


Chapter 10


Gender Microaggressions Among Women in STEM: Addressing Workplace Challenges Through an Interdisciplinary Lens

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ABSTRACT

Microaggressions are everyday verbal, behavioural, or environmental slights that signal hostility towards marginalised groups. Such microaggressions, when extended towards women in a workplace, can have a lasting impact on the health and well-being of the women employees. Professional growth and development could be hampered, deterring women from climbing the ladders of professional success. This systematic review intends to consolidate literature existing in the field of gender microaggressions published post-2003 to explore the specific forms of microaggressions faced by women in STEM fields; the intersectionality of age, race, and ranking with gender microaggressions; and the effects of gender microaggressions in terms of job satisfaction, work-life balance, and well-being of the targets. An extensive review of 30 research papers was conducted. This review emphasises the need for interventions to combat systemic prejudices and cultivate inclusive organisational environments.

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INTRODUCTION

Women's presence in the corporate world has been steadily on the rise, and overt discrimination against them is becoming uncommon. However, covert discrimination in the form of gender-based microaggressions is still prevalent in workplaces, harming both the organisation and women employees alike. Continued instances of this subtle form of sexism lead to female employees' productivity and self-esteem being lowered and cause increased self-doubt and intention to turnover. Thus, as an indirect result of the presence of gender-based microaggressions in the workplace, the professional advancement of women employees is questioned.

Microaggressions refer to subtle, everyday interactions—verbal, nonverbal, or environmental—that convey hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (Sue et al., 2007). Gender microaggressions specifically target individuals because of their gender identity, often perpetuating implicit biases and stereotypes regarding gender capabilities. This review explores these concepts deeply to illustrate their nuanced impacts on women working within STEM fields.

Despite increased awareness, subtle gender discrimination through microaggressions remains difficult to detect and mitigate due to its implicit nature. Scholarship highlights that covert discrimination continues to present unique challenges, often bypassing formal complaint systems which traditionally address explicit bias (Cortina & Kabat-Farr, 2011). Thus, an enhanced interdisciplinary understanding is necessary to develop robust, contextually specific interventions.

This systematic review broadly synthesizes international literature, reflecting global scholarship on gender microaggressions within STEM workplaces. While the review includes studies across diverse cultural and organizational contexts, particular attention is given to literature primarily emerging from Western and South Asian regions. Explicitly acknowledging this geographical focus allows readers to contextualize findings and recommendations accordingly.

Women in STEM

Across 146 nations, women comprise only 29.2% of the STEM workforce, compared to almost 50% representation in non-STEM fields (“Global STEM Workforce,” 2021), despite the growth in the number of women earning a bachelor's degree in STEM fields (Catalyst, 2019). The situation is even more dire regarding senior leadership levels in STEM, with women holding only 16% of corporate board memberships (Catalyst, 2019). A study by STEM Women (2023) suggests

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