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Making math uncool is hurting America, report says

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Americans may like to make fun of girls who are good at math, but this attitude is robbing the country of some of its best talent, researchers reported on Friday.

They found that while girls can be just as talented as boys at mathematics, some are driven from the field because they are teased, ostracized or simply neglected.

"The U.S. culture that is discouraging girls is also discouraging boys," Janet Mertz, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor who led the study said in a statement.

"The situation is becoming urgent. The data show that a majority of the top young mathematicians in this country were not born here."

Writing in the Notices of the American Mathematical Society, Mertz and colleagues described their analysis of data from international math competitions going back to 1974. They also looked at surveys of U.S. students.

"It is deemed uncool within the social context of USA middle and high schools to do mathematics for fun; doing so can lead to social ostracism. Consequently, gifted girls, even more so than boys, usually camouflage their mathematical talent to fit in well with their peers," they wrote.

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They also challenged the widespread belief that females lack exceptional math aptitude.

"Innate math aptitude is probably fairly evenly distributed throughout the world, regardless of race or gender," said Titu Andreescu of the University of Texas at Dallas, who worked on the study.

"The huge differences observed in achievement levels are most likely due to socio-cultural attributes specific to each country."

The study looked at how many women faculty members there are in five top U.S. research university mathematics departments. It found 20 percent of them were born in the United States.

"We are wasting this valuable resource," Mertz said. "Girls can excel in math at the very highest level. There are some truly phenomenal women mathematicians out there."

The study also looked at test scores that show that in elementary school girls do as well or better in math than boys. These begin to lag in the middle school years and the gap widens greatly between girls and boys in high school.

Many of the women who become math or engineering professionals come from other countries, notably in eastern Europe and Asia, where mathematics is promoted more, the study found.

"Just as there is concern about the U.S. relying on foreign countries for our oil and manufactured goods, we should also be concerned about relying on others to fill our needs for mathematicians, engineers, and scientists," Joseph Gallian of the University of Minnesota and current president of the Mathematical Association of America, said in a statement.

(Reporting by Maggie Fox; Editing by Xavier Briand)

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