

2. What Happened to Us

This section contains an annotated, revised version of the list that was circulated among our colleagues in the Area of Computer Science. There are two subsections that correspond to the two major aspects of our graduate careers: Professional Identity and Social Identity. A third subsection addresses the reactions of our community to distribution of the list.

Throughout this section, we discuss actual experiences of women in Computer Science at MIT that convey pervasive, biased attitudes about women. Some of the specific comments may at first appear insignificant, with consequences that are difficult to understand. However, when these experiences occur daily to many women, they create an atmosphere in which it is difficult for women to work effectively.

2.1 Professional Identity

2.1.1 First a Woman, then a Professional

The day-to-day experiences of many women in Computer Science are characterized by a greater emphasis on their gender than on their identity as serious professionals.

- Following a technical discussion over lunch with a faculty member, I was asked for a dinner date. I was left wondering whether the faculty member went to lunch for the intended technical discussion or for personal reasons.
- During a technical discussion with a faculty member, he made an obscene remark about my clothing when another man entered the room.
- While I was teaching a recitation section, a male graduate student burst in and asked for my telephone number. Men often interrupt me during technical discussions to ask personal questions or make inappropriate remarks about non-professional matters.² Faculty members have referred to personal details about me in class lectures.
- When I was a teaching assistant (TA), one of my students missed the lecture and saw me later. He said, "Will you come sit on my lap sometime and tell me what I missed?" This illustrates a lack of respect for me as the instructor as well as an attempt to undermine my authority as a TA by focusing on the fact that I am a woman. Respect from one's students can be as important for developing self-confidence as respect from a peer or supervisor.
- If, during a technical meeting, a sexist comment is made, all eyes turn to me for my reaction. Not only am I constantly in the spotlight, but many men think it is alright to make sexist comments during technical meetings, even when I am in the room.

²This generalization from the experiences of the women in our Area is supported by Hall in her report of a study conducted by the Project on the Status and Education of Women of the Association of American Colleges [3].

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- A male graduate student said "Gee, I don't think it's fair that the only two girls in the group are in the same office. We should share."
- I was told by a secretary planning a summer, technical meeting at an estate owned by MIT that the host of the meeting would prefer that female attendees wear two-piece bathing suits for swimming.
- During a grades assignment meeting, a professor decided to give a borderline student the higher grade because she was "cute." When I suggested that this was not a relevant basis for grading, another staff member chimed in, "Yeah, she's not *that* cute."
- A male student identified a particular female colleague as "the one with no chest."

These examples represent professional situations in which men make sexual or other personal references to women. Such references can take the form of specific comments about a woman's appearance and personal relationships or stereotyped comments about women's abilities and personal traits.

- When I first met the professor in charge of a course for which I was a TA, he said, "Boy, the TAs have gotten a lot better looking around here."
- I received an anonymous message saying, "Looks like there is a hot item in the department."

These examples may seem less problematic than the previous ones because they were intended as compliments. In other, non-professional situations, they might be interpreted as compliments. However, regardless of the intent, in a work situation such comments detract from a woman's professional image. As one woman summarized: "In professional situations, comments about my appearance are upsetting. They make me feel insulted, embarrassed, offended, hurt, and concerned for my stature as a professional."

- "Why do you need a degree for marriage?" -- a male colleague.
- "Jane came here only to get married." -- a male graduate student.
- "What's an attractive girl like you doing in a place like this?" -- a male colleague.
- "Jane flirts to get whatever she wants."

This last set of examples reflects stereotypical assumptions about women's roles and values. Some male colleagues view women only in traditional, gender-typed roles. Their stereotyped comments further convey the attitude that women are not serious professionals.

Whether intentional or not, personal comments about a female colleague made in professional

situations create the impression that the woman is there for personal rather than professional reasons. They convey the attitude that men think of us first as women and second -- if at all -- as professional colleagues. During a technical discussion, these experiences detract from the value of the woman's technical contribution and damage her credibility. Inappropriate comments by professors in the presence of graduate students and comments by graduate students that are not discouraged by senior colleagues legitimize these attitudes and perpetuate the lack of respect displayed for female members of research groups. As a result of these experiences, women feel undervalued and lose self-respect and self-confidence, all of which hinder their professional development.

