

Gender Bias

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“Women are intrinsically inferior”. This is the opinion of a surprisingly large number of people in education and professional positions. Students are forced to endure crippling comments like this and worse from their teachers and employers or suffer the consequences of standing up for themselves, like discrimination in class and lost jobs. Women face degrading situations everyday in both school and the workplace because society has become attached to a concept that draws an intangible line separating high and low profile jobs and puts men into the high and women into the low. This problem has been a part of American culture since the country’s beginning. Not only are women’s lives dramatically impacted by the barrier barring them from high profile jobs, moving up to high profile positions, and studying “manly” subjects, but the lives of their families and the people they support are also impacted. A woman supporting kids and in the same position of work as a single man is paid less just because of her gender. Both the lack of opportunities for women in higher education and discrimination by college and university professors are causes of the lack of women in high profile jobs and the glass-ceiling phenomenon preventing women from moving up in the workplace to managerial positions.

One very significant cause of discrimination against women in the workplace is the lack of opportunities for women in higher education. Time magazine states that “with each step up the academic ladder, [female] participation decreases”; however, the majority of college applicants are female. Colleges tend to reject more females and favor males because of lower admission rates for males. At Yale a group of women undergraduates protested a quota on females at an alumni meeting and were met with the response “we’re all for women, but we can’t deny a Yale

education to a man” (“The Higher, the Fewer”) In the University of Richmond males have an admission rate approximately thirteen percent points lower than that of females. This is due to the fact that most people applying to college are women; in order to keep a gender balance they must reject more female applicants (Kingsbury). Likewise, Bryn Mawr’s policy for admissions is “if the body is warm and male, take it; if it’s female, make sure it’s an A” (“The Higher, the Fewer”). Though it is definitely true that most people applying to colleges are female, this does not mean that females dominate or even make up one quarter of many stereotypically male majors. Women shy away from majors like mathematics, business, computer science and engineering, typically dominated by males, and gravitate toward majors that are considered socially acceptable for females. Male students are typically more aggressive and assertive and are most aggressive in classes taught by women (Brooks). At the University of Texas “students report avoiding courses that are overwhelmingly male because of the unwelcome feeling they experience in the classroom” (Horany). Its easy to see from situations such as these how women have come to feel unwelcome in fields that some think should only be held by men and are predominantly made up of males. Betty Shanahan, the Executive Director of the Society of Women Engineers, states “disparities persist among strictly engineering majors, where more than 4 in 5 are men” (qtd. in Gillum). In the “Big Ten” Universities, the proportion of women graduate students is actually less now than it was in 1930 (“The Higher, the Fewer”). According to the National Women’s Political Caucus, a little over twenty years ago women only earned 14% of the bachelor, 13% of the masters and 9% of the doctorate degrees in engineering (NWPC). While these percentages have been steadily growing and the gaps have been closing, contributing to more opportunities for women in the workplace and gender equality, there are still definitely big gaps that need to be covered in opportunities for women in higher education.

A serious effect of the lack of opportunities for women is the “glass ceiling” phenomenon in the workplace. According to the Webster Dictionary, the glass ceiling is “an intangible barrier within a hierarchy that prevents women or minorities from obtaining upper-level positions” (Webster). Though some would like to deny the glass-ceiling phenomenon, it is there and is still a big problem in today’s world. In her testimony to a congressional hearing, Dr. Ann Sutherland Harris of Columbia University states, “the higher in terms of faculty rank, the higher in terms of recognized responsibility, the higher in terms of salary, prestige and status, the fewer are the women” (“The Higher, the Fewer”). Her statement holds true for universities as well as for large corporations. At MIT’s School of Science there is a pattern of “discrimination in areas from hiring, awards, promotions and inclusion on important committees to allocation of valuable resources like laboratory space and research money” based on gender where women are the victims. Women hit a glass ceiling when trying to move upward in their jobs; insults, harassment and other types of “psychological warfare”, are ways that people try to deprive women of reaching higher “spheres of prestigious professional activity” (“The Higher, the Fewer”). In a study by Dr. Alice Rossi of 188 Major Departments of Sociology, women made up less and less of the workers as the job rank increased. Women made up 30% of the doctoral candidates, 27% of the full time instructors, 14% of the assistant professors, 9% of associate professors, 4% of full professors, and less than 1% of departmental chairmen (“The Higher, the Fewer”). This glass-ceiling phenomenon affects not just women but their families as well. It is easy to understand why the glass ceiling is such a big deal when in 2009 a typical female partner earned 12% less than their male partner, not a good thing when both are trying to help provide for a family. If women are given more academic and professional opportunities, they will have a better chance at obtaining high profile jobs and finally cracking the glass ceiling.

