text ROULA FARAG photos EDEN HENNESSEY

#DistractinglySexist

Confronting Sexism in STEM with Eden Hennessey

The hashtag, #womeninscience, has been used on Twitter over 100,000 times.

Across the social media landscape, we hear about consistent underrepresentation of women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), but how many of us understand the how and why?

One of the difficulties women face when it comes to discrimination in science is how they respond to it. Eden Hennessey, a social psychologist, has devoted her career to studying the cost of con-

fronting sexism in science.

Even in the 21st century, research has shown that science is still perceived as something masculine, whereas the arts is considered more feminine [1]. As a result, having women in science is often viewed as counter stereotypical.

To understand the cost of confronting sexism, Hennessey treats the issue as a research problem. She believes that discussions around the topic shouldn't only come from opinions but also from empirical research. But the work doesn't always come easy.

"A barrier to studying perceptions of sexism is the willingness to talk about it," Hennessey said. "In the scientific community, I get two responses. One is very guarded, 'I really don't want to talk about this.' Then there are other folks who are like, 'boy do I have a story for you.'"

Hennessey explained that one barrier to confronting sexism is the social cost – being viewed as a "complainer" or someone difficult to work with.

"Being perceived as 'bitchy' and 'bossy' were actually items that I measured during my work," Hennesey said. "And these are really loaded terms that are highly gendered."

Hennessey also believes sexism and racism must both be considered.

"White women may think, 'because the gender equity piece is making some headway I can confront.' Whereas a Black woman may not, because it's not safe to do so in the context of both racism and sexism. We have to consider that those barriers are going to substantially differ between people."

In addition to barriers, Hennessey's research also delves into how people perceive women confronting sexism and their responses. Generally, when asked to read a story about a woman confronting sexism in science, men had a negative perception, whereas women's perceptions were more positive. However, Hennessey notes that there are many contributing factors such as the approach and the context of the situation. The bottom line is, it's much more complicated than it seems.

To place a spotlight on the issue, Hennessey channeled her work into a series of photo exhibitions in a collaboration with photographer, Hilary Gauld. This personal and unique approach meant her research would reach an audience outside of science and academia.

"I have this artistic and creative side and being able to bring that into my research has been a really sustaining process."

In 2015, Nobel Prize-winning scientist, Tim Hunt, made a series of sexist comments during a conference about women being problematic in research labs because they fall in love and cry when criticized. This elicited significant backlash from women, especially in the science community, leading to the hashtag trend #distractinglysexy as a humorous

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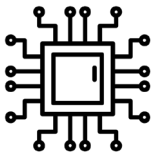
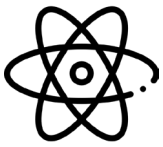
In 2015, female graduates only made up

20%
Engineering



18%
Computer + information science



37%
Physical + chemical science

Numbers from Statistics Canada.

52% of Canadians can't name a woman scientist or engineer

in a 2019 online survey of 1,511 Canadians comissioned by non-profit, Girls who Code.

> “It started to become something that people wanted to talk to me about all the time.

response to Hunt’s sexist remarks.

Hennessey seized the opportunity to integrate the idea into her own research and decided to name her exhibit #DistractinglySexist. “Humor is also one of those responses to discrimination that is effective,” Hennessey said. “It diffuses the situation and makes it less emotionally charged.”

The photo exhibit took place in Wilfrid Laurier University during late September of 2015 to huge success. “When it first came out it was a bit of an explosion, it started to become something that people wanted to talk to me about all the time. And people wanted to have [the conversation] in their schools and in their discussion groups,” Hennessey said.

The exhibit paired the stories of nine women in STEM fields who faced sexism during their careers with research findings about gender inequalities in science. The work highlighted some of the common sentiments women in science receive including remarks like, “so you’re going for the whole sexy scientist thing,” and “my advisor told me not to worry my pretty little head about it.”

The work captured only a small sample of the many women interviewed by Hennessey as most of the interviewees preferred to stay anonymous. Ironically, these women feared the consequences of speaking out about their experience – which echoed Hennessey’s own research findings.

Even though majority of the responses to the #DistractinglySexist photo exhibit were positive, Hennessey said there were inevitably “haters.”

However, she was just as interested in these negative comments because it revealed a different response while confronting sexism. This led her to extend the #DistractinglySexist series with another photo exhibit in 2016 titled #DistractinglyHonest. The latter focused on what women are unable to say honestly about their experience with discrimination and sexism.

In early 2018, Hennessey presented her two photo exhibits #DistractinglySexist and #DistractinglyHonest in Trafalgar Square in London, England to celebrate the International day of Women and Girls in Science.

In 2020, Hennessey showcased her latest photo exhibit #TurningTablesinSTEM at the Ontario Science Centre. The work featured the voices of over a dozen more girls and women from across scientific disciplines. One story involves a young schoolgirl who couldn’t even find a children’s dinosaur sweater in the “girls” section due to restrictive gender marketing – highlighting the pervasiveness of cultural stereotypes.

For Hennessey, sharing and amplifying the stories of women is a big part of challenging the status quo.

Amanda Desnoyers
(PhD, Psychology)
and her son

#HonestlyChallenging

"If you can make it personable, make it interesting, make it accessible to people, then you're going to get a much wider audience who's listening," Hennessey said.

Apart from raising awareness about sexism in science, Hennessey is also pushing for systemic and institutional change through her work with the Dimensions charter – an initiative that provides public recognition to post-secondary institutions with increased equity, diversity, and inclusion.

"It's a voluntary program where you and your institution can sign up and say you commit to these principles," Hennessey explained. "Things like, recognizing the important contributions of Indigenous people to the knowledge of science and research."

Hennessey also works on issues surrounding sexism in STEM as a member of the Laurier Centre for Women in Science. There, she works alongside centre founder and physicist, Shohini Ghose, to support interdisciplinary research and create opportunities for women in science.

Hennessey explains the three main pillars are, "to do the research, to communicate the research, and to take action based on what the research says."

"Everyone, often, within science is incredibly skilled and talented so how do you distinguish yourself from other people?" Hennessey said. "We need more people to be able to communicate their science."

"We need to work on the stereotype of what a scientist looks like at the same time as representing their work."

REFERENCES

1. Nosek BA, Smyth FL, Sriram N, Lindner NM, Devos T, Ayala A, et al. National differences in gender-science stereotypes predict national sex differences in science and math achievement. 2009;106(26):10593-10597.