The comments described above undermine women's professional identities by drawing attention away from their roles as professionals and focusing it on stereotypic roles for women. It is inappropriate to make such personal comments during technical discussions, either with MIT colleagues (for example, in a class, a technical seminar, a group meeting, or a meeting with a supervisor) or with visitors (for example, outside consultants, government representatives, or visiting scholars).

2.1.2 Invisibility

- I know men who ignore my questions about their work, but respond to a man who asks the same questions.
- It's very common not to be asked for my technical opinion on a relevant subject in my field of interest.
- I have been excluded from discussions. I even had two people with whom I was trying to have a meeting pull their chairs together and start talking to each other as if they'd forgotten I was in the room.
- In response to being asked about my work, a male colleague took over, gave my analysis of the situation, and said how long it would take me to do a task.
- I have been ignored, constantly interrupted, and talked over in meetings as if I weren't there.
- I was the only woman in a group working on a machine. Only one person could use the machine at a time. Often, while I was working on a task, a male graduate student would physically push me away from the machine and interrupt my work so that he could get at the machine. This didn't happen to the men in the group.
- It is a common experience for me to receive professional correspondence addressed to "Mr. Jones." Also, I have observed some of my male colleagues who are very surprised when they discover that a good technical article written by, for example, J. Jones, was

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written by a "Jane" rather than a "John." Although men form a large majority of researchers in computer science, women have proven themselves capable of making valuable contributions to the field. When it is always assumed that engineers in general, and authors of good work in particular, are men, women's contributions are implicitly being overlooked.

Many women are treated as if they were invisible in technical situations. They feel that this is one way in which they are not taken seriously as professionals. They are overlooked in technical discussions and excluded from group efforts, their work is attributed to male colleagues, and their opinions are not sought on relevant technical subjects. One reason for this invisibility is that an aggressive discussion style is inappropriately viewed as a sign of competence. If a woman (or, for that matter, a man) does not discuss issues aggressively, then she (or he) is often viewed as less competent, and is not taken as seriously as a "more visible" colleague.

The examples listed above convey the attitude that women cannot make contributions to technical discussions or group work that are as valuable as men's contributions. Experiences that lead women to believe that they are not doing good work and are less competent than men promote a negative self-image for women. Also, such prejudices foster a lower image of women throughout the field and can inhibit the development of their careers.

2.1.3 Patronizing Behavior

- "We'll see how we can fix things for you so they're better." -- a male colleague.
- Often, when I ask a male graduate student how to do some task, particularly something on the system, he will do it for me rather than explain to me how I can do it for myself.
- I asked a male graduate student a technical question and got an answer that seemed to be aimed at someone with little or no knowledge of computer science, as if it were being explained to a high school student rather than a colleague.
- It seems like all I have to do is ask one simple question and the people I work with try to take over my entire research problem and solve it for me. I think they're trying to be helpful, but it doesn't help me if I'm never allowed the chance to do my own project.

On the other end of the spectrum from invisibility is patronization. The final comment above emphasizes the key point: women, as well as men, need the opportunity to work on open-ended research projects on their own. They need this experience to develop the discipline necessary to focus on a research problem; the creativity to formulate alternative paths to pursue; the technical judgment to evaluate different alternatives and to choose the most appropriate one to follow; and the technical skill, self-reliance, and perseverance to carry a task through to its completion.

For a project to be a significant learning experience, it must be challenging. Because less is expected of them, women are relegated to straightforward, menial tasks more often than their male counterparts.

- "You want to do research? Let me see what I have that you can do.... This paper needs proofreading."³

Concerning the assignment of menial tasks, one woman comments:

- I resent being given what are considered menial tasks for two reasons: first, the dispenser of the tasks assumes that women should be doing more menial tasks than men, second, the dispenser is making a statement about whomever does the tasks by labeling them as menial.

Women ask only to be given the same chances to pursue challenging research problems and the same opportunities to prove themselves as are given to their male colleagues.

