schlözer shows. Dorothea von Rodde-Schlözer is NOT on the Wikipedia list of notable members of the University of Göttingen. And yet, Dorothea von Rodde-Schlözer was the second woman ever to be awarded a PhD at a German university – Göttingen, in fact – in 1787.

The daughter of Professor August Ludwig von Schlözer – whose name is on the list – her education was the result of a bet her father had waged that women’s brains could be equal to men’s if properly trained. She therefore had the best private tutors and learned to speak ten languages (in addition to German, these were Dutch, English, French, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Latin, Spanish, and Swedish). By age 17, Professor Schlözer considered his daughter ready for university. Dorothea was not allowed to enroll, however. To humor her influential father, she was permitted to undertake a private examination at the conclusion of which the PhD was awarded.

This concluded the experiment – the bet was presumably won – and Dorothea was duly married off. Father and daughter went on to co-author a book about the Russian economy. Incidentally, Dorothea von Rodde-Schlözer also became the first German woman to take a double name including both her husband’s and father’s names.

Surely, Dorothea von Rodde-Schlözer’s achievements merit her inclusion in the list. Why is she not there? Because of the technicality that she was not enrolled?

Charlotte von Siebold is not on the list (Image Credit: Wikipedia)

Well, Charlotte von Siebold, who was enrolled as an auditor and who is commonly regarded as the first modern German female gynecologist, is not there, either. The same is true of another three trailblazing academic women, who all received their PhDs in Göttingen: the mathematician Sofja Kowalewskaja (1874), the chemist Julia Lermontowa (1874) and the physicist Margaret Maltby (1895).

That I can identify five notable academic women affiliated with the University of Göttingen who have not made it onto the Wikipedia list of notable members more or less off the top of my head puts the outrageously low number of women on the list in a somewhat different light: their absence is not only the result of the historical exclusion of women but of contemporary ignorance.
The fact that women are less likely to be considered notable, even today, was strikingly illustrated last year when Donna Strickland won the 2018 Physics Nobel Prize. At the time of the award, Donna Strickland did not have a Wikipedia page. Someone had attempted to build a Wikipedia page for her in May 2018 (about half a year before the award) but the submission had been rejected by a Wikipedia moderator on the grounds that “this submission’s references do not show that the subject qualifies for a Wikipedia article.” The male joint winner, Gérard Mourou, had had a Wikipedia entry since 2005 ...

That there have been more notable men than women throughout history is the result of centuries of patriarchal domination. That we do not know about the achievements of many female thinkers, researchers and scientists is the result of the ongoing dismissal of women’s contributions. Even today, female achievement is ignored and judged by different standards. The latter in turn cements the perception that academic excellence is a male prerogative.

If you’d like to make a difference this International Women’s Day, why not get...
onto Wikipedia and add Dorothea von Rodde-Schlözer, Charlotte von Siebold, Sofja Kowalewskaja, Julia Lermontowa and Margaret Maltby to the list of notable members of the University of Göttingen? Or curate the page of a notable yet overlooked woman?

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Cecco, L. 2018. Female Nobel prize winner deemed not important enough for Wikipedia entry. *Guardian*