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women?



by Cecilia D'Anastasio

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In the essay collection *Lean Out*, women in tech argue that it's not their fault for wanting to leave a toxic work environment.

You'd be hard-pressed to find an article about Gesche Haas, who has held senior roles at the startups Grouper, WunWun and Conjure.io, that doesn't mention sexual harassment in tech. It's a burden she has accepted by now.

By the time she was featured in the app *Wingcircle's* March 2014 "Entrepreneur" series, Haas had proven integral to the success of thriving startups and hedge funds worldwide. It was four months later, at a tech conference in Berlin, that she sat down with angel investor Paul Curda for twenty minutes over drinks. Soon after, Haas checked her inbox and found what is now an **internet-famous** (<http://valleywag.gawker.com/one-woman-finally-calls-out-a-tech-investor-for-creepy-1623490558>) e-mail from Curda, a potential industry contact: "Hey G. I will not leave Berlin without having sex with you. Deal?"

It was not a deal. After some deep reflection, Haas published Curda's inappropriate e-mail online. At first, she feared attaching her name to the incident would stain her professionally. A **long** (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffbercovici/2014/08/07/what-its-like-raising-money-as-a-woman-in-tech/>) list (<http://www.housingwire.com/articles/33592-court-filing-reveals-name-of-anonymous-whistleblower-in-zillowmove-lawsuit>) of (<https://medium.com/@beamanofhonor/be-a-man-of-honor-6f930d82d1f8>) female whistleblowers in tech have opted to publish anonymous call-outs of endemic harassment and toxicity in the industry, whereas women who have chosen to forgo anonymity—like **Adria Richards** (<http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-21896442>), who tweeted out some PyCon attendees' conversation praising "big dongles"—have faced harassment and termination for drawing attention to the issue, and by extension, themselves. But just as Haas feared integrating the incident into her public identity, she feared the opposite: "If I didn't attach my name to it," she told **Bloomberg** (<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2014-11-20/gesche-haas-reflects-on-harassment-in-tech-industry>), "it would imply that I did something wrong."

As a result, only about one-third of articles about Haas have omitted any mention of misogyny in favor of her entrepreneurial successes.

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Why suffer the indignity of being systemically undervalued, underpaid, and underestimated when you can, instead, gracefully opt out?

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Women and minorities in tech have a special responsibility. In an industry built by and for men—in which only 26 percent of jobs are held by women—pattern recognition plays a strong role. The face of tech entrepreneurship and of computing is, it seems, pale-skinned, beady-eyed, and male. On top of 14-hour days composing code, minorities in tech are otherwise employed as demographic icons. In that capacity, they often must defend their identity against an culturally-sanctioned exclusivity. That job never pays.

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It's hard to be a feminist in tech, as countless horse-beating articles have confirmed over the last few years. It can feel like you're ride-or-die with women or you're just another complicit programmer. Potential whistleblowers weigh being tolerant of abuse or out of a job. Harassment happens, startlingly often and unprovoked, and it can feel it comes with the territory of tech jobs—just like a signed contract and a fridge stuffed with craft beer. "Lean in" all you like, but in an industry where women largely lack the structural support to remain happy and healthy, there's an underrated third option: "leaning out."

Elissa Shevinsky, editor of *Lean Out* (<http://www.orbooks.com/catalog/lean-out/>) (O/R books, out 9/3/2015), did not used to care about feminism. There was a time when, she admits, she just wanted to code all day and, afterward, down Scotch with her (mostly male) colleagues. Shevinsky **garnered attention** (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/technology/technologys-man-problem.html?_r=0) after 2013's TechCrunch Disrupt hackathon when two Australian men debuted Titstare, which, as founder David Boulton explained, "is an app where you take photos of yourself staring at tits." (A month earlier at DefCon, "Hacker Jeopardy," as it always did, showcased a stripper named "**Vinyl Vanna** (<https://pando.com/2013/08/31/hackers-and-sexism-at-defcon/>)," who would remove clothes as the crowd chanted correct jeopardy answers.) Shevinsky was horrified, but Pax Dickinson, her business partner at startup Glimpse Labs was not: "It's not misogyny," the aptly-named Dickinson **tweeted** (<https://twitter.com/paxdickinson/status/377139293136756736>), "to tell a sexist joke, or to fail to take a woman seriously, or to enjoy boobies." Shevinsky quit Glimpse.

"I worry about training and encouraging women to join an industry that's failing so many of the women who are already there," she writes in *Lean Out*. Shevinsky later returned to Glimpse on the condition that her title would be "ladyboss."

