What do STEM students think?

Over the course of a couple weeks, I had the opportunity to talk with 88 STEM students and ask them their opinion about sexism in STEM.

The results surprised me. Over the course of the last decade, the sexism that exists inside of the STEM world has been widely documented, and widely ridiculed. The vast majority of the sexism cases studies have been in the workplace, however, and not the classroom, where the majority of students are more open-minded then our older counterparts.

I asked each of the 88 student’s five questions:

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your major?
4. Have you witnessed or experienced sexism towards woman either in class or in the workplace?
5. Do you believe that sexism is a problem in the STEM community?

38.64% of the students were 22 or older, 19.32% were 21 years old, 30.68% were 20 years old, 9.09% were 19 years old, and 2.27% were 18 years old.

59.09% of interviewees were male, 39.77% were female, and 1.14% identified as neither.

All of the students were in STEM related majors, with the overwhelming majority of students (72.56%) being computer science majors.

Now let’s move on to the meaty part of the questionare.

For the question “Do you believe that sexism is a problem in the STEM community?” 63.64% believed that it was, while 36.36% believed that it was not.

This surprises me. I would have thought that an overwhelming majority of students, at least 85+%, would have responded yes.

This data can be interpreted in two different ways:

Sexism in STEM is on the decline, and students now a days are more tolerant to their female coworkers and classmates, or the students are in denial about sexism is STEM.

The optimistic part of me wants to believe that the former is the case, and the days of sexism and the gender gap that is ever so present in STEM will no longer exist in the near future.

But again, the question can be interpreted in different ways. There is a difference between sexism being a problem in STEM, versus sexism existing and step. Sexism exists in our daily lives and is still an issue that needs to be addressed, and as much as I want to believe that racism isn’t an issue anymore, that is still not the case.

The word “problem” can be interpreted in many ways. When a professor occasionally questions a female students answers, is that considered a problem, although the overwhelming majority of students and other professors wouldn’t do that? To some, any amount of sexism can be called a problem, while others do not think so.

Regardless, if the majority of students do believe that sexism in STEM is a problem, then it must still be.

The fourth questioned I asked, which is “Have you witnessed or experienced sexism towards woman either in class or in the workplace?” was surprising to me as well. 57.95% of students have witnessed sexism in the classroom or workplace, while 42.05% did not.

Again, the definition of sexism may vary among students. Some may view questioning a female student all the time as sexism, while others may not. For some, sexism would be telling that female student to go back to the kitchen, and they would not view the questioning as a form of sexism.

But regardless of the definition of the word, the fact remains that the majority of students have witnessed sexism, and the majority of students think that it is a problem.

Conclusions

I went into this project with an open mind. As a computer science student, I have witnessed my fair share of sexism, but never spoke about it with other students, and never raised the issue to anyone else but my thoughts.

Sexism in STEM, either the workplace or the classroom, is still an issue. When the majority of students interviewed believe that it is a problem and have actually witnessed it themselves, there is no denying it.