

# INTERNALIZED COLONIAL THINKING AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION

by Neal Koblitz

Last December I went to Hyderabad for an international conference on cryptography. It was well organized and successful; however, I was disappointed that among the Indians who presented their work (roughly half of the presenters were from India) there were no women. I had not expected this, since I knew that the statistics on women in the mathematical sciences in Indian universities are not so bad.

However, in India, as in many of the developing countries that have well-established advanced research institutions (such as China, Vietnam, and Mexico), there is a stratification that works to the disadvantage of women. The main centers of research are at special institutes that are funded more generously than the universities. A position at such an institute is usually better paying and more prestigious than a university professorship. In part this is because the institutes assiduously develop international ties (while not always putting equal effort into maintaining close ties with the universities of their own country), inviting foreign specialists, organizing international meetings, and sending their own researchers abroad for conferences and extended visits. Unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge in virtually all such institutes women are drastically underrepresented — even in countries such as India and Mexico that have fairly good records of hiring women for university teaching positions.

In analyzing gender in science in these countries, one has to look critically at the extremely high prestige accorded to any form of international ties or recognition. On the one hand, it is understandable that scientists and government officials are eager to find an “unbiased” measure of quality and are worried about intellectual in-breeding and self-interested evaluations by in-country colleagues. On the other hand, the extreme admiration for foreign credentials shown by many people — especially government officials and the upwardly-mobile middle classes — is irrational and unhealthy.

In my articles on higher education in Vietnam — see <http://www.math.washington.edu/~koblitz/vn.html>

— I mention that many middle-class people in Vietnam are ignorant enough to believe that an Associate’s Degree from Houston Community College (an institution in which a large number of affluent Vietnamese parents enroll their children) is more worthy of respect than a 4-year degree from Vietnam’s leading government university. Similarly, in India, China, or Mexico it seems that a job candidate with a Ph.D. from one of the country’s *leading* institutes or universities is at a disadvantage in competing with someone who has graduated from a *weak* American Ph.D. program.

At its root this situation is a remnant of colonialism. The internalized prejudice that teaches that everything in the imperial country (or more generally the West) is high-quality and everything in the colony or former colony is low-quality remains deeply imbedded in people’s consciousness even when it is no longer acceptable to openly advocate such a view. Scholars who have written on the problems of neocolonialism — such as the late Edward Saïd — have stressed that the battle for equality of the former colonies must continue in the intellectual sphere long after political independence has been fought for and won.

The excessive value given to foreign credentials has many negative consequences. For example, India and China are faced with an epidemic of falsified credentials. My colleague Guang Gong (who was an organizer of the conference in Hyderabad and the only woman on the podium in the opening ceremonies) told me that the head of Microsoft's large branch in China was later found to have listed in his CV an American Ph.D. from a college that in fact doesn't grant Ph.D.'s in that field (he was then removed).

Another negative consequence is discrimination against women. Because of family and societal pressures, in many countries women find it much harder than comparably qualified men to spend extended periods of time abroad. A talented and accomplished woman is less likely than her male counterpart to boast a foreign degree or postdoc. In the competition for the most prestigious jobs, even if there is no direct gender discrimination (and this is a big "if"), there will be indirect discrimination because of the excessive weight given to any type of recognition from the West.

It is important for leaders of science and technology to understand that a truly modern society must free itself of the inferiority complex that is a legacy of colonialism. If a woman who has a Ph.D. from the Indian Statistical Institute is competing against a man who has a Ph.D. from the University of Alabama, they should unhesitatingly give the job to the woman. That will not only advance gender equity, but also help promote excellence over mediocrity.