No, sexism is not an issue

It does not exist today, it is mainly the older generations

The gender gap in STEM has not gone unnoticed. Girls Who Code, scholarships catered solely towards woman pursuing STEM degrees, and all-female science clubs are all measures taken to increase and encourage woman with an interest in STEM. So how could there possibly be a STEM issue if all of these resources exist? A 22 year old male physics major, when I asked him what his opinion was on sexism in STEM, pointed this specific issue out, stating

“[There is] so much positive discrimination in terms of advice to (male) professors, advertising physics towards schoolgirls, etc. has massively increased the numbers of women at my university doing physics. And there's no notable perception that "they're there to fill a quota but not actually as good".

These resources are advantages that male students do not have. In past decades, these resources did not exist, and the gender gap was even larger than it was today. Many of the older STEM workers and professors grew up not only in an era where sexism in general was more common than today, but also grew up in an era where, in general, STEM was an “all-boys” club.

A 22 year old male chemical engineering student, when I asked his opinion on the matter, simply stated “Old teachers were sexist. Students are not.”

Which is true. In general, the older members of society are more sexist than others, simply because they grew up in an era were sexism was more common and more accepted than it is today. Take the TV show *Mad Men* for example. The powerful men in the advertising industry were extremely sexist, and used their power to control and manipulate woman. The TV show was set in the 1960’s, when the main jobs held by woman were that of a secretary, receptionist, or other jobs where the main purpose was serving their male bosses. When men display this type of power and dominance over woman, it is not hard to see how those who grew up in this era and witnessed it firsthand simply accepted it as a fact of daily life. Their sexism and general crassness towards woman of today are seen as outdated and disturbing, but to them they see nothing out of the ordinary. It’s like how my grandfather still uses the term “colored”; although the term is deemed racist by today’s standards, he grew up using the word, and throughout his life never thought anything was wrong with it.

But when the workplace and University offices becomes dominated by those of my generation, the STEM world will be more welcoming towards woman, and eventually this gender gap will close. But what if the gender gap issue is not in part due to the sexism, but another, unrelated issue?

STEM is simply more interesting for men

A 21 female mechanical engineering major did not think that sexism in STEM was an issue when I asked for her opinion. She believes that the issue relies with the subject matter instead, telling me that:

“There is nothing beside the subject of interest that steers women away from technical studies. Women are not ostracized for being in the tech community, they are just rarer. Just as males are rarer, yet welcomed, in women studies.”

A male 22 year old aerospace engineering agreed with her, stating

“There's not much prejudice toward women in engineering (in my experience), beyond the obvious fact that there are more men in that field than women. I've never seen a woman or her work demeaned simply due to her gender (or vice versa), nor have I seen a man or his work especially upheld simply by virtue of his gender (or vice versa). Typically, the quality of ones ideas, methods, and results are of much more concern than their sex or gender.”

Just because it is rare to see a woman in the computer lab, does not mean that all woman were driven out due to sexism. Like the female mechanical engineering student above, men are simply more interested in STEM, just like more woman are interested in majors like women’s studies, retail merchandising, and nutrition.

As a male, I admit that I do not see myself ever pursuing those majors. It’s not because I feel that as a male I am not welcome and be discriminated against simply because of my gender, it is simply because I do not have an interest for them.

The Girls Who Code organization mentioned that 74% of middle school girls expressed interesting in STEM related careers, but only 0.3% chose computer science as a major when they went to college. What this statistics fails to take into account is that although a middle school girl is interested in STEM, they may find another field more interesting, such as law or medicine. Just like I am interested in finance and economics as a subject, I am simply more interested in computer science, which is why I chose it.

The Vocal Minority

I do not view myself as sexist. I never question the ideas and opinions that my female coworkers and classmates have simply because they are women. I question females just as much as I do males, but I have noticed male classmates doing the opposite. However, it always seems to be a few students exhibiting this behavior continuously, rather than the majority of students. When I talk to my male friends pursuing STEM careers, they do not believe they are sexist either, and also notice that it is only a few people who tend to exhibit the sexist STEM major stereotype. I talked with a 21 year old female mechanical engineering student who agreed, telling me that

“I think that over 90% of professors and peers that I have ever interacted with treat me as a normal human being and do not differ their thoughts or treatment to me because of my gender. At the U I think I have only heard one professor make a sexist comment that offended me, and I feel fully supported in my major.”

There are always going to be sexist people in this world, and some are more vocal than others. Maybe this is the case in STEM. Maybe people like me, who treat their female counterparts as equals, simply are not vocal enough, and need to call out those who are continuously questioning female students about their ability. The students and professors who question everything a female student does are simply more vocal about it, because when a professor asks a student “Are you sure about that?” it is uncommon for students to speak up and say “I agree with her.” A 20 year old male biology major believe that women are among those most brilliant in his major, saying

“Some of the most brilliant professors and fellow students I have met are women. I have failed to see any sexism in the practice of the STEM community, but if it is there than those perpetrating it are just dumb.”

Maybe the sexism is STEM is over sensationalized

When talking with people who didn’t believe that sexism in STEM was an issue, the majority of them agreed that they have witnessed it. However, I witness sexism in my daily life, and I do not automatically assume that sexism is a massive issue as it was during the mid-19th century. Yes, sexism is still present in all aspects of our daily life and still needs to be regarded a serious issue. However, society has made enormous leaps in gender equality in the last few decades, and maybe sexism within the STEM world is simply an example of the sexism that is still present in our everyday life.