2.1.4 Qualifications

- "You got into graduate school because the Area needs more women."
- "You got into graduate school because Professor Jones is in love with you."
- "What am I going to do? This is an important course and my teaching assistant is a girl."
- I was told by a male faculty member that women do not make good engineers because of early childhood experiences ... little boys build things, little girls play with dolls, boys develop a strong competitive instinct, while girls nurture....
- "Women aren't concerned with technical details." -- a male colleague.
- I've heard several teaching assistants come to the conclusion that women always ask for help more than men, with an implication that women can't figure things out on their own.
- I've heard men chuckle when a women's technical opinion is mentioned, and say "Oh, Jane," in a tone of voice that dismisses and ridicules her opinion.

Many of the problems that women encounter arise from some men's basic doubt that women are qualified to pursue a graduate career in computer science. In our Area, no unqualified students are accepted. Nevertheless, the qualifications of female graduate students are systematically doubted by male faculty members, graduate students, and undergraduate students. Many women feel that they have to be more qualified than men just to be considered as capable.

³We refer here only to relatively unchallenging work like proofreading, not more challenging work like reviewing papers.

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Women are often told that they lack qualifications needed for research projects and consequently are not given the opportunity to prove themselves. In addition to restricting the opportunities available to female students, this frequent questioning by others of women's qualifications leads women to doubt their own qualifications. Self-doubt leads to lower self-confidence and makes women reluctant to take on challenging projects to prove that they really are capable.

Some people find it difficult to respect the goals of women in a technical field because they believe that women are incapable of technical endeavors. While most people would agree that men and women are socialized differently as children, these differences should not be allowed to form a permanent barrier to a woman's training in a technical field. Instead, these insights should be used to construct academic programs for students that take advantage of their strengths and correct their weaknesses, should such weaknesses exist. In fact, most women applying to engineering schools have worked hard to overcome "deficiencies" in their backgrounds and, by the time they enter graduate school, are as well prepared as male students to undertake research in computer science.

Some research supervisors believe that women do not examine problems to a sufficient level of detail, do not exhibit independent thought, or cannot make substantial contributions to a technical discussion. Broad generalizations about women's qualifications and abilities lead to reluctance on the part of some supervisors to accept women in research groups or to give them critical tasks.

- "I don't like to supervise female graduate students. For instance I can't stand it when they start to cry if you criticize their work. In general, I have trouble relating to them," - a male faculty member.

While it is understandable that some male faculty members feel more comfortable dealing with stereotypically male reactions, they should accept the responsibility for learning to deal with both men and women in academic situations. Otherwise, differences that have no bearing on technical ability will continue to be used to deny women the opportunities that are available to men.

As mentioned before, stereotyping restricts opportunities available to women in the Area and encourages them to doubt themselves. One woman comments:

- Stereotypes make it harder for me to work here because they reinforce the idea that I can't be a good engineer. This attitude is pervasive. It affects other people's behavior towards me as well as my own self-image.

2.1.5 "Acceptable" Behavior for Women: A Double Bind

Some argue that women students would be best to adopt a "masculine" style in order to achieve classroom credibility. Others point out that a woman who does so may be perceived as "aggressive" rather than assertive because her way of talking and acting does not conform to "feminine" expectations: what a female student says in a "masculine" style may be rejected out-of-hand on that basis. Indeed, the same behaviors seen as "forceful" in a man may be viewed negatively -- perhaps even as "hostile" -- when used by a woman. ([3], p. 10)

The experiences we have had in the Computer Science Area of our Department at MIT reflect the double bind in which women are caught. On the one hand:

- I was once told that the reason women don't finish here is that they are trained by society not to be aggressive.
- "You'll never make it through MIT. You're too feminine. You're just not aggressive and pushy enough."

And on the other hand:

- "You're so aggressive."
- "Mrs. Attila the Hun."
- "I'll bet she doesn't take any shit."
- "You sure are bitchy today; must be your period."

If a woman appears quiet and feminine, her success may be hindered because she is not competitive. If she does not appear quiet or feminine, she is socially ostracized. Women feel that there is no way for them to be accepted by their colleagues.

