The Chilly Climate in the Workplace, or, Why It Still Hurts to be a Woman in Labor

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Although much progress has occurred, men and women working together side by side in the same organization, or teaching or studying in the same department often have very different experiences from one another. Even the most ardent supporters of equity for women may be unaware of how they treat women differently than their male colleagues. And for minority women, the problems may be intensified; compared with white women on the one hand and minority women on the other, minority women are less frequently hired, promoted or, in academe, given tenure.

Our Project has done a number of reports on the chilly climate in higher education. We've examined the climate both in and out of the classroom; the climate for women faculty, administrators and graduate students; the climate for Black women; and how men students often create a chilly climate for women students. We are about to release a report on women in medicine and are working on a report on the climate for Hispanic women as well.

In these reports we have noted some behaviors such as the following:
- women are more likely to be interrupted than men
- people (men and women) are more attentive when men speak
- during discussion, people (men and women) are more likely to respond and to respond more extensively to men's comments than to women's comment's. Women's comments often are ignored or receive a diffuse "uh huh."
- Men are more likely to get more attention, praise, criticism and feedback than women.

What we have learned is that the behaviors we call "the chilly climate" occur everywhere -- they are not limited to the classroom or to the campus -- they are perhaps universal, and they are certainly part of the everyday workplace. They do not occur all the time or in every aspect of the workplace, but they happen enough so that
they give both men and women a message that women are not as worthwhile and are not expected to participate or behave in the same ways that men do.

I should add here that we did not do any hard research ourselves. We looked at the research done by others, both published and unpublished. We looked at our files which are the largest in the country regarding women in academe. We put a call for information in our newsletter, and we talked to people across the country, questioning and listening to them. That was the easy part. We ended up with a large collection of materials, and we tried to make sense out of it and to put it into categories. That was the hard part. It was important for us to name the behaviors so that similar behaviors could be recognized and identified; otherwise all one has is a string of unrelated incidents. I want to talk about some of these categories we have named, although we have by no means named them all or in the best way.

I. The Problem of Numbers
The chilly climate begins with the problem of numbers. Imagine how you would feel if your doctor was female, your lawyer, your boss, your priest, rabbi or minister, your dean and president, your garage mechanic and the president of your bank.

When men are the vast majority, even a few women may be seen as "too many." A woman dean or manager is hired and the comment is made,"It looks like the women are taking over." Or when a minority woman is hired, her high visibility may lead to the erroneous perception that "minority women have it made."

Generally, the fewer the women, the greater the likelihood that they will be viewed as tokens, seen in relationship to stereotypes about women than as individuals. Women become overvisible because of their small numbers. Because they stand out, for example, a woman's presence or absence at a meeting is more like to be noticed. Women may be subject to greater scrutiny, both socially and professionally.

Women may be viewed as symbolic of all women: "We had a woman in this department once who didn't work out so we are leery of hiring another." (Can you imagine anyone saying,"We had a man in this department who didn't work out so we are leery of hiring another."). Women are asked to give the "woman's point of view," rather than her own their own.

Few women means more isolation, with less people with whom to talk and to socialize with.

WOMEN IN ENGINEERING CONFERENCE: A NATIONAL INITIATIVE
II. Confusion of Social and Professional Roles

Many men have had limited experiences with women as colleagues or as professionals, so they may fall back on the ways in which they are comfortable -- treating women in their social roles such as mothers, wives, sisters, girlfriends, hostesses, or the role of the office wife, the secretary. For example: focusing on a woman's appearance and other personal qualities in conversations, in introductions and in letters of recommendation. Compliments that might be flattering in a social context take on a different meaning in the professional setting. It causes a woman to be appraised for her appearance rather than her ability (More about this later.)

