

How Not to be a Jerk to Women in STEM

A simple guide on how to treat women in science, technology, engineering and math in a respectful and collegial manner



By **Megan Patterson**

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Ladies be codin', via [Flickr](#)

The treatment of women in STEM fields has been a pretty hot topic over the past couple of years — be they in science, math, engineering, programming or other STEM fields, it seems like more women than ever are becoming increasingly vocal about the systemic sexism that exists in their fields in an effort to change it. Here's a simple guide from real women working in a STEM field on how they would like to be treated. And please note — not all of these examples of poor behaviour were necessarily perpetrated by men. Women are just as guilty of buying into sexist assumptions as men, and many of the women I talked to have witnessed this behaviour in both men *and* women.

1. Don't assume the woman writing you an email or who is talking to you on the phone is someone's secretary, personal assistant, or a human resources representative. This one came up a LOT, and even from women who don't work in STEM fields (my lawyer friends get this quite a lot as well). You'd think we'd be past this in 2013, but apparently not.

2. Don't bring up your female colleague's physical appearance in a meeting when you'd never do it to a man. R, who is in optics, once had a co-worker comment on how her hair was in a ponytail during a meeting. When she asked him not to do that, he got mad at her, because "his wife would be upset if you didn't notice when she changed her hair."
3. Don't make rape jokes during an international press conference for your expensive next generation gaming console. Or ever, really.
4. Don't fire a woman for speaking out about sexism in the tech industry. This past March, Adria Richards, formerly of SendGrid, was fired for just that very reason.
5. Don't address all correspondence to "Gentlemen." This was something a lot of the women I spoke to complained about. Be aware of who you're writing to, and when in doubt, use gender neutral terms. "Even if the email is coming to a project team full of women or the envelope is addressed to my full name, or Susan's full name, or whatever, the salutation in the letter will say 'Gentlemen,'" said K, an engineer.
6. Don't forget to use your female colleague's titles when introducing them. S, who is a professor, told me, "I attended a welcome back picnic for the returning undergrads in our department. The Department Head introduced the entire male faculty as Doctor, but did not do so for the female faculty members."
7. From E, who works in tech: "Before you have even met her, please don't stand over her desk, staring at what she is doing, start laughing, and then say, 'It's so funny. I have never seen a woman engineer before.'"
8. Be conscious of bias when making hiring decisions. Particularly in academics, women are often passed over for jobs and promotions in favour of male applicants. C, also a professor in a science faculty, related a particular incident at her job to me: "Recently a co-worker was in a meeting, and they were batting around ideas for folks to nominate for a new committee the college wants to form. The all-male-except-for-my-colleague committee kept suggesting men, so she spoke up and suggested that the nominations should include some women – for example, the head of a very successful, VERY large and well-known corporation in the area. The second-in-command (a role he has appropriated, not one he has been given/assigned) said immediately, 'No, she's CRAZY' and went right on suggesting men. Worse, the objections to the male suggestions were things like, 'No, he's probably too busy,' and folks on this committee have deemed other women in our department to be 'difficult' or 'crazy' – right in front of my female colleague." A study recently revealed that this bias is very real — science faculty will often rate a male applicant's suitability for the same job as higher than a woman's, even though both applications were exactly the same except for the name.

9. Again from E: “Please don’t tell her she cannot promote a female to a senior post because ‘she just got married, so she’ll probably get pregnant soon, and then you’ll be back in the same place again.’”
10. That a show set in the 1960s should even be relevant regarding sexism in the 21st century is not great, but I would recommend watching *Mad Men* season four’s “The Summer Man.” And whatever you do, *do not be Joey*.
11. E sums it up nicely. “Please don’t schedule a follow up conference based on the theme that ‘women are better than men at some of these things, because SCIENCE and we will argue this is why more women should be hired.’ Women might or might not be better at stuff, but brain scans are a long, long way from proving anything to this level. The fact is that STEM requires a vast range of skills that suit a whole range of people. Women are not ‘better’ at STEM than men. Nor are they worse. And they should not feel pressure to be ‘better’ than men to justify their existence or work in this industry. Women have the right to be just as crap as men too.”

Yes, a lot of these things should seem like common sense, but all of these stories are things that have actually happened, and are actually happening now as I write these words. There are lots more that I didn’t include. These are all women who love their jobs — if they didn’t, they wouldn’t still be there. The main thing a person can do is mindful, be polite, and be respectful. It’s not hard. If you have to ask yourself, “Will I come across as a jerk if I say this?” the answer is probably yes.

Megan Patterson is a freelance writer and the Science and Technology Editor at feminist geekery site [Paper Droids](#). She also [tweets](#) more than is healthy or wise.

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