2.1.6 The Consequences for Women

Many of the individual experiences presented in the previous sections have the same consequences. Most directly, women suffer from the actual limitations placed on their professional development by the refusal or reluctance of faculty members to supervise them, to provide financial support for them, or to allow them to work on interesting and important problems. For any graduate student, there is often only one professor at a given institution whose interests coincide with the student's. For a woman, whose interests coincide with those of a professor who does not provide a supportive environment for women, there are no easy alternatives: she cannot continue her education unless she moves to another group, school, or field of work. Because the professor's attitudes often affect the research group's attitudes, an unsupportive professor contributes to a lack of valuable

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support from peers. When a woman leaves a group, her departure often is blamed on her lack of ability, rather than the faculty member's lack of support or responsibility.

Other consequences for women are less apparent and more difficult to measure. Like everyone else, women internalize the opinions of themselves that others express frequently. When people whose ability they respect, such as their advisors, continually undervalue their contributions and imply that they are incapable of succeeding, they come to believe this negative appraisal of themselves. This problem leads to a vicious circle: once a woman is made to feel incompetent, she is less likely to accomplish as much as if she had received the encouragement given to her male colleagues. Dealing with biased behavior takes time and energy. Women who are subjected to this kind of behavior have less of each to devote to their work.

This treatment and the resulting struggle take their toll personally. One survival tactic that some women adopt in an unsupportive environment is withdrawal. They isolate themselves from their research groups and may select a research topic that requires little interaction with others. The environment encourages them to deprive themselves of the benefits of working with and learning from others -- an integral part of a graduate education. Alternately, some women choose to hide their femininity. They intentionally dress unattractively or adopt a louder and more aggressive manner than when they are in more comfortable circumstances. Such behavior has the dual benefit of stopping sexual overtures and creating an image that is more in keeping with their colleagues' view of an engineer or scientist. However, for many women, it is impossible or personally unacceptable to modify their behavior so drastically in these ways, even to become more acceptable to their colleagues. This alternative may backfire too, since some men cannot accept women who completely deny traditional women's roles. (See [3].)

For many women, dealing with the problem of inequality in any of these ways is an unacceptable burden. Some leave MIT rather than remain frustrated with professional and personal compromises they find unavoidable. Some very capable women with the potential to make strong contributions to their field of research have left MIT without completing their studies. (This information was gathered from private conversations.) This is a loss to MIT as an institution, as well as to the women involved.

2.2 Social Identity

2.2.1 Misplaced Expectations

- In an interview with a faculty member about research the following gestures made by me were interpreted as "come-ons": (1) looking him directly in the eyes, (2) smiling while talking to him, and (3) leaning back in my chair.
- All I did was say "Hi" to a male graduate student, and the next time I saw him, he asked me out.
- A male student who had lunch with me a number of times when we were teaching assistants for the same course regarded me as his "territory." I overheard him say to another male graduate student, in reference to a third, "John is muscling in on my territory."
- Having lunch with male graduate students seems to signify that I'm going out with them. The same is implied by technical discussions. In short, people seem to assume that I'm going out with any male I talk to.
- Professor Jones and I were working late on a project, and we decided to grab something to eat. I thought we'd go for a sandwich. Imagine how I felt when we drove up to a fancy, candle-lit restaurant. I didn't want to go in because it seemed too much like a date situation, but he insisted and also wouldn't let me pay for my dinner. I felt as if I had been forced into going on a date with him, and after that I always felt nervous about being alone with him.
- A male faculty member and I played tennis together a few times until I realized that he was viewing our games as dates.
- Following a technical discussion over lunch with a faculty member, I was asked for a dinner date.

Men's expectations of how a woman should behave frequently cause her actions to be misinterpreted. Women in this environment often feel that they are viewed primarily as potential dates. A female graduate student who is friendly with a male colleague runs the risk of having the male colleague assume that she is romantically interested in him. Other men may make this assumption, whether or not the man concerned does. A lunch appointment with a man to discuss a technical matter may be viewed by him and/or other members of the community as a social date. It is difficult to keep a professional relationship from being mistakenly interpreted as a romantic one. Such misinterpretations disrupt both social and professional relationships.

Some men expect the women to bear the burden for the imbalance in the number of women and men; they expect the women to *accept* the excessive social attention that results from the low percentage of women.

- A male graduate student said, "The problem with this place is that there aren't enough attractive, available female graduate students." Enough for what? I'm not here to be attractive and available.

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- A graduate student said, "Men are tired of only seeing men. They want to see women in dresses, not women who look like men."

