Yes, sexism is an issue

On Facebook, I saw a junior female environment engineering major post an article that explains a lot of what is wrong with the current tech community, entitled “The Top 5 Biases Pushing Woman out of Stem.” The first pattern mentioned was called “Prove-It-Again”, and detailed how that “two-thirds of the women interviewed, and two-thirds of the women surveyed, reported having to prove themselves over and over again – their successes discounted, their expertise questioned.” This is a common pattern that will be evident in the common sections. The second pattern, entitled “The Tightrope”, stated that “women need to behave in masculine ways in order to be seen as competent – but women are expected to be feminine.” So these women are walking a so-called tightrope, where they need to act just masculine enough to be taken seriously, and just feminine enough in order to identify as who they are: a woman. The third pattern, entitled “The Maternal Wall”, detailed an important issue involving woman: having children. “When professional women have children, their commitment and competence are questioned, and opportunities start drying up.” The fact that woman need to leave for months at a time is important for a new mother, but workplaces view this as a hindrance, due to the fact that they are paying an employee for months of work that they are not doing. The fourth pattern, entitled “Tug-of-War”, explained that “women who have encountered discrimination early in their careers often distance themselves from other women … an older woman who ‘probably had to go through hell’ made sure younger women did, too.” This is a natural reaction, because those women who suffer through discrimination may think that the younger women who did not suffer did not deserve their permission. The fifth pattern, entitled “Isolation”, which is observed mainly as being directed towards black and Latina women, descried how these women feel like they are out of place. One microbiologist states that “A lot of times … [t]here are things that people exclude me from because they say ‘Oh, she’s going to be the only black person there... just don’t invite her, she won’t feel comfortable.” In this day and age, those thoughts should never cross a person’s mind, but apparently this is being thought more than is expected.

She posted this article with a long caption explaining how someone was finally able to put her thoughts into words. Out of curiosity, I was wondering if she herself has experienced sexism within her major or workplace.

“There was one time when I was helping measure out pavement so we could mark it for removal and the man I was working with didn’t trust that I was reading him the right number off the tape. He made me switch ends with him and said that I probably just wasn’t used to measuring tape, even though I had been using them all summer.”

For me, it’s strange hearing this. She’s been doing the same thing all summer, but the guy he was working with didn’t trust that she was reading a tape measurer correctly? She provided another example, but this was not with a coworker.

“Other times were just talking with my boyfriend when going over homework. If I got a concept before he did, he automatically assumed that I had cheated and looked it up.”

A common theme between these two examples falls in line with the first pattern mentioned, “Prove-It-Again”. The student I talked to has proved herself as an intelligent and hardworking member of her respective major, yet the male coworkers and students continuously questioned what the student did, and she felt like she had to “prove herself”. From what I have noticed, this is the type of sexism that is rampant within the STEM community. This kind of sexism is not direct, like saying that a woman’s answer is wrong, solely because she is a woman, or telling a woman to work on something easier because the hard stuff is for men. It’s when a man, even seemingly subconsciously and not intentionally, questions everything that a woman does, although this same criticism and questioning is not directed towards men.

I asked the female student if she has ever witnessed any sexism towards others, and this is what she had to say:

“I haven’t really witnessed anything firsthand for other people. I feel like sexism tends to be less obvious when there are more women present. Most women I know have experienced some sort of sexism though. I have a friend who goes to NDSU (North Dakota State University) and is studying electrical engineering, and one of her professors from her freshmen year told her that he couldn’t believe she hadn’t changed her major, although she had done well in this class.”

Whether the professor made that comment because he didn’t believe that woman could succeed in electrical engineering or because he couldn’t believe that she didn’t get sick of the sexism that exists is up for debate. Regardless, it was an inappropriate comment that a college level professor should not have made.

For my final question, I asked her why she thought that sexism was a bigger problem in STEM and not other majors:

“I feel that there is more sexism in STEM majors because women are still relatively new to many of the STEM fields. These roles were traditionally held by men and it’s difficult for some people to adjust to a change like that.”

While the fact that men have traditionally held STEM jobs, all jobs were traditionally held by men when women were expected to stay at home. It is still a mystery why other fields such as law and medicine have incorporated women into their fields with little to no problem, but STEM fields are still dominated by men. In fact, a study by the U.S. Department of Commerce (LINK) found that a mere one in seven engineers were women. In addition to that low number, the percentage of women in STEM fields has not grown since 2000.

Why is this? Why has other fields incorporate women with almost no problem?

Part of the problem resides in popular culture. TV shows such as Suits and Parks and Recreation feature women as successful in their fields, which is law and government accordingly. Suits, which is a TV show about the fictional law firm Pearson Hardman and the drama that occurs within the firm, features the powerful and respected lawyer Jessica Pearson. Pearson’s name is on the door, and she is not sexualized in any way. She is portrayed as a brilliant, sophisticated lawyer who excels in her career. If a 15 year old girl, still unsure about the path she wants to take in her life, happens to stumble across an episode of Suits one day, it may inspire her to become like Jessica Pearson.

