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Mira Brancu, Ph.D.

A New Look at Women's Leadership

CAREER

Achieving Gender Inclusion in STEM Industries

How organizations can help women in STEM feel included and valued.

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Reviewed by Ekua Hagan



KEY POINTS

- Working in male-dominated STEM industries and organizations brings specific challenges for women.
- Internalized sexism is as much of a challenge as sexism is for women in male-dominated industries.
- Leveraging changes in generational shifts within the industry might help women navigate male-dominated STEM industries.

In my [post](#) on how organizations can transform leadership development for women, I shared that I would be interviewing women leaders as well as allies and specialists (e.g., HR, executives, DEI experts) who could offer different perspec-



Source: Natanya Wachtel/ New Solutions Network

tives of women's lived experiences, how women are navigating, what is currently being done, and where gaps remain.

In this post, I frame the challenges of working in male-dominated science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) industries and organizations, through Natanya

Wachtel is a former therapist, educator, and marketing strategist and worked in multiple STEM-focused organizations. More recently, she founded the New Solutions Network, a socially-minded cause-driven collective where she applies her behavioral science-informed marketing knowledge to support human-centered businesses. She also continues to hold several leadership roles for other health tech companies and non-profit boards.

Perfectionism, internalized sexism, and unspoken cultural norms

Wachtel notes:

“In math and science, I was often the only female in the room and sometimes felt like I didn't have any allies—even with the other women! I think it's because we were pitted against one another—maybe subconsciously we were in competition because there were only so many seats at the table. I was worried about not being taken seriously—I was one of the few women, I was younger when I moved into higher-level roles, and then there was this passive-aggressive culture on top of that. I felt like I *had to be the best all the time*. Like I couldn't make a mistake.”

Wachtel's experience is not unique. It highlights how perfectionism can grow out of a lack of feeling accepted, which happens more often when you work in an organizational culture where you don't feel a sense of belonging.

ences. They may instead find themselves feeling alone, isolated, and even in competition with each other. It's just one example of **internalized sexism**. She notes:

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“Even when I had just given birth to my twins, I was writing contracts from the hospital and just told people, ‘Oh, I’ll be out tomorrow’! I was excited to have twins but felt I couldn’t share that. I’ve had more children over the years and would try to hide it. But you know, there’s weight gain that comes with pregnancy that you can’t hide. And later on, when I was going through a health scare, I had weight gain, physical discomfort, and associated pain. Through each of those experiences, I felt like *I couldn’t express how I felt because that would show weakness, that you’re unreliable, or that you’re too distracted with family stuff*. I just felt like I had to be this version that wasn’t me. I didn’t even realize it, but it was definitely something that

This is a common experience and fear for many women. Organizations carry many unspoken cultural norms, even if no one explicitly tells you anything about being negatively judged.

These messages are conveyed through the behaviors of leaders and employees.

For example:

- When women observe that people rarely take breaks at work, answer their emails at all hours, and are teased about taking an extended vacation, the message received is that “Rest is not tolerated, even though you might have more responsibilities than others at home.”
- When women hear comments about their pregnancies or others, such as “Whoa, looks like that baby is ready to come out any minute!” or “Must have been nice to have all that time off for your maternity leave,” the message received is that “Your pregnancy, birth experience, and discomfort is an inconvenience or open for mockery.”
- When women return from maternity leave and find that they are no longer receiving the important projects they previously received, the message is, “We have written you off for further leadership opportunities.”

Women aren’t the only ones who are negatively affected by these messages. But they are affected more often than men—and usually in ways that create greater pay and promotional disparities.

Women in STEM who are serious about their careers sometimes experience an additional reverse negative judgment by women or family members who police them in the opposite direction: messages that working “too hard” means you are not a “good mom.” (This is another form of internalized sexism).

THE BASICS

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“I remember when we lived in a suburb of New York City where a lot of the women didn't work, and they made disparaging comments like, ‘Oh, it must be so hard. We’re all going to work out together, but oh, right, you can't come.’ It was awkward because I didn't begrudge them for what they chose for their life. But I felt like they were suggesting I was less of a mom. And then at work, I was less of a ‘good worker’ if I indicated anything about being a mom.”

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The unspoken double-bind message: You are either not a good worker or not a good mom.

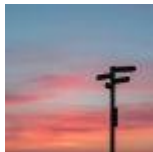
Wachtel, who is an immigrant from a culture in which being direct in your communication is valued, experienced additional double-bind messages:

“In the office, the men would say, ‘You’re like the guys because you can take it, you can give it out, and we just get down to business,’ but the women did not respond well to that. I heard one day that I made someone cry because I said bluntly, “We can’t use that.’ I didn’t say it was bad or stupid or call them names; I was just being direct.”

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This is the insidiousness of sexism and internalized sexism. (This double-bind was also cataloged well in the 1992 book *Breaking the Glass Ceiling* written by Morrison, White, and Velsor, about the experience of women in leadership roles navigating the “narrow band of acceptable behavior.”)

Intersectionality makes it even more complicated. For example, in cultures like Wachtel’s country of origin, directness is valued regardless of gender. At work, she got positive feed-

hurtful and off-putting. A no-win double-bind situation.

It takes significant self-awareness for individuals to separate what part of their experience is specific to their own growth needs versus what part is the culture's impact.

Hopeful trends

What's one thing organizations can do to help women in STEM feel more included and valued?

Wachtel has seen hopeful trends through her work with the Women Who Create non-profit.

"We work with young women and those who identify as BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] ... who are not afraid to express themselves in their dress, language, makeup, and openness about who they are and what they care about. It empowers me. It's a shift. We still have work to do, but I see positive change with the younger generations helping to push Gen X and Boomers to shift our mindsets, which inspires me."

One thing organizations can do is to leverage this generational shift and create mutually beneficial mentorship experiences.

Older generations can learn new things from younger generations as much as the other way around. This is called *reverse mentorship*. (An article from the Society for Human

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Organizations should be proactive and make it easy and welcoming to access mentorship opportunities.

Wachtel notes:

“What if you are the first in your family to go to college? What if you're the only one in your family who speaks English? There are unspoken barriers you wouldn't know about, and there's a lot of pride, shame, and other reasons why people may not want to highlight their challenges or not sure how to ask.”

Do not put the burden on people who are still learning how to navigate the system to figure out how to access mentorship.

Instead, teach leaders how to be proactive mentors, sponsors, and allies.



About the Author



Mira Brancu, Ph.D., serves as a Senior Organizational Development Psychologist for the VA, is an Associate Professor at Duke, and is CEO of Towerscope, a leadership and team development consulting company.

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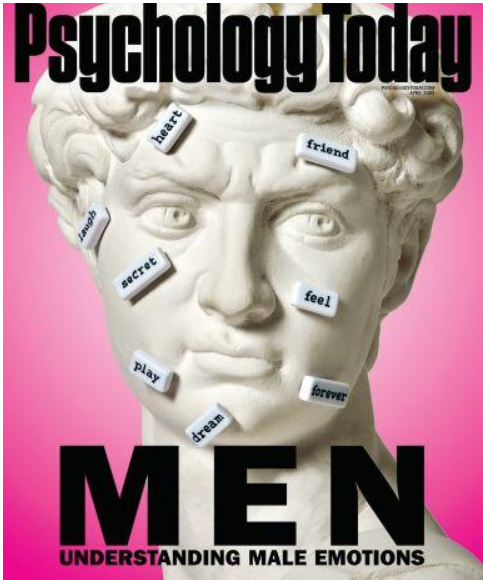
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