

Case Study

Chapter 11

A group of female engineering students at a Canadian university are harassed by a few of their male counterparts. The men mock and insult the women's work and refuse to work with them on group projects.

The women take their concerns to the dean who talks to the male students and gives them a warning. The men stop the in-person harassment, but around this time a Facebook page starts up, and on this page, anonymous students make derogatory comments about women and, more specifically, female engineering students. No names are mentioned.

When the women report this to the dean, he says he cannot take any action because he doesn't have access to the Facebook page, can't prove who is making the posts, and no names are mentioned. The women feel discouraged and, for some of them, they no longer want to attend the program. Others feel stress and anxiety that is impacting their course work and grades.

- 1. According to sociological theory, why do fewer women enter the STEM fields?**
- 2. What are some possible challenges for women who do study and work in STEM fields?**
- 3. Why does this harassment and discrimination happen in STEM fields?**
- 4. What should the dean and the university have done differently?**
- 5. What can be done to minimize this issue and encourage girls and women to pursue STEM careers?**

Sample Answers:

1. Sociologists would explain that less women go into these fields because they have been socialized to go into more traditional fields for women, such as health and education. Social influences such as encouragement from parents and teachers for boys who excel in these fields and lack of support for girls who are also strong achievers in these fields play a large role.
2. Women may not have female role models at school or work. They may also encounter harassment and discrimination, resulting in mental health issues and lack of opportunity. They may feel discouraged enough to leave the field permanently and pursue other options in more supportive environments.
3. Since women are in fewer numbers in these fields, they can be easier targets. Some men, also, may feel threatened by women entering what they see as a male-dominated field.
4. The dean should have pursued the matter further, launching an investigation into the Facebook page and meting out consequences to the perpetrators. The university can have a clear, formal policy on social media usage as well as zero-tolerance for harassment, both in person and online. The women should receive support and empathy from their classmates and professors, as well as access to counselling if needed.
5. Starting in preschool, students should be encouraged to pursue various interests regardless of gender. As students get older, STEM support for girls needs to be provided both within and outside of school. Options include workshops for girls, parents and teachers; scholarships for women in these fields; sensitivity training at work for all employees and managers; and mentoring programs.