In Parks and Recreation, Leslie Knope, although bubbly and a little crazy, is good at what she does, and everyone in the parks department respects her. She is strong, smart, and passionate towards the small parks department in Pawnee, Indiana. Again, if a young girl pondering her future stumbles across Parks and Recreation while browsing for a new series on Netflix to binge watch, the dedication of Leslie Knope, her passion, and the respect for her may inspire her to pursue a career in politics.

There are plenty of examples of strong female leads for various careers in the world of television, but there is one that is missing: STEM.

*Silicon Valley* and *The IT Crowd* both feature life in the technology field. *Silicon Valley*, a TV show about a group of guys who create a tech startup called Pied Piper, has received wide critical acclaim. However, there are no women in Pied Piper, only men. The only women characters in the TV show are venture capitalists, most notably venture capitalist Monica. While Monica could be categorized as a strong female character, she is not a programmer, she is a business women. Again, if a young girl watches an episode of *Silicon Valley*, nothing would inspire her to pursue a career in technology

*The IT Crowd* is another TV show about jobs in technology, mainly a rag-tag group of IT support. Again, the people on the IT support team are men. In the TV show, a woman named Jen is assigned to run this rag-tag group of guys. When Jen applied to the company, Reynholm Industries, she said on her CV that she was “good with computers”, although she knew next to nothing about computers. She successfully bluffed her way through the interview, due to the interviewer being equally computer-illiterate, and was offered the job. Again, this is just another example of the stereotype that woman are bad with computers and technology in general. Why would a woman want to pursue a career in technology if popular culture tells them that technology is just for men?

This is an obvious problem for women. Women are not encouraged by popular culture to pursue a career in STEM, which is why it is great that organization like Girls Who Code exists today.

Girls Who Code is an organization that wants to eliminate the gender parity that exists in STEM, aiming to provide computer science education and education exposure to 1 million young women by 2020. Their Summer Immersion Program “represents an innovation approach to computer science education, pairing seven weeks of intensive instruction in robotics, web design, and mobile development with engaging, career-focused mentorship and exposure led by the industry’s top female entrepreneurs and engineers.” In 2014, according to their website (LINK), the organization launched over 160 Girls Who Code Clubs in schools, libraries, and community-based organizations across the country, and expanded its Summer Immersion Program to 19 programs in 5 cities nationwide The organization notes that in middle school, 74% of girls expressed interest in STEM, but when choosing a college major, just 0.3% of high school girls select computer science.

All-female science camps like their Summer Immersion Program is a brilliant idea that will spark an interest for STEM in many young woman. However, when I asked a 20 year old electrical engineering major to explain whether or not she believes that sexism is an issue in the STEM, she had this to say:

“Whether direct or indirect, there is a difference in how genders are treated in the STEM community. Even by the fact that we have to encourage females to join STEM encourages a rift because we are acknowledging a difference and perhaps putting more pressure on females in STEM. The focus needs to be on equality, not an increase by either gender.”

She raises a good point, but when the gender gap is as wide as it is right now and there has not been any increase in the percentage of women in STEM, organization like Girls Who Code are taking the necessary steps in order to decrease it.

Surviving as a Woman in STEM

It takes a strong person to overcome constant and non-stop micro-aggression on a daily basis. Personally, if I was constantly questioned about what I did more than other classmates simply because of my gender, I would change majors in a heartbeat. The girls in computer science that are my friends and have decided to stick through it seem to have changed since there freshman year. After the constant questioning and the fact that they continually have to prove themselves, most of them simply do not care anymore. They ignore the guys who give them a hard time, and simply dismiss them as another sexist douchebag. When I asked a 20 year old male computer science student whether or not he believed that sexism existed within the computer science community, he immediately agreed, adding:

“When I talk to women in my classes (which is probably slightly more often than the average CS student), I seem to notice to that not only are they often cognizant of the problem; they are often hardened to it, as if they had to develop a thick skin, a "don't give a f\*\*\*" attitude or the like in order to succeed. While these are bad things, I think it is worth noting that these social situations are having a negative impact on STEM women and are assuredly part of the reason that many women stay clear. Hopefully more will join, but I can't say for sure that I would have put up with what they go through as I don't know what it is like to "walk in their shoes" as a female STEM student.”

Although the thick skin developed by undergraduate woman in STEM majors may come off as crass and harsh, it seems to be one of the best ways that a woman can survive in the STEM field. When you’re a woman in STEM, intellect can only take you so far, as male students and professors may still question your actions more than men.

I talked with a 21 year old female computer science student about this issue, and said “I haven’t been questioned as much as I have since freshman year, but I believe that is mainly due to the fact that people know I am smart and I have established myself as one of the smarter computer science students.”

Woman should not have to prove themselves in order to escape the questioning of their abilities, but unfortunately that is the case for most woman in STEM today.

So it’s pretty obvious sexism is a known issue, right?

Based on everything that has been stated above, it would seem odd for a STEM student to state that sexism is not a problem in their community. Even if the sexism is subtle and often goes unnoticed, at some point it has to be noticed.

Right?