



Why aren't there more female engineers?



By Rachel Nuwer | Smithsonian.com

In U.S. universities, women make up just 12 percent of engineering professors. Likewise, just 11 percent of working engineers are female. Yet women represent 20 percent of the engineering degrees awarded each year, as the Washington Post points

out.

Researchers have long questioned what fuels this divide, citing everything from women's greater likelihood to become full-time parents to women's supposed tendency to be less aggressive in pursuing opportunities. Neither of those things, it turns out, actually explains the problem. Instead, a chilly workplace environment seems to be the main factor that pushes women out of engineering careers.

In a new study, researchers surveyed more than 5,000 female graduates who earned engineering degrees from top universities over the past 60 years. Forty percent of the respondents, the Post reports, had either left the engineering field or never used their degree professionally. Women most frequently cited "uncivil workplace climates," including "the expectation to put in long hours of face time in the office, and the perception that there was little opportunity to advance," as the main motivation behind their decision to leave engineering.

Supervisor support, according to the Post, was often lacking, and the respondents said they frequently suffered from condescending comments and

gossip at the hands of male colleagues. Many jobs and labs also did not make provisions for having a family, forcing women to choose between their careers or families, researchers add. Other women said they did not like the fact that they were the only female employee or student in their workplace or lab.

Research underscores the importance of mentoring. From their analysis, the researchers found that women who did stick with engineering and went on to enjoy a successful career often said they had a supportive supervisor when they were just getting started. That means that, to begin to close the gender divide in engineering, system-wide change needs to be implemented from the top down, the researchers told the Washington Post. And that first requires acknowledging that "this is not a 'woman's issue," one research told the paper. It's "about creating a good work environment."

Critical thinking challenge: How did researchers answer this question: "Why aren't there more female engineers?"

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