Other men use the lack of women as an excuse for unrelenting sexual advances and other unacceptable behavior; they argue that there are too few women around for men to know how to act toward them.

When viewed only as social beings, women are sometimes felt to be disruptions to the work environment. They are not considered to be part of the research atmosphere and are treated as distractions and nuisances.

- A faculty member told other students that one of his male students wasn't getting his work done because I had started going out with him and he was spending too much time with me. I wasn't going out with him. His lack of progress was due to completely different reasons.

Some men seem unable to view a woman as an individual, not associated with any man. At times, women find it extremely difficult to participate in group social activities because of expectations that they pair up with men.

- I went on a ski trip with a number of men in the Area. At the conclusion of the day, there was an explicit discussion among the men about who was going to be my "partner" for the night.

The following are comments from female graduate students about how experiences like those presented have affected them.

- I am uncomfortable about asking certain male graduate students for help (about the system, projects, etc.) because it might be viewed as "coming on" to them. More times than not, the answer to a question is followed by an invitation to go out.
- I find that I have a sense of anxiety all the time here. Because I never know who's going to decide that I'm "available," I'm not comfortable away from my desk, and I find it difficult to talk to male graduate students. This is particularly noticeable because I am comfortable talking to female students and the majority of the faculty.
- These situations have made me stop talking to male faculty members and fellow graduate students. Any approach made to me by male faculty members or graduate students I view with great suspicion.
- Because men always think that I'm coming on to them, I don't feel comfortable joining technical bull sessions. I feel as if I'm missing a valuable part of my graduate education.

2.2.2 Unwanted Attention

- One of the male research associates started taking an interest in me. He went out of his way to find opportunities to talk with me. However, once he found out that I was engaged to be married, he completely ignored me. Subsequently, he began to bother my female officemate. He wouldn't leave her alone even though she said "no" to several dinner invitations. I resent the fact that I was treated as a potential date instead of as a colleague.
- Male graduate students will often walk into my office just to "talk" or "chat." Many times when I want to work and I ignore them, they stay. Even when I explicitly ask them to leave, they continue to dawdle in my office.
- I continued to receive dinner invitations from a male graduate student after I'd been turning them down at least twice a week for two months.

Women are as interested as men in romantic relationships. However, in an environment that is ninety percent male, the women are inundated with unwanted attention. Often a woman's response of "no" is not taken seriously; she is repeatedly bothered by the same man or by others.

If a woman is approached romantically by a colleague, particularly someone in a supervisory position, she might hesitate before rejecting the social overture, because rejection of social attention will often harm the professional relationship. The fact that this is more of an issue for women than for men results from the imbalance in the number of women and men and the resultingly larger amount of social attention that each woman receives; it is compounded by the predominance of males in supervisory roles.

- I have been grabbed and tickled by a male graduate student in my research group with whom I have no personal involvement.
- When I was sitting at my terminal typing, a male faculty member came up behind me and started rubbing my neck and shoulders.
- While talking with a male colleague in my office, he suddenly placed his hand on my breast and said he liked me.

A few men are much bolder in their attentions to women. They use physical contact in demeaning and taunting ways or as an excuse to be deliberately personal. Physical contact can be comforting and reassuring between friends. However, the set of examples above illustrates inappropriate instances of physical contact.

Many men fail to understand why women do not appreciate constant attention like that described above. Some believe that their comments and actions are "flattering" or "cute." They do not realize

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that women find such comments and actions bothersome. Furthermore, the large number of men in the Area causes the number of offenses to be unacceptably large.

The following are comments from female graduate students about how unwanted attention has affected them.

- Approaches from Prof. Jones made me feel uncomfortable with him. In situations where I should have been able to go to him with questions, I avoided him. I still feel uncomfortable around him and have yet to say more than "hello" several years later.
- Faculty members should understand that personal attentions from a faculty member threaten my professional image. I don't want to fight the "She got through because of Prof. Jones" syndrome.
- Trying to have a social life here is very difficult. I have to be constantly on guard for "wanton" men. I don't have the time and energy to be constantly having to "defend" myself while I am trying to get work done on my thesis.
- We don't want it to seem like we're saying all attention is bad. We want the men here to treat us as well-rounded people, which includes desire for human relationships. The problem with the attentions we receive now is that our freedom of choice is ignored.

