

III. Appendix - Contributions by Other Members of the Community

The following four subsections present reactions by members of our community at MIT. Prof. Peter Elias is Associate Head for Computer Science of Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science. Dr. Mary Rowe is Special Assistant to the President. Prof. David Reed is on the Computer Science faculty of the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science. The final contribution is by a men's discussion group that is one of the outgrowths of the activities chronicled in this report.

III.1 Peter Elias -- The Department

When I saw the report written by the women graduate students and technical staff I was surprised and dismayed at the extent of the problems they had found in our environment, but felt that other members of the community would share my surprise and concern, and that the report could make a great contribution to producing a more satisfactory environment for women in computer science at MIT. I invited my colleagues to read the report and discuss it at a lunch meeting of computer science faculty and research staff on April 1, 1982. In the memo announcing the lunch I wrote:

It is tempting to shrug off some of these problems as merely showing oversensitivity on the part of the women involved. I don't think we can afford to do that, however, for three reasons.

First, many of our women graduate students heard before they came that MIT was a difficult place for women. Others, who did not apply or did not come, may have been frightened off by such reports. The percentage of women in graduate work is roughly the same in Area II as in the rest of EECS, although we have almost twice the percentage of undergraduates.

Second, the women note in their letter that many women graduate students feel uncomfortable enough here to avoid their research group or laboratory. They thereby lose a principal component of graduate education.

Third, a larger number of complaints of this general character arise from Area II than from the rest of EECS. This may be due in part to our distinctive geography and workstyle. Whatever the cause, it gives us a greater incentive to take the problem seriously.

The lunch was very well attended, discussion was intense and largely sympathetic and interest was sufficiently great that we agreed to have a second meeting with Mary Rowe present, to give us a better MIT context within which to place the situation here. That meeting, on April 29, 1982, also drew a large and very vocal audience, including some of the women faculty and research staff. The women's group then held what I believe was the first meeting for all of the members of the two

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laboratories, The Laboratory for Computer Science and the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, including students, research staff, support staff and faculty, on May 20, 1982. Again discussion was intense and revealing.

Certainly the net result of all this activity will not make the problems faced by women in computer science at MIT all disappear. However I do believe that there was a significant increase in the sensitivity of many of us among the students, faculty and staff to many of those problems, and that the report and the following activities were a useful and important first step.

III.2 Mary Rowe -- Subtle Discrimination

I believe that subtle discrimination is a major barrier to equal opportunity -- and can cause serious damage, for the following reasons.

- Subtle discrimination often leads to more explicit discrimination. Thus, ignoring women is a habit that may lead to overlooking a woman who might be the best-qualified person for a job or promotion or to underpaying women.
- Because the provocation for discrimination -- one's gender -- cannot be changed and has nothing to do with one's work, one inevitably feels helpless.
- Subtle discrimination takes up the victim's time. Sorting out what is happening and dealing with one's pain and anger take time. Extra time is also demanded of many women and men to help other women deal with the pain caused by subtle discrimination.
- Discrimination prevents people from doing work that is as good as they are capable of doing. If a secretary or graduate student is unreasonably overloaded with menial work for a supervisor, the overloaded person may be prevented from doing the kind of excellent work that prepares her for promotion. Subtle forms of discrimination can cause much damage before it is recognized.
- Subtle discrimination is particularly powerful as negative reinforcement because it is hard to identify. This means that these inequities are hard for a victim to "turn off." It also means that frequent victims, like women, experience a range of emotions from legitimate anger to paranoia. The experience of being uncertain about whether one was insulted causes displaced and misplaced anger. It also causes one to ignore some real insults, so that they persist.
- Subtle discrimination often is not *intentional*, even when objective observers would agree that it exists and that an injury really took place. This is another reason it is hard for a victim to respond to it. We are all socialized to believe that *intent* to injure is an important part of injury, and it is certainly critical to our dealing with injuries at the hands of others. Faced with a subtly discriminatory act, the victim may not be certain of the motives of the aggressor and may be unwilling to start a fight where none was intended. When uncertain about motives, most victims at times do not get angry when they should, which perpetuates the injuries and may weaken the victim's self-image. At other times, they protest when no injury was *consciously* intended, even though it occurred. The latter situation can be salutary for all concerned, especially if the aggressor reacts by acknowledging an unconscious intent to injure. However, sometimes the aggressor is so totally unaware of aggressing that, even though observers agree that an injury took place, he may respond with anger, feelings of betrayal or bewilderment, or worse.
- Subtle discrimination seems petty, in a world where redress by the less powerful often seems heavy-handed or too clumsy. Unionization, going to court, and appeal to the President's office may seem heavy weapons against subtle discrimination. The perceived lack of *appropriate* weights of redress helps perpetuate subtle discrimination.
- Subtle discrimination of some types may have a negative Pygmalion quality. That is, the expectation of poor performance, or the lack of expectation of good performance, may by

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itself do damage because students and employees have a strong tendency to do what is expected of them. As Sartre noted throughout his book on anti-Semitism, the anti-Semite creates the Jew.

