Gender Bias against Women of Color in Science
An interview with Joan Williams

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Over several decades, social scientists have identified clear patterns of gender bias that women encounter at work. Yet little is understood about the nuances of how these patterns manifest for women of color. Joan Williams, Distinguished Professor of Law at UC Hastings, wanted to explore how gender plays out in the everyday interactions of women scientists and how they differ by race and ethnicity.

Professor Williams partnered with colleagues Katherine Phillips at the Columbia Business School and Erika Hall at Emory University (formerly a graduate student at Northwestern) to conduct 60 in-depth interviews with women of color scientists. In addition, they surveyed more than 500 women to quantify the experiences of White, Black, Asian-American and Latina women in STEM. The researchers are indebted to the Association of Women in Science (AWIS) for their assistance in recruiting study participants.

Key Findings

Women encounter rampant gender bias in the scientific community with important distinctions in how bias differs by race and ethnicity.

- Approximately 2/3rd's of the women - 66.7% of those interviewed and 63.9% of those surveyed – reported *Prove-It-Again bias* or the need to provide more evidence of competence than their male colleagues in order to be seen as equally competent. Black women were sharply more likely to report this phenomenon, which they attributed to race, while other women attributed *Prove-It-Again bias* to gender.
- More than 3/4th's of the women interviewed reported being seen as either 'too feminine to be competent' or 'too masculine to be likeable', known as *Tightrope bias*. For Asian women, the acceptable band of behavior was even narrower with greater backlash for stereotypically masculine behaviors such as self-promotion. Latinas reported being labeled as emotional or angry when being assertive and faced greater pressure to manage 'office housework' such as scheduling meetings. Black women are afforded more space to act assertively *as long as* this behavior is not construed as anger.

- Gender bias against women often fuels conflict among women. Over half of the scientists interviewed and approximately one in four women surveyed reported the *Tug of War* among women. An example is when women who've faced discrimination early in their careers distance themselves from other women, a pattern documented in several studies. Among 3/4th's of the women surveyed reported that women generally supported each other in their work environments—but only a bit over half (56%) of Black women did.
- Once triggered, the strongest form of gender bias is the *Maternal Wall* reported by nearly 2/3$^{rd'}$s of women scientists interviewed. After having children, women face stereotypes about a reduced level of commitment to - and interest in - their careers. The *Maternal Wall* affects women of all races and ethnicities but was heightened for white and Asian women more often advised by colleagues to work fewer hours after becoming mothers.

Implications of the Research for Organizations Seeking to Drive Change

The research underscores that women scientists of all races and ethnicities face gender bias—but that their experience of gender bias differs by race. A clear implication of the research for diversity practitioners is the need to recognize and address differing patterns of bias in organizational women's initiatives. Too often women's initiatives are seen as primarily for white women without adequately reflecting the needs and experiences of women of color. Efforts to proactively understand how gender biases manifest for women of color - and to reflect back those differences in both messaging and targeted interventions – is a powerful means to help women of color feel included. Just as diversity initiatives focused on race alone are by default male and inadequately address the differing experiences of women, gender initiatives must also seek to reflect the unique needs and issues for women of color.

A second key learning from the research, that is the continuing prevalence of gender bias for women scientists, demands a new and more results-based approach. Of the total sample of 127 women interviewed for Williams' co-authored book (with Rachel Dempsey), 96% reported gender bias. Many gender initiatives are focused on enriching the women – with targeted trainings, mentoring programs, and network opportunities among other efforts – and while these certainly have merit, this approach is incomplete. Because implicit and subtle bias is the real culprit in most workplaces today, rather than the overt discrimination of the past, it is much more challenging to see and thus to address. In addition, implicit bias is powerfully self-perpetuating and gets reinforced in countless ways day after day. Remember that *ALL* of the women interviewed for the research reported experiencing one or more of the major patterns of gender bias.

The chief weapon used by organizations to combat gender bias is typically a single implicit bias training. According to Williams, "While this is a good start, doing anything just once will not change a culture. It just doesn't work like that." Eliminating gender bias requires addressing the structural and behavioral

patterns that under grid how organizations operate such as women being penalized for utilizing the expanded tenure clock to manage the transition to parenthood or men naturally gravitating to sponsor other men for key projects and positions, in advertently disadvantaging their women colleagues. A better solution is for organizations to *identify* and *disrupt* the bias through a four step process:

1. Identify the patterns of bias through conversations with women at the organization.
2. Develop a hypothesis and an objective metric to measure progress. For example, if women are doing large loads of office housework—taking notes and playing backroom roles—while the glamour work is more likely done by men, a metric might be to measure who's doing the glamour work and who's doing the office housework.
3. Use a *bias interrupter* to interrupt the bias. A gentle interrupter might be a training that describes the office housework problem and how it relates to gender bias. (Keep in mind that gender bias trainings typically are more effective if they are built into a training that's already expected and in place.)
4. Review the metric to see whether the *bias interrupter* has been effective. If it hasn't, ratchet up to a stronger interrupter. An example would be to create policies identifying that the responsibilities for taking notes should be rotated and/or that a more formal assignment system for allocating office housework is necessary.

Combatting deeply entrenched patterns of gender bias requires an iterative, evidence-based process. Progress results when organizations try different approaches through time and apply what they learn. Gender equity needs to be seen as an ongoing management issue, like research and development or marketing, and treated with the same rigor anchored by metrics, consequences, and ongoing innovative approaches. The UC Hastings College of the Law has founded the Working Group on Bias Interrupters, which brings corporate partners together with leading researchers to identify and pilot bias interrupters. There is space for a few additional corporate partners. Please inquire if you are interested or would like to learn more.

Potential Research Questions to Explore

Two promising avenues to explore through additional research include:

- Creating a comprehensive repository of evidence-based Bias Interrupters – concrete changes to organizational structures and practices - that are making a quantifiable difference for women scientists.
- Exploring the enduring work-life imbalance many employees experience, despite efforts such as offering part-time professional options which too often are marginalized by the always-on work culture, by focusing on the deep link between masculinity norms and cultures of pervasive overwork.

Research Links

Below we have highlighted researchers focused on key issues highlighted in this *Research Spotlight*.

Research focused on differing expressions of gender bias by race and ethnicity:

- Erika Hall, the Goizueta Business School at Emory University
- Robert Livingston – University of Sussex
- Katherine Phillips, Columbia Business School

Research focused on systemic changes – or disrupters – to address the ongoing crisis of work overload and imbalance which so profoundly impacts women, and increasingly men professionals:

- Lotte Bailyn, Sloan School of Management
- Jennifer Berdahl, University of British Columbia
- Erin Kelly, University of Minnesota
- Phyllis Moen, University of Minnesota
- Leslie Perlow, Harvard Business School