2.2.3 Obscenity

- I have had obscene mail sent over the computer system to me by male graduate students.
- There is a picture of a nude woman on our system which is printed out and displayed. It is also used occasionally to demonstrate the graphics capabilities of the system.
- "That's where you belong: on your knees." I was kneeling in the library in front of the card catalog. He walked up and planted himself right next to me such that if I turned to face him, my face would have been just below waist level.
- There was an obscene decoration on display in a professor's office. When I objected by pointing out that it might offend some women, my objection was laughed off.

Obscenity is pervasive in our environment. Humor in the laboratories often takes the form of sexist, demeaning jokes. By placing women in demeaning roles, these jokes make women acutely uncomfortable. By focusing attention on women as sex objects, obscene material makes it difficult for them to establish identities as professionals. Obscenity tends to keep women from becoming integrated into the community as colleagues and adds to the "locker room atmosphere."

2.2.4 The Fishbowl Syndrome

- Wherever I am, be it in my office or the elevator, or at a lecture, seminar, or meeting, male graduate students, faculty, and staff are always staring at me as if I were some sort of freak.
- A male graduate student sitting next to me leered at me all through a seminar. This happened so often that in subsequent seminars I made sure that my friends sat around me to "shield" me from this particular graduate student.
- As a first year student I was followed around intermittently by a professor who was teaching one of my courses. He never said anything and kept his distance, but he was watching. It was unnerving.
- A faculty member started paying a lot of attention to me -- going out of his way to "run into" me, talking to me a lot, and flirting. When I asked another woman student what she thought was going on, she told me he had made advances to a couple of other students. She was surprised that I had not been warned about him.
- A male graduate student said, "What do you expect? You are a very attractive and interesting woman so you are going to attract a lot of attention."

Female graduate students are continually stared at in classes, group meetings, even their offices, and are often followed by male colleagues. This kind of unwanted attention is more subtle than that of the previous sections, because there may be no verbal or physical interaction. Although the casual observer may not even be aware of it, women are constantly under surveillance. This makes them feel uncomfortable and out of place. As one woman commented:

- I always feel as if I am being pursued. I also feel like I'm in a spotlight. All my actions are under close scrutiny constantly and I feel extremely self-conscious.

2.2.5 The Consequences for Women

Women in the Area are in a double bind. If they choose not to get involved in social relationships, they can alienate themselves from particular individuals and from the community. This detracts from career growth because the women do not get the valuable feedback and technical interaction offered by informal settings. Isolated from the community, they also forfeit supportive relationships with friends and colleagues. On the other hand, friendships with male colleagues usually are assumed to be romantic, not only by the male colleague, but also by the community at large. This assumption disrupts both professional and non-professional relationships.

For many of us, the consequences of the attitudes described in this Section can be summarized by one woman's comment:

- I feel like I can never have any friends here, like I can never fit in. I've never felt so isolated in my life.

2.3 Reactions

Reactions to the problems raised by the list were strong and often emotional. The reactions of men and women are addressed separately in the following subsections. The reactions of some individuals in the community are presented in Appendix III.

2.3.1 Men

The men's reactions to the list were generally positive. Most conversations, whether in groups or privately, began with an affirmation that we had raised legitimate issues, and most men supported our concern that these issues be addressed. Beyond that, reactions varied widely.

The Associate Head for Computer Science of the EECS Department was dismayed at the extent of our problems. In a memo to the faculty, he described why he believed they should not dismiss these problems as merely oversensitivity on the part of the women (see Appendix III.1). Another professor sent a letter to us expressing his concern about our problems (see Appendix III.3). A group of men began meeting weekly to discuss our situation and theirs; some of their comments are in Appendix III.4.

There was a general feeling among many men that the list and the discussion following its distribution were useful and important first steps toward improving the environment for both women and men. Some men spent a great deal of time analyzing their behavior toward women. They commented that the discussions prompted by us increased their sensitivity to how their actions affect women around them. Although the amount of harassment is difficult to measure, many men appear to have become more aware of the feelings of women.