The question is frequently raised whether subtle discrimination does not just "happen to everyone?" Are we not just describing the general inhumanities of large organizations? Frequently, I will talk with a powerful white male who openly says "I harass everybody, Mary. I don't discriminate." Let me raise here hypotheses as to why subtle discrimination might be worse for women in paid employment (especially for women in traditionally male employment), than for the average white man. Some hypotheses as to why subtle discrimination may do more damage to women are analogous to the hypotheses as to why they do damage at all.

- "General" harassment often takes specifically sexist forms when applied to women. One might say to a man "Your work on this experiment has been inexcusably sloppy; you'll never make it that way!" When addressed to a woman, the same criticism might come out as "My God, you think no better than my wife; go home and have babies!" The harassment of women piles up in allusions to sex roles. Like the dripping of water, endless drops in one place have profound effects.
- Discrimination often is perpetuated by more powerful people -- most of whom are male -- against less powerful people -- most of whom are female. Since less powerful people by definition have less influence, it is difficult for them to stand up against discriminators who happen to be their supervisors or advisors.
- Some traditional white, male environments support and reinforce certain kinds of discriminatory behavior, like the telling of aggressive and humiliating dirty jokes in a lab.
- Men may overlook some sexist behavior because it is so "normal." Many male supervisors are acutely uncomfortable around secretaries and consequently ignore them, but neither they nor male bystanders notice this. Pornography on walls, sexist jokes, and the use of sex in advertisements and announcements are so ubiquitous that many people do not consciously notice it.
- Women in non-traditional positions have a more acute role-modeling problem, because they witness subtle discrimination against others like themselves. Disproportionately more women see people "like them" put down or ignored by their superiors. In most work environments, the principal, same-sex role models for women are clerical and hourly workers, who are the groups that most frequently report subtle discrimination. This inadvertent role-modeling is made stronger because nearly all women are at one time or another assumed to be clerical workers (or waitresses or saleswomen, depending on the situation). A young female engineer says "I am constantly being taken for what I am not. I constantly feel a struggle to develop my own self image, but it is not affirmed by most of the world around me, as it is for my male colleagues."
- It is harder for women to find mentors to help them deal with subtle discrimination. There are so few senior women in most organizations that junior members of most communities cannot find as many high-status, same-sex mentors as white males can find. Sometimes,

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higher-status women try to compensate by spending extra time as same-sex mentors. However, it is inevitable that the burden of dealing with discrimination falls on women who are already disproportionately drained of energy by caring for others.

- It is particularly difficult to find an *appropriate* mentor when one has been the victim of sexist discrimination. Listeners of the opposite sex may not understand. Listeners of the same sex may be so discouraged, angry, or full of denial that they are worse than useless. I believe that it is often more difficult for women to find adequate help in dealing with the minutiae of sexism than for average members of the community to deal with "general inhumanities."

I believe there are many reasons why the problem of subtle discrimination for women goes beyond the *general* inhumanities of large organizations. This point may become clearer to male readers if they imagine being a child-care worker in a large, conservative, inner-city, day-care system. The "general harassment" might include questions and comments about your sexuality. You might hate always being asked by visitors why you are there. Other white males might find you odd. Women might distrust your skills, simply because you are male. You might find the constant assumption that women care for children better than men to be very oppressive -- the advertisements, the jokes, the pictures on the walls, the fathers deprived of custody. Since you might in fact *be* inept in some ways at the beginning, this criticism might hinder your professional development. You might be very sensitive to the just run-of-the-mill anger of your cross-sex supervisor. You might have no one like yourself to turn to.

In summary, I believe that subtly discriminatory behavior causes pain and, for women, the pain often occurs in an environment they cannot easily control, evade, or ameliorate. Continued experience of destructive situations which cannot be improved can start unhappy cycles of behavior ranging from declining self-esteem to withdrawal, resignation, poor work, fantasies of violence, and so on. At the very least, it takes a lot of energy to deal with an environment perceived as hostile, or to continue to deny the difficulties.

III.3 David Reed -- One Man's Reaction To The Report

When I read an early version of this report, and encountered the reactions it engendered among the faculty, staff, and students in the area, I wrote the following paragraphs to the reports' authors. I think they bear repeating, as one man's reaction to the report. I would only like to add that I am proud of the effort put in by both men and women here in discussing these problems openly and honestly. There are complicated and deeply held feelings at the root of these issues. The old rules of "correct" behavior between man and woman are based on assumptions of inequality. As we destroy these old assumptions, the rules change for all of us, and we must examine even our most fundamental instincts.

