

# National Center for Women & Information Technology

## PROMISING PRACTICES

### How Does Combating Overt Sexism Affect Women's Retention?

Sexism systematically disadvantages women through sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, overt discrimination, or other expressions of unconscious or conscious bias or stereotypes about women. In addition to the individual harm sexism causes, legal and social implications make addressing sexism important. Studies in a range of settings, including computer science, show that sexism leads to impaired performance and attrition. For example, recent research shows that women doctoral students are likely to leave computing as a result of sexist incidents [see callout box].

In academic settings, sexist behavior is often described as the “chilly classroom.” It includes sexually offensive behaviors ranging from suggestive humor and discussion of sexual matters to inappropriate physical contact, stereotyping, dismissing or demeaning women’s accomplishments, as well as giving more attention or positive feedback to men.

Industry settings typically focus on the type of intentional sexist behavior that constitutes sexual harassment — defined by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as unwelcome sexual advances or conduct that affects hiring and performance or creates an “intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment.”

Sexist behaviors can be reduced. Research indicates that the following strategies reduce sexual harassment:

- **Visible high-level intolerance of these behaviors.** Harassment most often occurs in environments where leaders ignore it or discourage complaints. In contrast, highly visible and proactive leadership improves conditions and helps retain women.
- **Credible policies and procedures for dealing with incidents.** Clarifying what constitutes harassment and what to do if it happens decreases the incidence of sexual comments and images displayed. To be effective, these practices should be “concerted, multifaceted, organization-wide” efforts to change organizational climate (Gruber, 1998). For example, the military achieved positive results with their “zero tolerance” program. Likewise, Gruber’s study of approximately 2000 Canadian women confirmed that taken together, sexual harassment policies, complaint procedures, and training reduce sexist behavior. Finally, research suggests the importance of communicating that women are valued and able members of the department.
- **Effective training.** Effective training is almost always recommended as a key ingredient for preventing intentional sexism. Training, however, also has a down side. Women are less likely to confront or report perpetrators when training emphasizes that reporting sexism could result in retaliation and alienation. On the up side, training seems to reduce harassing behavior.
- **Assessment to uncover prevalence and track outcomes of interventions.** Assessment can identify the prevalence and types of sexist behavior. The results indicate whether action should be taken, with which groups, and with what content. Assessment also documents reduction in sexist behavior that results from leadership, policies, and training. In these ways, assessment can guide efforts to eradicate sexist behavior and its harmful effects.

#### SEXISM HAS REAL CONSEQUENCES FOR COMPUTING DOCTORAL STUDENTS

Within the first four years of their Doctoral programs, almost one quarter of 236 women in the CRA-W Graduate Cohort (see info below) reported experiencing or observing sexism in their academic department. For example, the women describe faculty members making jokes about female abilities, male students discussing women and their sex lives, “animation posted on course website of a naked woman’s silhouette,” and a faculty member saying “that women with children should ‘choose’ between a family and an education.” Experiences like these lead women to consider leaving without their PhDs.

According to two studies sponsored by NCWIT and the Computing Research Association, more than half of the women in computer science or computer engineering (CSE) doctoral programs think about leaving before the end of their second year. In contrast, only 35% of their male classmates think about leaving. Compared with other reasons, the odds of actual departure are at least 10 times greater for women who think of leaving because they observed or experienced sexism.

In the workforce, sexual and gender harassment are associated with reduced job satisfaction and health conditions. Research from business and the military shows that when organizations fail to take sexual harassment seriously, more harassment is likely to occur, resulting in productivity and turnover problems for organizations. Even witnessing harassment has significant negative consequences. The loss of investment is substantial.

#### RESOURCES

- Paludi, M. & Paludi, C., Jr. (Eds.) (2003). *Academic and workplace sexual harassment: A handbook of cultural, social science, management, and legal perspectives*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Grossman, J. (2003). The culture of compliance: The final triumph of form over substance in sexual harassment law. *The Harvard Women’s Law Journal*, 26, 3-75.
- Gruber, J. E. (1998). The impact of male work environments and organizational policies on women’s experiences of sexual harassment. *Gender and Society*, 12(3), 301-320.
- The Computing Research Association’s Committee on Women (CRA-W) offers the Graduate Cohort Program, which is a support, networking, mentoring and role model program for women in CSE graduate programs across the United States and Canada.

