

GENERAL INTEREST

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PREJUDICES IN THE WORKPLACE

After being an engineer with two decades of professional experience behind me, and having been reasonably successful, I still find steeling myself for a fight with this unseen foe whenever I meet a new set of people...

LAST night my eight-year-old daughter was going through her schoolwork, where she was looking up genders of different animals/humans. Peacock/Peahen, Dog/bitch, King/Queen etc.

In the middle, she turned around and asked me, "Mom, what is the female of Doctor?" I was reading a book and without missing a beat, answered, "*Beta*, there is no gender for a profession. A doctor is a doctor, whether a male or female". She nodded sagely - "Yeah, right. Like you are an engineer. It is based on what you do, not whether you are a girl or a boy", and she went back to her schoolwork. I realized with a start - this is so simple

for her. She has seen me work all her life, it comes as no surprise to her that a profession has nothing feminine or masculine about it. That it is simply about skill and ability, and nothing to do with gender.

But that's not the way the entire world views it. Not the current one, anyway. There are people in the world who "feel" differently about a woman professional although they "know" that both genders have similar professional ability. However hard we try and gloss over it, gender prejudices are alive and kicking in the world. I know, I have experienced them first hand.

It is seldom voiced, nor is visible to a casual eye, not in the politically correct professional corridors I find myself in, but it is there. Lurking in board-rooms, in seminars, in meetings, in parent-teacher meetings, and even in homes,



rearing its ugly head, every now and then. Showing up in the way men and women look past me in my company's booth at a technical event and engage with a male colleague for a technical discussion. Thrown in my face when a male colleague is chosen over me to head a project I have worked so hard on. Demonstrated by the involuntary closing-of-ranks by my peers at a beer bash session at an office party. It shows up when people hand out roles to me that they assume me to be good at – at nurturing people, at being good in handling irate customers and at soothing down a ruffled colleague, and in the same breath, I am passed over for roles that require handling new project situations, traveling to new geographies and breaking new ground and markets. It is



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seldom, at least in the beginning that people seek to see what I am good at – I am just lumped with these “female” expectations. Awwrrrgghh, it is frustrating!

After being an engineer with two decades of work behind me, and reasonably sound and successful decades at that, I still find steeling myself for a fight with this unseen foe whenever I meet a new set of people – whether male or female, a new set of buildings and new situations. I have to overcome this prejudice and forgive the people who have harbored it, before I get on with my work. No matter how many times I have killed it, no matter how many times I have proved myself to be equal, I have to do it again and again and again.

Why? Because I must. Because I know that despite what some people may assume me to be, I am an equal professional. This truth is known to me, but is hidden behind the fog of unconscious conditioning of the mind. And I must fight to bring this truth to light, sometimes even to myself.

How exactly do I fight prejudice? Ah, that’s not easy or even straight-forward. More because this is insidious and unseen, sometimes even the person with the prejudice does not know he/she has it. Unless it is a dogma, it typically is subconscious. To combat it, it, hence, needs different kind of weapons. I know of one that works. **Evidence to the contrary.** And I make it my business to create such

evidence. I ignore perceptions and just get on with my job, make sure I explain my role, my skills that got it done, generate visible, demonstrated evidence of my skills, and make sure I articulate my desired role before I find one dumped on me. I simply focus on sharpening my skills, meeting my deliverables, and keeping my faith in myself intact. Then, I dig my heels, and wait - for the respect moments to occur, when others, prejudiced or not, acknowledge and respect what I have done. When respect appears, prejudice simply melts away and disappears. All it needs is evidence and patience. Sometimes, lots and lots of it.

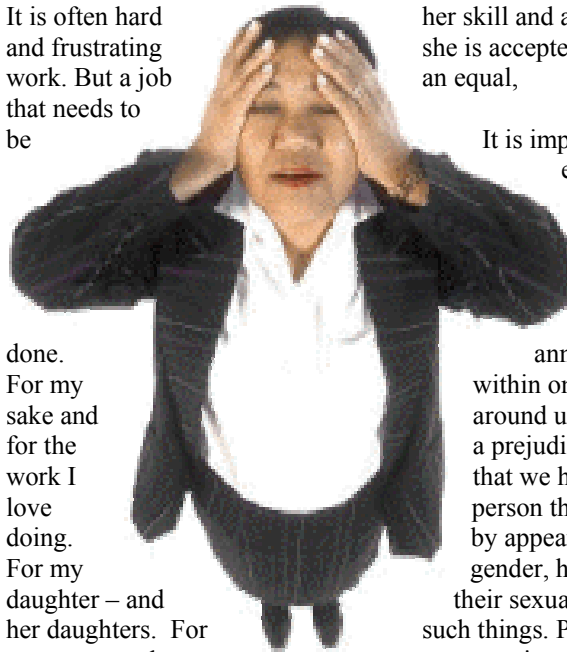
It is often hard and frustrating work. But a job that needs to be

done. For my sake and for the work I love doing. For my daughter – and her daughters. For my parents who thought me to be equal to my brothers. For the BITS education which equipped me to be equal – and for friends and colleagues who depend on me to be so. And I know I am not alone. I look around and see other women who have done the same. CEOs,