Another reason behind the scarcity of women in male dominated fields is largely due to discrimination by male professors in colleges and universities. Female students are constantly hit with ignorant and insulting statements made by male professors and instructors. The president of Harvard responded to a draft reducing the amount of men applying to the graduate program with “we shall be left with the blind, the lame, and the women” (The Higher, the Fewer). Recently, Harvard’s President Summers was forced to resign over a controversial statement implying that women lack the same innate ability in math and science fields as do men, coupled with growing concern over discrimination under his administration. “Each academic year since Summers became president in 2001, the percentage of women offered tenured jobs has declined. In the last academic year, only four of 32 such offers were extended to women” (Bombardieri). Women on college campuses have witnessed and been subject to offensive statements such as “the admissions committee didn’t do their job. There is not one good-looking girl in the entering class”, “we expect women who come here to be competent, good students, but we don’t expect them to be brilliant or original”, “women are intrinsically inferior”, “any woman who has got this far has got to be a kook”, “why don’t you find a rich husband and give all this up”, “a pretty girl like you will certainly get married. Why don’t you stop with an MA” (“The Higher, the Fewer”). This attitude from professors and administrators whom students look to for advice and approval not only damages the student’s self-esteem but also erases their motivation to become a successful person. Another worrying fact is that this attack on female students is not only psychological but is also in some cases physical and takes the form of sexual harassment. “Sexism is often a factor...academic departments for fields that have traditionally excluded women can show a higher rate of sexual harassment of female students and faculty”, according to the Sexual Harassment Support organization. In a survey of

high school graduates 82.2% of females admitted to being sexually harassed during their school careers. One university professor says about the serial seduction and sexual harassment of his female undergraduate students that he “felt it his duty” to educate his students not only in scholarly subjects but also to “‘guide students to maturity’ even in their sexuality and sexual experiences” (SHS). These types of patronizing and patriarchal discrimination by male professors essentially create “boy’s clubs” on campuses that exclude women and largely limit the amount of females in male dominated fields.

Because women are typically scarcer in engineering, mathematics, business and computer science majors it logically follows that there are fewer women in jobs where these subjects are the most prominent. This isn’t to say that women are incapable of performing these jobs; in fact, women “constitute the largest unused supply of superior intelligence in the United States” (Time). What is stopping them from performing jobs in these areas is society’s concept of what a woman can and cannot do. At Harvard’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences there are no female professors; at University of Michigan’s School of Education only 6 out of 105 professors are women. This concept of men-only jobs is applied to women in many areas of work, even in government. Currently, women make up only 16.4% of the 112th Congress, 17% of the Senate, 16.4% of the House of Representatives from only 27 states, and there are only 6 women governors (United States). One theory as to why women are so scarce in principal jobs is that of “same-sex preference”. Since throughout history men have usually been predominant in the work force, they are therefore the ones with high-end jobs and managerial positions. Studies have shown that workplaces “favor managers who’s gender matches the majority of their subordinates”, and since most workers were men their managers were also male (Atwater). A second theory of why women are in lower paid jobs is that women were dominant in low paying

fields such as nursing and teaching elementary and middle schools, 13.1% of all female workers were in these fields versus 3.2% of all male workers. The wage gap that is measured takes into account the salaries of all working men compared to those of all working women with no accounting for the percentage of each gender in high or low paying jobs (Young). However, when comparing wages within the same field and job, women still under-earn. The percentage of women faculty in universities nationwide grew from 23% in 1975 to 34% now; however, the salary gap between male and female professors widened in the same amount of time (Goldberg). Women ages 20 to 50 earn from 14% to 40% less than their male counterparts in management jobs. The total median pay for men in management jobs is \$83,550, while for women the median pay is \$61,000 (Drickhamer). In order to restore the rights women have been denied in the workplace it is necessary for society to let go of the idea that there are male jobs and female jobs, and essential that institutions like universities that shape the workforce grasp the importance of treating female students equally.