LEAN OUT

The Struggle for
GENDER EQUALITY
in **TECH** and **START-UP**
CULTURE
Edited
by **ELISSA**
SHEVINISKY

Shevinsky's cutting compilation of essays doesn't specifically ask why tech is so congenitally sexist. Sexism in Silicon Valley is an **observable** (<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/ist/?next=/science/2012/09/are-scientists-sexist-new-study-identifies-a-gender-bias/>), **quantifiable** (<http://www.newsweek.com/2015/02/06/what-silicon-valley-thinks-women-302821.html>) **reality** (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/technology/technologys-man-problem.html>). More daringly, *Lean Out* questions whether the tech industry even deserves women at all. When highly criticized tomes like *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* **tout the importance** (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/books/review/sheryl-sandbergs-lean-in.html>) of proactively turning yourself into a workplace commodity, *Lean Out* comes as a welcome counter-manifesto, with fangs. The problem isn't necessarily that women don't care about programming, or that women in tech aren't measuring up to their male peers. According to *Lean Out* contributors, they do, and they are. The problem is that some cocktail of internalized misogyny and financially-reinforced tokenism runs through the veins of tech.

Just because there's a woman or a minority in a position of power doesn't mean that the environment is healthy; existing in the space is not the same as thriving. So why suffer the stress of tokenization and the indignity of being systemically undervalued, underpaid, and underestimated when you can, instead, gracefully opt out? Throw your second monitor against the wall, light a cigarette, and don't let the door hit you on the way out. It's not you; it's tech.

Kate Heddleston, a software engineer in San Francisco, damned the up-from-your-bootstraps fairytale of lean-in feminism on her **blog** (<https://www.kateheddleston.com/blog/how-our-engineering-environments-are-killing-diversity-introduction>) last March:

Women in tech are the canary in the coal mine. Normally when the canary in the coal mine starts dying you know the environment is toxic and you should get the hell out. Instead, the tech industry is looking at the canary, wondering why it can't breathe, saying 'Lean in, canary. Lean in!' When one canary dies they get a new one because getting more canaries is how you fix the lack of canaries, right? Except the problem is that there isn't enough oxygen in the coal mine, not that there are too few canaries.

In *Lean Out*, current and former techies argue that blame shouldn't be placed on them for not measuring up, or for dipping out of a toxic work environment. Studies **show** (<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-gender-eng.pdf>) that girls and boys from a young age don't differ in an aptitude for math; girls, because of a variety of social pressures, "lack self-confidence" in those fields. Those who do blossom into hackers and entrepreneurs are inundated with stories about **rape threats** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/10/20/rape-and-death-threats-are-terrorizing-female-gamers-why-havent-men-in-tech-spoken-out/>), workplace **sexual harassment** (<http://www.theverge.com/2015/3/3/8141053/ellen-pao-kleiner-perkins-venture-capital>) and **unequal pay** (<http://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2015/07/21/former-google-employee-alleges-unequal-pay/30481175/>). A staggering 72 percent of women in tech feel their performance evaluations are **biased** (http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2014/08/28/performance_review_study_won). Say you pursue the dream and make it to CEO. Good luck—female-headed companies receive **only 3%** (<http://www.babson.edu/Academics/centers/blank-center/global-research/diana/Documents/diana-project-executive-summary-2014.pdf>) of venture capital funding. These women are often caught in the crosshairs of opposing forces: feminism and misogyny, success and failure.

Anna Anthropy, a game developer and *Lean Out* contributor who was recently doxxed, has noticed that it is extremely trendy to nudge women into programming classes. She has also noticed that blockbuster videogames consistently feature women who moan uncontrollably when they are stabbed. Also noteworthy are memes calling out "fake geek girls" and lists congratulating the 87-some hottest women in tech. Anthropy's had a **tough time** (<http://motherboard.vice.com/read/empathy-games-dont-exist>) in the videogame industry, especially as a transwoman, and decided to "lean out," or take a few steps away from the toxicity. In 2002, she **decided**

(<http://www.capitalnewyork.com/article/culture/2012/04/5665874/video-game-designer-anna-anthropy-describes-life-radical-queer-trans>) to stop playing videogames.

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There's no shame in taking your hand off of something poison.

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"If I could take every nervous breakdown [I had] and stack them up," she writes in her *Lean Out* essay "But What If It's Killing You?", "I would build letters a mile high that say 'THEY DON'T DESERVE YOU.'"

In *Lean Out*, anthropy calls for an end to passion: passion that pushes malnourished bodies through "crunch time," demands continued work when the boys are out drinking, and worst, begs for **silence** (<http://valleywag.gawker.com/women-wont-name-harassing-venture-capitalists-even-ano-1618352306>) in the face of misogyny. Passion rockets you to the top, but it can also keep you there for far longer than is healthy.

"But anna," she asks herself, "what if that's just giving them what they want?" **Half of women** (<https://hbr.org/2014/03/whats-holding-women-back-in-science-and-technology-industries/>) in technology, science or engineering leave because of hostile workplace environments - twice that of men. There's a even term for this: the "leaky pipeline," or the tendency for discrimination and harassment to force women out of STEM fields. The number of female computer science majors has actually decreased by 19 percent since the mid-80s.

But don't women in tech want, and need, more women in tech? Isn't "leaning out" sending a negative message to young girls clutching well-loved copies of ***Barbie: I Can Be A Computer Engineer***

(<http://www.npr.org/2014/11/22/365968465/after-backlash-computer-engineer-barbie-gets-new-set-of-skills>)? "What if things are getting better—just very slowly?" anthropy asks. "What if it's killing you?"