Scientists, Technology Officers, Police Cops, Design engineers, Mountaineers, IAS Officers, Pilots – all women who silently went about applying their ability and the skill to do a job, and just did it. When they kept at it, no matter what people thought or said, people could not but respect that they did, and considered them as equal professionals. Invariably. Inexorably. Irrevocably.

But this is only about the battle I wage and the weapons I use. I am able to work long, hard hours and grind away the prejudice - but about my daughter, and girls of her generation? It would indeed be sad, if she too would have to present evidence upon evidence of her skill and ability before she is accepted and treated as an equal,

It is important, then, to examine where this prejudice comes from, so that one is able to move towards its annihilation, within oneself and all around us. It is said that a prejudice is an attitude that we have about a person that is governed by appearances, color, gender, height, religion, their sexuality and other such things. Prejudices are not consciously learnt. They exist in the murky depths of the *unconscious mind*. Nobody teaches you prejudice. It is arrived at by our minds, sifting evidence that it finds, in experiences, daily interactions, stories, myths, legends, movies and stuff like that. We absorb



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them in homes, work places and in social settings. It is prejudice which makes one select a male surgeon over a female one, even though the female surgeons' credentials may be factually better (but this is one area, which is fast changing everywhere).

Talking about prejudices, I have a confession to make. I hate to say it, but I have sometimes been prejudiced about female professionals too. I am not proud to admit it, but it was there. I couldn't help feeling a little nervous when I would see women striding towards an aircraft I was going to fly, wearing a pilot's uniform. I have no idea where that came from, considering that I "KNOW" a female pilot will be as good as male one. How could I think thus? I, as a professional woman faced my own prejudice and overcame them while I hoped for a world that has none. My prejudice about female pilots came from my growing up years. I never saw many women fly aircrafts when I was growing up. I never heard stories about women

pilots, only about male ones. Maybe if I had seen enough women pilots, and heard enough stories about companies fighting to hire women pilots, I would not have batted an eyelid when I saw a woman walk into the pilot's cabin.

We've come a long way! There are examples to the contrary everywhere. It is time for all of us to change!

It is said that the unconscious mind has 'a mind of its own'. No one can force it to behave. It needs to be trained and schooled, and then, it would change. To school the unconscious mind, it would need the same trick that I use to fight this attitude at work.

Pile up evidence to the contrary. Pile up images, thoughts, songs, stories, legends and news about women and their professional lives all around. Create a smorgasbord of professional success stories of women. Tell them to your daughter and to your son, tell them to the winds, tell them to the rooftops, tell them to newspapers, tell them to your friends – let all of them know

that women, too, lead successful professional lives. Celebrate them. Rejoice in their skill. Stories of this kind will jostle for space with all those other old stories about women being mothers, care givers, wives – but they would be there too. And they would be told and re-told and echoed back to our unconscious minds in many, many ways. Then, someday, when the unconscious mind is processing his or her experiences, stories and images, it would reach the final "Aha" moment! The conclusion that there is ample evidence of women doing design, software, space sky-walking, medicine, mountain biking – and that really, profession has nothing to do with being a woman, but only to do with skill and ability.

And then, when my daughter – and yours – grows up, she would be perceived as an engineer. Not a "female" engineer, but just an engineer. Period.



GENDER PREJUDICES

An October 2004 report of the Indian National Science Academy (INSA), titled, "Science Careers for Indian Women", aimed at gaining a perspective of the Indian situation regarding women in Science and Technology. It concluded that there is no gender differentiation in the intrinsic abilities of women to pursue careers in the sciences – though subtle discrimination in many workplaces does exist. In the context of the current controversy caused by Lawrence Summers of ex-Harvard fame, the INSA report observed that selection of subjects for higher studies by Indian girls is guided more by social factors – certain perceptions that women are not really expected to pursue engineering fields (medical and biological sciences are more acceptable).