Today AWIS, the Association for Women In Science, is one of the biggest and strongest impacting organizations working to create a solution for the problem of a scarcity of women in the workplace due to discrimination in education. It was founded by a group of 27 women in 1971 that decided to find “solutions to overcoming job discrimination, lower pay, and professional isolation”(awis.org). The president of AWIS now is Joan Herbers; she along with the rest of the executive board and many chapters of AWIS, ranging across the country from as close to home as Palo Alto and San Francisco to Washington DC across the country, work to build programs and opportunities to advance women in science careers. AWIS’s current public policy states that since “women in STEM are prevented from reaching their full potential...because of barriers that exist in scientific workplaces” they aim to make sure

Congress, the media, and employers understand this by carrying through three points. First, they plan to increase their “interaction with national legislative bodies and federal agencies”. Second, develop “mechanisms to increase participation and representation of AWIS members in advocacy initiatives”. Third, strengthen current partnerships and develop “new alliances to leverage effectiveness”. By reaching these objectives they will then be able to expand and reach four more points. First, “advocate for the retention and advancement of women in scientific leadership positions in industry, non-profit organizations and academia”; second, “promote gender specific data collection by national, state, and private entities”; third, “advocate for STEM institutions and corporations to develop policies that increase gender representation on boards, conference programs, and committees”; and fourth, “develop and provide public policy statements on subjects including Title IX, funding for programs targeted toward increasing women and minority representation in science, and the need for family friendly policies”(awis.org). Although AWIS has already completed its objectives for the past 40 years, they continue to pursue and accomplish great feats in increasing the role of women in science.

The great thing about AWIS is that there are virtually no disadvantages. It is mostly funded by contributions and is a non-profit organization. Its only opposers would be those who oppose the advancement of women. AWIS has already made huge strides forward due to the enthusiasm that surrounds it. It provides scholarships and hosts workshops and “STEMinars” to educate more people; it works with communities to help make programs there better or more effective. Just this April they “celebrated Equal Pay Day by dancing in a Flash Mob, raising awareness, and visiting members of Congress with women engineers from all over the country to tell their stories”(Popejoy). Recent successes include partnership in 2010 with the USA Science and Engineering Festival which took place in Washington D.C. and consisted of over 500

exhibits for families to explore (awis.org). AWIS received a grant in 2009 to create AWARDS, Advancing Ways of Awarding Recognition in Disciplinary Societies, to “improve recognition of women...in STEM” (awis.org). In 2008 AWIS sent a letter of congratulations to Obama including a list of 40 names of women who were qualified to work in important leadership positions in his new administration (awis.org). Stunts such as these along with constant and untiring responses advocating women in science to their opposition really help make a difference. Though at times they are ignored, like when trying to get the Gender Bias Elimination Act passed, or an increase in funding for STEM, AWIS continues to make sure their opinions are heard. Their support and dedication to their cause to advance women in STEM has made an incredible impact and they have raised tons of money to help women accomplish more. Because AWIS directly addresses this problem and begins on the solution by promoting scientific education for women starting as young as elementary school, the organization is able to effectively decrease the disparity of women in high profile scientific jobs.

Women’s role in society has become engraved in our culture. Even though many early equal rights movements in the 1900s strove to eliminate the female “cult of domesticity”, today equality is still an upward battle. However, if women are allowed more opportunities in higher education, society will be more accepting of females in management and with any luck the glass ceiling will shatter. And, if educators don’t discriminate based on gender, more women will enter STEM fields and there won’t be separate men and women’s spheres. The solution seems so simple, just end discrimination. We live in America, where every man, and woman, has equal and unalienable rights, where no one is intrinsically inferior.

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