

Post Local

Black and Latina women scientists sometimes mistaken for janitors

By **Brigid Schulte** February 6

In a series of famous studies designed to gauge at what age stereotypes sink into young minds, elementary school students were asked to draw a scientist. Kindergarteners' drawings in these Draw-a-Scientist tests were all over the map. But by second grade, one standard image had firmly taken root: A scientist wore a white lab coat and glasses. And he was always a white man.

So it should perhaps come as no surprise that a new [report](#) on women of color in science, technology, engineering and math, or STEM, found that 100 percent of the 60 scientists interviewed reported experiencing bias and discrimination.

So much so that African-American and Latina scientists said they were routinely mistaken for janitors. "I always amuse my friends with my janitor stories," one black woman scientist said. "But it has happened, not only at weird hours."

More than three-fourths of the African-American women scientists surveyed – 500 in an online survey in addition to the 60 in-depth interviews – reported having to provide evidence of their competence over and over again. They tend to feel they can't afford to make a single mistake. And more than women of any other race or ethnicity, black women were more likely to report a sense of "bleak isolation."

In the new report, "Double Jeopardy? Gender Bias Against Women of Color in

Science,” authors outline four typical types of gender bias against women: having to Prove yourself again and again, walking a Tightrope between being seen as either too masculine or too feminine, running into the Maternal Wall and motherhood bias, and experiencing a Tug of War as the few women in the company, the academic department or the lab compete for the one or two “token” female slots.

The report, by the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California, Hastings College of the Law, was funded by the National Science Foundation.

Women scientists from India said gender bias was worse in the United States, though women scientists from Japan and Africa disagreed.

A majority of Asian-American women scientists said they get pushback when they’re assertive, and don’t conform to the more stereotypical view of being a passive, feminine “China Doll.” One biophysicist recalled her colleagues telling her after she got a grant to “go back to the kitchen” so they’d have a chance.

And Latina women scientists are labeled “angry” or “emotional.” Some said they worked intensely to overcome the stereotype that Latinos are “lazy.” Their accomplishments were more likely to be attributed to luck. And they reported routinely being asked to do the administrative drudge work that researchers called “office housework.”

“Several of them were actually being treated as admin, expected to fill out other people’s grant forms, coordinate other people’s meetings, and they couldn’t get out of it,” said Joan Williams, a law professor at the University of California’s Hastings College of the Law and one of the authors of the new report.

“In others studies, we heard of white women being expected to do the ‘office housework’ – say, if you’re a lawyer, that means you’re responsible for doing the task list, or keeping track of everything going on in litigation,” Williams added. “It’s not like this – doing secretarial work.”

Women are a distinct minority in all STEM fields, and women of color even rarer. Big Internet companies like Google and Facebook released their employment data and shocked no one when it showed a largely white or Asian male “brogrammer” culture.

Although women make up half the workforce, they hold about one fourth of the STEM jobs, according to the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey.

And bias is pervasive. Researchers at Yale, in a 2013 study, found that, given identical resumes of fictitious job applicants, science professors at six major universities favored the male applicant. If the woman was offered the job, her average starting salary was nearly \$4,000 lower. Female scientists, the researchers found, were just as biased as the male scientists.

“The numbers have just not moved in all the STEM disciplines in the last 10 years,” said Janet Koster, executive director of the Association for Women in Science. “Women start out, but seep out of the pipeline when they go into early careers or academic education. For people of color, we’re not even getting them into the pipeline in the first place. That has to change.”

As for women of color, Koster said, in 2012, only 10 African-American women and 10 Hispanic women received PhDs iout of a total of 852 granted in mathematics and statistics. “That’s tragic,” she said.

“There’s not only a leaky pipeline problem, the plumbing itself is broken,” wrote Zuleyka Zevallos, Buddhini Samarasinghe and Rajini Rao, three women scientists who started the Web site [STEM Women](#), to highlight the bias women in science encounter in an effort to change the culture.

The Double Jeopardy report notes that companies, universities and labs can use “bias disrupters” to put fairer systems in place to recruit, evaluate and promote men and women and people of color more fairly.

But Williams notes that her aim is to help women and women of color learn to navigate what other studies have found are “hostile” STEM environments.

“We’ve been trying to change these organizations for 25 years. But they have not changed,” Williams said. “So what women need now are very concrete strategies.”

And one of the most powerful ones, Williams outlines in her recent book, “What Works for Women at Work,” is:

Create a posse. Women often feel uncomfortable with self-promotion, she said. And research shows that their mistakes are more likely to be pointed out and not forgotten, their success often attributed to luck rather than effort, and their competence called into question more often.

So you have to blow your own horn, she said. But do so without running into another wall of bias that women aren’t supposed to act assertive and masculine, but more feminine and self-effacing.

“The posse solves both problems,” she said. “You find a small group of people, both men and women, about your level, or a couple of notches above, and you celebrate each other’s successes. So you get your accomplishments out there, but in a way that avoids the pushback of self promotion.”

If you liked this story, you may want to read about how women are making inroads in statistics, one of the hot new fields of Big Data: [Women flocking to statistics, the newly hot, high-tech field of data science](#)

Or this, on a National Science Foundation report of 5,000 women who graduated with engineering degrees in the last 60 years that found 40 percent quit or never entered the field: [Study: Uncivil work environment pushing women out of the engineering field](#)

Brigid Schulte writes about work-life issues and poverty, seeking to understand what it takes to live *The Good Life* across race, class and gender.