Men are rarely described in terms of their physical attributes or their ability as parents. For example:
- "I'd like you to meet the lovely new addition to our department, rather than "I'd like you to meet this new hotshot we've just hired."
- In a letter of reference: "She manages beautifully, even though she has three children."
- Addressing women as "honey," "dearie," "sweetie" or "Mrs." -- words which undercut a woman's professional identity, especially if the men are being addressed as "Dr."

Expecting women to continue their social roles in the professional setting mean that women are expected to be nurturing, mothering, to "be feminine" (what ever that means), and to smile a lot. This subjects a woman to a classic double bind: if she acts "motherly" it will be hard to view her as intellectually vigorous. If she doesn't act "motherly" or "feminine" she may be seen as "hard" or "castrating," or if she is an administrator, she may be viewed as the "Iron Maiden" or the "Dragon Lady" -- common labels for any woman in a high position who may, in fact, be acting no differently than her male colleagues. But if she speaks softly, she may be seen as "weak" and "lacking in leadership ability."

Essentially what is viewed as appropriate for men in terms of professional and intellectual activity may be viewed as inappropriate for women.

III. Devaluation, or Women's Worth in a Man's World

Women may be viewed in ways that lead to the devaluation of their competence and their desirability as professional colleagues. There are numerous studies showing that the gender of a person influences how that person's behavior and achievements are perceived and evaluated.

In one study identical vitae were sent to department chairs and they were asked to state at what rank they
would hire the hypothetical applicants. The names of the vitae were switched; half the time each vita had a male name and the other half of the time each vita had a female name. When a vita had a male name, chairs typically recommended the rank of associate professor; the identical vita with a females name typically merited the rank of only assistant professor.

The work that women do is devalued, even by women themselves. Women's accomplishments may be down graded. A man and women with the identical qualifications may be described differently:

He: He has served on two departmental committees and even on one institutional committee.  
She: She has served on two departmental committees but only on one institutional committee.

Men's success and achievement are often attributed to talent, ability and competence -- internal and predictable factors. In contrast, women's success and achievement are often attributed to external and/or unpredictable factors such as "they had to hire a woman," or "she slept her way to the top," or luck or intuition. (We call the same factor "intuition" when it occurs in a female; we call it "judgment" when it occurs in a male.) Women themselves may attribute their own success to luck or being in the right place at the right time.

IV. Lack of Collegiality: Can a Woman Be One of the Boys?

A key element of success in academe and elsewhere is collegiality. People need to be able to talk to each other about scholarly pursuits, professional opportunities, organizational politics and problems, and personal issues, especially when things go wrong. Yet many men find it difficult to talk to women. Indeed many of the difficulties women face spring from the general discomfort that many men still experience when dealing with women as professional peers, and women's subsequent exclusion from collegial interchange.

How can a woman be one of the boys if the men are uncomfortable with her? Generally people are more comfortable with people like themselves, including members of their own sex. This "comfort factor" shows itself in many ways:

- Men talk more to men and simply do not talk to women as much.
- Men rarely include women in informal talk or activities.
- Women are viewed as marginal, similar to minorities in many ways. They are perceived as outsiders, and are thus often isolated socially from their peers. Their comments may be overlooked or ignored at
meetings, and they generally get less feedback, whether positive or negative, almost as if what they do or say does not matter.

At the same time that men have difficulty or discomfort with women, men may view women's collegiality with other women with suspicion. Let two or three women eat lunch together or merely talk with each other, and they may be asked, "What are you women plotting against today?" or "When are you women taking over?" Although the comments may be made jokingly, they nevertheless reinforce and reflect the idea that women are outsiders and perhaps not to be trusted.

Sometimes men are collegial with women only when there are no other men present. They'll laugh at a sexist comment during a staff meeting but later criticize these remarks with a woman when there are no other males present.

V. Sexualization of Women

Add to the devaluation and the lack of collegiality another factor: the sexualization of women. Many men relate to women primarily in terms of sexuality rather than as professionals. Women are more likely to be judged by their appearance, while men are more likely to be judged by their achievements. Sometimes the only praise a woman gets is for her appearance.