NCWIT offers practices for increasing and benefiting from gender diversity in IT at the K-12, undergraduate, graduate, and career levels.

Visit [www.ncwit.org/practices](http://www.ncwit.org/practices) to find out more.

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### Assessments for Identifying Overt Sexism (Case Study 1)

One Way to Address Overt Sexism and Improve Women's Retention in IT



Undergraduate



Graduate



Career

One important step toward minimizing the occurrence of overt sexist behavior is identifying the extent to which it occurs in an organization, because it is often hidden. To improve awareness and track progress, both researchers and lawyers recommend conducting periodic surveys, focus groups, and audits of any complaints filed. The information gained from surveys can inform efforts to improve conditions and measure the effects of remedial actions.

Several survey tools measure the incidence of sexist behavior in different settings, although care should be taken in their use. Sexism surveys have the potential to increase women's feelings of not belonging or concern about negative gender stereotypes. To minimize or head off unintended harmful effects, be certain to preface any survey or focus group by expressing the value your department puts on all its members. If possible, also remind participants about a positive identity they have achieved, e.g., student admitted to an elite university or employee of a quality-focused corporation.

For undergraduate programs, NCWIT offers the free Student Experience of the Major (SEM) Survey-in-a-Box and provides support from the [NCWIT Extension Services](#). The SEM contains questions about numerous aspects of the undergraduate experience, including collaborative learning, relevant/meaningful assignments, pace and workload, and racism. It also asks about the nature of student-student and student-faculty interactions, and specifically about sexism. In particular, the SEM asks about the frequency of the following explicitly sexist behaviors:

- Some students in my computing classes or labs are treated better than others because of their gender.
- Some students in my computing classes or labs are treated worse than others because of their gender.
- Students in computing class, lab, or discussion tell negative jokes about men or women.

The 28-item Perceived Chilly Climate Scale focuses more specifically on the prevalence of sexist behavior in an academic department than does the SEM. Janz and Pyke (2000) developed an instrument that measures five factors of chilly climate — climate students hear about, sexist attitudes and treatment, climate students experience personally, classroom climate/course materials, and safety. This instrument would be useful for a more complete and nuanced assessment of sexism than the SEM provides. Along similar lines, Riger, et al. (1997) developed a 35-item instrument for measuring sexism faculty experience in their academic departments.



For business settings, Stokes, Riger, & Sullivan developed a survey called "Working Environment for Women in Corporate Settings." Their questions measure dual standards and opportunities, sexist attitudes and comments, informal socializing, balancing work and personal obligations, and remediation policies and practices. Likewise, in her book, *Giving Notice*, Freeda Kapor Klein suggests asking all employees questions related to their observations or experiences of "bias, including ridicule, teasing, insults, stereotypes, derogatory names, or pejorative language" in addition to other issues related to hidden barriers (2008).

More instruments for measuring sexism are available from the Department of Health and Human Services in the publication, *A Compendium of Measures of Discrimination, Harassment and Work-family Issues*.

### Carefully Track Sexism in Your Department

#### RESOURCES

- Janz, T. A., & Pyke, S. W. (2000). A scale to assess student perceptions of academic climates. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 30(1), 89–122.
- Bond, M. et al. (2007). "Expanding our Understanding of the Psychosocial Work Environment: A Compendium of Measures of Discrimination, Harassment and Work-Family Issues." Department of Health and Human Services.
- Kapor Klein, F. (2008). *Giving Notice*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.

NCWIT offers practices for increasing and benefiting from gender diversity in IT at the K-12, undergraduate, graduate, and career levels.

*This case study describes a research-inspired practice that may need further evaluation. Try it, and let us know your results.*

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