"There's no shame in taking your hand off of something poison," she explains. "Leaning out" is not giving up, the manifesto argues. It's about preserving your personhood. It's about withdrawing from a charged existence in a hostile environment.

As tech companies advertise the importance of diversity and make public efforts to attract female applicants, women being placed in positions of power continue to face harassment - apparently more incessant and personalized harassment than ever before. Those who climb to the top, like **Brianna Wu** (<http://www.polygon.com/2014/10/11/6963279/brianna-wu-death-threats-police-harassment>) and **Ellen Pao** (<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/mar/13/ellen-pao-gender-lawsuit-silicon-valley>), often battle such harassment in the public arena, with the world treating it like a spectator sport. Stick your head out, the tech sector seems to say, and you might be cut off at the knees.

And harassment isn't always overt or external; "imposter syndrome," or the powerful fear that somebody will discover that your success is fraudulent, can needle its way into your psyche and thwart any attempt at workplace fulfillment.

Erica Joy, *Lean Out* contributor and former Google engineer, did everything to feel like she was "passing" in the tech industry. Only 3 percent of the computing workforce is comprised of black women like Joy, and she was the single woman of color on her team. While at Google in Atlanta, she attended paintball outings, picked up a few first-person shooters and let slide any off-hand prying into whether she was a single mother (she was not). The longer she stayed, the more her coworkers' casually racist and sexist remarks weighed on her. When she brought it up, HR suggested that she transfer to New York to evade the workplace tension.

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I feel a constant low level of stress every day, just by virtue of existing in my environment.

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In *Lean Out*, Joy composed 11 bullet-points detailing why being a black woman in corporate tech was not working for her. Items like "I feel like my presence makes others uncomfortable" and "I feel like I have to walk a tightrope to avoid reinforcing stereotypes while still being heard" are clearly disconcerting. But Joy suffered even more steadfast ghosts attached to her identity in a tech context: "I feel a constant low level of stress every day, just by virtue of existing in my environment," she says. "I feel like I've lost my entire cultural identity." After a few years, Joy acquired heart problems. Acne, too.

In 2011, **CNN filed** (<http://money.cnn.com/2013/03/17/technology/diversity-silicon-valley/>) Freedom of Information requests probing America's most prominent tech companies for their diversity data. For Dell, Ingram Micro, Intel, Ebay and Cisco, the only companies that abided, the highest number of black women in managerial positions was one. Apple, IBM, Google, Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard stonewalled requests for data with written petitions (many have since increased transparency). There is even a **reality show in development** (<http://www.businessinsider.com/this-reality-show-about-black-women-in-tech-must-be-stopped-2015-3>) about black women in tech. Tellingly, it seems that the program is based around the same stereotypes that haunted Joy: "Are you known in your industry for your over-the-top personality and unconventional approach to business?" the show's producer asked startup founder and developer **Kathryn Finney** (<http://www.kathrynfinney.com/>).

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This seat comes at what cost? Does that seat require our silence and deference?

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Joy peaced out. [Hack the Hood](http://www.hackthehood.org/) (<http://www.hackthehood.org/>), [Black Girls Code](http://www.blackgirlscode.com/) (<http://www.blackgirlscode.com/>), and other justice-minded tech organizations are now benefitting from her tech savviness. She's currently in the process of regenerating parts of herself that the tech industry snatched from her.

"This seat comes at what cost?" Krys Freeman, entrepreneur and *Lean Out* contributor, questions. "Does that seat require our silence and deference, in exchange for validation of 'cultural fit?'"

Not all tech companies are rife with misogyny. Not all tech employees are misogynists. "Leaning out" worked for many of the book's contributors, but others are still diligently cutting their teeth on the industry to pave the way for more women entering the field. Although only 4.2 percent of investing VCs are women, female-led venture firms are over 50 percent more likely than male-led ones to invest in startups with lady execs. Likewise, female-led initiatives like Lesbians Who Tech and Girls Who Tech are cultivating safe environments for minorities to develop marketable skills in tech.

There is movement toward organizing a mafia of disenfranchised folk in tech. The fact is that, the more minorities enter the field, the more minorities are in the field. The more minorities in the field, the more who enter. "Leaning out" can immediately benefit those who will no longer tolerate being both a demographic emblem and a tireless, silent workhorse in tech. But those who accept the heightened responsibility will be the ones to explode the white, male pattern recognition that pushes women away and out.

FAKEGRIMLOCK, the [most famous \(http://fakegrimlock.com/\)](http://fakegrimlock.com/) robot dinosaur on the internet and *Lean Out's* opening essayist, begins the book with a firm message apparently addressing its contributors: "IF YOU LET SOMEONE ELSE BUILD TOMORROW, TOMORROW WILL BELONG TO SOMEONE ELSE. THEY WILL BUILD A BETTER TOMORROW FOR EVERYONE LIKE THEM."

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