Other forms of sexualization:

- assuming that women who collaborate with male peers are engaged in a sexual relationship;
- assuming that women who collaborate with female peers are engaged in a sexual relationship.
- discussing a woman's sexual attributes in letters of recommendation or in search and promotion committees.
- describing women, including students, by their anatomy (such as a "piece of ass") or as food ("cupcake" or sweetie pie"). These words hardly promote a professional image. They make women uncomfortable regardless of whether the words are aimed at them or are used to describe other women or are meant as compliments, because they shift the focus away from a woman's intellectual abilities in a way that depersonalizes by reducing her to merely a sexual being.

VI. Humor: Why Can't a Woman Take a Joke Like a Man?

While humor is often used to lighten up a subject it also
can be used to express anger and resentment, and can be used to define the outsiders.

Jokes demeaning women are not uncommon. Such jokes are often told to women directly or in front of them, often without any awareness or concern that the joke may be offensive to women. Sometimes the speaker prefaces a joke with "You women won't like this joke," and then the speaker goes right on to tell it. The speaker is really saying it doesn't matter if women are offended. And if a woman indicates her displeasure she'll be told, "Can't you take a joke?" This makes her feel at fault rather than the person who offended her.

What can be done to change the chilly climate? Our reports together have several hundred recommendations, with most aimed at what institutions can do, particularly in terms of policies and programs. Here are a few that individual women might find helpful, although I don't want to imply that women by themselves can warm the chilly climate. A public problem needs policy and structural solutions. Nevertheless, there are a few things women can do to alleviate their own discomfort:

- **When instances of differential treatment occur, write down what has happened** to help you identify kinds of differential treatment, determine patterns, and differentiate between what happens to you as an individual and what is based on gender.

- **When overtly sexist remarks or jokes are made, there are a number of ways to respond.** You can ignore, stare down or pretend not to understand. This is particularly useful when sexist jokes are told. Asking the person several times to repeat a joke or asking them to explain it will often discourage them from doing the same thing again to you. They will either believe you have no sense of humor and thus not bother you again, or may recognize the inappropriateness of their behavior. It's also ok to just say "This remark is offensive to all women" [rather than "to me" which personalizes your comment].

- **If you are interrupted, continue talking and continue looking at the person to whom you are addressing your comments.** Do not look at the interrupter. You can say something like "Just a minute. I haven't finished my point." (Caveat: People with higher status are "allowed" to interrupt people of lower status, so if your boss interrupts, you can let her or him do it.)

- **Use humor. Mirror comments:** When a male professor at a seminar referred to a female professor as "a lovely lady" with whom he would hate to disagree, she countered by referring to him as "a handsome gentleman" with whom
she would hate to disagree.

- Claim you own accomplishments as a male colleague would his. If you have solved a problem, published an article, been promoted or whatever, accept due praise rather than "politely" attributing your success to outside factors such as luck. Tell others, especially your supervisor about your good work.

- Seek out informal contacts, for example, by arriving early for meetings and chatting with others before business begins. Invite men out to lunch. If you are worried about how this looks, invite another man or woman to make it a threesome.

- When asked to bake cookies or take notes or engage in other behaviors related more to stereotypes than to professional expectations, do not feel obligated to say yes.

- Build alliances with other women through support groups and networks.

The campus and the workplace are often chilly for women. It is chilly because good will alone is not enough.

Let me close with something that is symbolic of the new mood of women. It is a "newly discovered revelation" from the Bible, and you will probably recognize the paraphrase:

And they shall beat their pots and pans into printing presses
And weave their cloth into protest banners.
Nations of women shall lift up their voices with nations of other women;
Neither shall they accept discrimination any more.

That may sound apocryphal, yet I suspect it may prove to come from the Book of Prophets, for what women are learning is the politics of change and the politics of power, and the campus, and the nation, and the world, will never again be the same.

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