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[Transsexual tackles sexism in sciences](#)- [Keay Davidson, Chronicle Science Writer](#)

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The debate over men's and women's roles in scientific research is drawing insights from an unusually well-qualified source, a Stanford scientist who has lived on both sides of the gender fence -- Ben A. Barres, a female-to-male transsexual.

In January 2005, then-Harvard President Lawrence Summers caused a brouhaha when he publicly suggested that women are naturally, perhaps genetically, less inclined than men to seek scientific careers. The furor climaxed with his resignation in February.

In an essay published in today's issue of the journal *Nature*, Barres charges that Summers' suggestion is sexist nonsense that exposes public and academic insensitivity to the severity of discrimination against female science students and scientists.

Barres, a neurobiologist at Stanford Medical School, knows what it's like to be a female scientist and a male one: He is a former female named Barbara who underwent a sex change nine years ago.

Since he became male, "people who don't know I am transgendered treat me with much more respect. I can even complete a whole sentence without being interrupted by a man," Barres writes in his *Nature* article.

Now 51, Barres grew up in New Jersey, where "I'd dress up like a football player for Halloween." The daughter of a salesman and a housewife, Barres recalls her mother gently smacking her legs to encourage her to sit more like a girl -- demurely, with her legs snugly together -- than like a boy with his legs and arms sprawling all over the chair.

As a girl, Barres sensed she was somehow different from other people. In retrospect, he said in an interview, he is amazed that he didn't realize he had something in common with the many highly publicized transsexuals of the 1960s through the 1980s, such as male-to-female transsexual tennis player Renee Richards and Caroline Cossey, a fashion model and James Bond girl.

"I thought these people were freaks," Barres admitted thinking at the time.

A decade ago, Barres developed breast cancer and had a double mastectomy. When a surgeon advised her she could undergo surgery to regain breast tissue, she fired back, "No way!"

"I was so delighted to have my breasts cut off," he recalled as he lounged in an easy chair in his Stanford office Tuesday.

For decades, the most highly publicized transsexuals have been males to females. They include such notables as former top computer scientist Lynn Conway of Xerox Palo Alto Research Center, who is now a professor of electrical engineering and computer science at the University of Michigan, Stanford biology professor and author Joan Roughgarden, and University of Illinois economist Deirdre McCloskey.

The big turning point for Barres came in 1997, when she "got really excited" while reading in *The Chronicle* about James Green, an Oakland native and female-to-male transsexual. Inspired, Barres consulted with a local specialist on sex reassignment, who began treating her with testosterone to masculinize her body.

She became he: With dark body hair and some thinning on top, Barres would be indistinguishable from most any middle-aged man except for one notable difference: He looks more like 31 than 51.

At Stanford, Barres is a tenured professor of neurobiology who studies cells of the nervous system. He also acts as a mentor to students eager to pursue scientific careers.

So he was flabbergasted by Summers' remarks in early 2005. Barres was even more stunned when some well-known male academics either defended the president's remarks or accused those who criticized him of repressing his free speech.

"Like many women and minorities ... I am suspicious when those who are at an advantage proclaim that a disadvantaged group of people is innately less able," Barres wrote in his four-page essay for *Nature*.

He said he's haunted by memories of sexist bigotry during his female youth: "As an undergrad at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology," Barres wrote, "I was the only person in a large class of people of nearly all men to solve a hard math problem, only to be told by the professor that my boyfriend must have solved it for me. I was not given any credit."

In his essay, Barres calls for specific efforts to improve science opportunities for female students and academics, including running fair job searches, improving women's chances of winning research grants, and making it easier for women to cover day care costs for their children.

It's also helpful to cultivate male supporters, he said. "It has been 30 years since I was a medical student," Barres recalled, "but I still recall with gratitude the young male student who immediately complained to a professor who had shown a slide of a nude pinup in his anatomy lecture."

Barres also treasures memories of his Harvard doctoral supervisor, David Corey, who encouraged the shy Barres to imitate aggressive male students by approaching distinguished scientific lecturers and asking them questions. Barres said such forthrightness pays off in any career, including science.

"Life, even in science, is a popularity contest," Barres observed.

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