I am very glad that you put in the effort you did. It is always hard to speak up when you feel oppressed, harassed, or beaten down--you wonder whether it is all your fault (especially when there are those who will imply that it is), or whether it is worth exposing yourself to more of the same, or whether it will do any good.

Certainly the reaction has been mixed, and with the extended distribution you will continue to get reactions. However predictable such reactions seem to be, and however defensive, denying, misunderstanding, insensitive, or uncaring, it is clear that you have had a significant effect. I have attended both faculty lunches where these issues have been discussed, and it is clear that most men there have learned a lot, as I have, about how individual women may perceive their actions--e.g., that discomfort at being an object of undesired attention is not just a "minor" problem to be solved when the women "adjust" to the norms of M.I.T.

Personally, I feel that your list has broken the ice between women and men who work here. These problems will not be solved quickly, and some men will say in a defensive reaction "these women don't deserve to work here if they have such thin skins." That these men are so defensive is a good sign of sorts--they used to feel it unnecessary to defend such behavior.

As for me, I learned a lot. I am not a woman, so I have not always been sensitive in the way I have behaved (I remember one time in anger sending a system message containing graphic language it embarrasses me now to recall, and I am sure that I have said things that could be heard as imputing that women could not be as successful as men [though I don't believe that]). I know now about some situations that have occurred that I might be able to help prevent in the future by expressing my disapproval as a faculty member and group leader. I will never be able to neuter myself (nor should any man) at work, but I hope that I can learn from you to listen with some understanding of how it feels to you.

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I have heard a rumor that several of the women involved in preparing the report are planning now to leave after their S.M. because of their feelings about the things in the list. I feel sad that some of you find that necessary after making a strong contribution towards improving life here. One of the reasons I am writing this is to let you know that there are those who care that you stay. M.I.T. need not be inhuman to be excellent.

Thank you all.

David P. Reed

III.4 Another Male Perspective on Discrimination

This section was written by a group of male lab members who have been meeting regularly to discuss the problems and issues presented in the main body of this report. Our group has included students, faculty and staff members. Several of the women responsible for the report have also shared their perspectives with us.

Due to the sensitive issues addressed by the women's original report, reactions ranged from defensiveness to joking belittlement to astonishment that women here face the problems they do. Some men expressed similar frustrations in their own professional lives, and were surprised that the women considered their situation different. But as a result of publication of the report, many people here have begun to think more seriously about discrimination in our workplace based on racial, cultural and educational differences as well as on gender. Thus we see reason to hope that this report will be a step toward a better working environment for all.

In discussing the specific problems which occur here, we came to the realization that sexism encompasses more than active, intentional discrimination. Women can be inadvertently discriminated against without anyone being consciously aware of it. For example, a subliminal assumption that men are generally more technically competent can hurt women because men will tend to approach other men for technical discussions. As a result, women find themselves separated from the main flow of professional ideas, their professional development becomes more difficult, and their professional opportunities are subtly restricted.

The longer we discussed such issues, the more obvious it became that their solution involves more than the adoption of new departmental or laboratory policies. We concluded that neither formal institutional change nor individual changes in behavior and attitudes alone can fully address these problems.

As it became clear that personal change was a significant issue, we began to consider what kinds of changes in our own attitudes and behavior were most important. The following list of priorities, arrived at after some effort, is far from definitive but was useful as a starting point.

- We need to recognize the legitimacy of other people's feelings. The high value we place on aggressiveness and the willingness to engage in intellectual combat should not lead to a lack of respect, understanding or empathy among us. The attitude that "It doesn't bother me, so why should it bother anyone else?" is especially inconsiderate and counterproductive. Professional competence is not always associated with a high degree of assertiveness and a confrontational style of discussion.

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- We need to take responsibility for our own actions. Although it is difficult to be constantly on guard against saying or doing something which is offensive to others, we have no one to blame but ourselves if we do so. We specifically reject the idea that men must be provided a list of dos and don'ts in order to be held accountable for their behavior -- sensitivity should come from within and not depend on criticism from others. If one carries a positive attitude toward others, the temptation to do something inappropriate is diminished, and far less "watchfulness" is necessary.
- We need to take a stand. When one of our colleagues engages in inappropriate behavior, it is all too easy to look the other way. But it is everyone's responsibility to speak out about what he or she feels is right, even though it may feel awkward or offend one's friends.

Discrimination is a severe and deep-rooted problem. No place is immune from its occurrence, and no amount of denial or superficial dismissal will make it go away. In reacting to the women's report and talking with each other, we are learning to perceive gender-based biases and other prejudices more clearly. The obstacles women face here reflect wider societal patterns, and the explicit rejection of traditional role models is critically important in changing these patterns.

We appreciate the time and commitment the women have invested in developing their report.

Steve Berlin
Dan Carnese
Oded Feingold
Walter Hamscher
Chris Reeve
Sunil Sarin
Mark Shirley
Jon Sieber