There also were negative reactions, often following protestations of sympathy. Some men said that they agreed with the points we raised, but their actions did not bear that out. There were a few cases in which harassment increased. Many men expressed anger and frustration. They were angry at us for "publicly airing dirty linen" or behaving like spies. They were frustrated for several reasons. Some men could not understand how people they had considered to be reasonable and rational could reach conclusions so different from their own. Others were frustrated by our lack of consideration for the problems they face due to the small number of women to date. Some were frustrated that we had not sought them out individually to hear their concerns. Still others were embarrassed at the possibility of having made mistakes in the past, and self-conscious about the possibility of making mistakes in the future. These reactions led some men to avoid women.

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In looking for a reason to dismiss the issues addressed, some men attacked what they considered to be incidents taken out of context. There were two reasons that incidents were not described as some might have wanted. First, in many cases, descriptions were changed to mask the identities of the participants. Second, incidents could not be described in their full contexts either because the women describing them did not have complete information or for lack of space. In all incidents described, we felt we had included enough information to make the point. Some men have since told us that they originally wanted to dismiss the list as a whole because of a small number of incidents that they felt were taken out of context.

The following is a partial list of frequently heard comments from men and our reactions to these comments:

- "Can't you take a joke?"
Usually, when a woman's complaints evoke this response, she does not think the incident in question was funny. If she lets the episode slip by without complaining about it, she is giving tacit approval to something that upsets her.
- "It wasn't meant that way."
Perhaps no offense was intended, but the speaker should be more sensitive to how other people perceive his comments or are affected by his actions.
- "Tell me whenever I am doing something you don't like."
In this case, the speaker is relieving himself of the responsibility for thinking of others and is putting the full responsibility to point out problems on the woman. He is asking for the impossible. Women form only a small percentage of the Area; they cannot be expected to be everyone else's consciences. Also, women cannot always speak out; often, it would be damaging for a woman to say something (for example, to her thesis advisor or in the middle of a technical meeting). In other cases, no woman is present when an offensive remark is made.
- "Are you going to put that on your list too?"
This was an immediate reaction that continues to be heard months later. Frequently, a comment like this comes from someone who feels betrayed, who perhaps feels his privacy was invaded. The speaker does not understand the anguish many of us felt while creating and publishing the list.
- "I agree with the important points, but you should get rid of the trivia."
The most interesting aspect of this common comment is that each speaker labels a different set of items trivial. More importantly, one of the significant aspects of the women's lives at MIT is our continual bombardment with discrimination in the form of minor, offhand comments and almost unnoticeable, suggestive actions. Incidents that may appear trivial can be seriously upsetting when they occur continuously.

2.3.2 Women

Many women who had not participated in creating the original list reacted very strongly to it. First, when the original list was distributed to the faculty it contained several items related to secretaries. The secretaries showed us how these comments portrayed them in a demeaning way; we realized that we had been insensitive to some of the implications of these comments. We removed the offending items from the list before distributing copies to the other members of the laboratories and continued to discuss the issues with secretaries and among ourselves. Second, the group of authors was composed of all the female graduate students but only some of the research staff. Unfortunately, many groups in the labs are isolated from other groups, and we did not find all the research staff. Those women who were omitted were justifiably hurt by not being included. In general, many of the women in the labs who had not participated in preparing the list were frustrated, because, as women, they were expected by male lab members to defend the list. We have been very touched by the expressions of support and loyalty that we received from so many of these women.

Our own reactions to general distribution of the list were very complicated. We found ourselves more in the limelight than ever before; everything was scrutinized and questioned, where previously it had just been watched. We found that even after all the energy we had expended in creating the list, we were misunderstood. Some of us became frustrated at having to say things and explain ourselves so many times. Others became depressed about the need for so much additional explanation. Most were angry that a few people could express sympathy for us and continue or increase their misbehavior. We were also disappointed with ourselves for not being more sensitive to the other women in the labs in the way we were asking the men to be sensitive to us. All of us were exhausted and torn between the desire to straighten it all out and make everyone understand what we were trying to say and the desire to get back to our work. Few, if any, had realized how much energy and emotional strength the process could take and continues to take.

There were also positive reactions. The open and honest effort of some of the men to understand and improve the situation was elating. That, and a closeness among the women that had not existed before, made many of us realize that our efforts had been valuable. All of us learned more about ourselves and each other.