**Adapt a Module: Internalized Sexism in Education**

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**Adapt a Module: Internalized Sexism in Education**

**Compelling Unit Question**

Why do more men pursue studies in technical fields (such as science, technology, engineering, and math) than women when they perform equally well in school?

**Text Set**

Kumar, R. (2021, September 27). *Breaking the cycle: My journey with internalized misogyny | Riya Kumar | TEDxYouth@CPS*. YouTube. Retrieved May 2, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrsBRBtwwQo>

In the Ted Talk “Breaking the Cycle: My Journey with Internalized Misogyny” by Riya Kumar, she discusses her experience with internalized misogyny, particularly within the South Asian community. Specifically, she discusses how her passion for politics via debate with male family members was productive and respectful, but afterward, they would make subtle misogynistic comments about her, such as “God help her husband” and “Good luck finding someone who will marry a girl like that who’s loud…” Other women in her family would also question her desire to get a Ph.D after college, asking her how she would still have time to have time to get an academic degree when “she had to get married.” These people consider themselves progressive, she says, but such comments implied that her purpose was to please her future husband. Kumar says that she internalized these messages, wondering how she could be loved by a man if she was considered obnoxious for expressing herself in debates and too busy pursuing an academic career. She says that this creates a cycle of misogyny in families that she is trying to break so that she can define herself, rather than letting the male gaze define her (the idea that the world is seen through a man’s perspective and to be good, women must conform to what receives validation from them).

The Star. (2019, December 12). *Michelle Obama explains Imposter Syndrome - YouTube*. YouTube. Retrieved May 2, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dumm_XfHkmY>

In an interview by The Star, Michelle Obama explains imposter syndrome: a feeling that one does not deserve the success that you have achieved. She says that this is particularly common among women and minorities, and she struggled with it as a student at Princeton and Harvard as well. She encourages viewers to believe in their abilities, which she did with time, especially since many men with power were overconfident and did not actually deserve it.

Millikan, R. (1936, June 24). Letter from Robert Millikan to W. P. Few. *http://cwp.library.ucla.edu*. Retrieved May 2, 2022, from <http://cwp.library.ucla.edu/articles/millikan/millikan_letter.html>

The letter from Robert Millikan, a Nobel Prize winning American physicist, to W. P. Few, the President of Duke University, in 1936, serves as an example of the early sexism pervasive in attitudes and institutions, particularly STEM schools, that has led to internalized sexism. Millikan encourages Few that the department of physics at Duke University should consist of men supposedly “in view of the fact [that] at least 95% of the ablest minds that are now going into physics are men.” While he admits that women have done outstanding work in other scientific fields, he holds that this is not the case with physics and, therefore, women who succeeded in physics would be an exception.

Cimpian, A., & Leslie, S.-J. (2017). The brilliance trap. *Scientific American*, *317*(3), 60–65. <https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican0917-60>

The article “The Brilliance Paradox: What Really Keeps Women and Minorities from Excelling in Academia” by researchers Andrei Cimpian and Sarah-Jane Leslie describes a phenomenon titled the brilliance trap. After finding a negative correlation between a disciple’s value of intellect and their representation of minorities and women, the researchers suggested that fields regarded as “genius” function as a subconscious “keep out” sign to women and minorities. This is likely because they have been wrongly stereotyped as intellectually inferior in society.

Ananthram, S., Bennett, D., & Bawa, S. (2021, March 15). *It's not lack of confidence that's holding back women in STEM*. Phys.org. Retrieved May 2, 2022, from <https://phys.org/news/2021-03-lack-confidence-women-stem.html>

The article “It’s not lack of confidence that’s holding back women in STEM” by Subramaniam Ananthram, Dawn Bennett, and Sherry Bawa presents findings that women in STEM are often more confident than men in STEM. They direct readers to look for alternative reasons for the disparity of men and women in STEM, rather than confidence. They suggest that the key to greater representation of women in STEM is for women to be more confident in their career prospects. This means offering support for women’s professional goals during and after their studies.

Wilkinson, L. (2021, April 4). *Spring 2021 Boston College Carroll School of Management “Business Statistics Welcome Survey” Information and Analysis*. Google Docs. Retrieved May 2, 2022, from <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1CoMiA7zmGmjLqQjeEf0e60L2NdV8Fu6YER8xBkQoo4w/edit?usp=sharing>

Due to the little visual representations of research findings on women and men’s perceptions of their intelligence in relation to their actual performance in academia, I have included an analysis of these variables and corresponding visuals from a survey of Boston College students in the Carroll School of Management that I did for another class. The analysis shows that nearly forty percent of men perceived their intelligence to be above average as compared to their peers, whereas nearly fifty percent of women perceived their intelligence to be about the same. Despite the significant differences in perception, women performed slightly better than men when comparing GPA, showing an overconfidence from men and slightly underconfidence from women in their abilities. This text offers findings that contradict the previous article in the text set.

Why do more men pursue studies in technical fields (such as science, technology, engineering, and math) than women when they perform equally well in school? As is the case with many academic questions, the former is still being explored. The adapted module on internalized sexism in education is designed to introduce students to this question, present possible answers, and prompt them to do their own research, as professional researchers are doing across academia. It includes texts that highlight the role internalized sexism plays in the educational disparity as well as the roles interpersonal, ideological, and institutional sexism play in the manifestation of internalized sexism. This module is specifically meant for students in tenth grade, who have started to think introspectively, can be more objective in their judgment, and have begun discerning their identity relative to ideas and opinions of others (“Child Development by Age”). At the end of the module, students should be able to form their own answers to the question and begin thinking about possible solutions for the gender disparities in education.

The question “Why do more men pursue studies in technical fields (such as science, technology, engineering, and math) than women when they perform equally well in school?” was chosen as the compelling question for the Internalized Sexism in Education adapted module because it suggests that reasons for academic pursuits may not actually lie in performance but culture. This will engage students and get under their skin because if the reasons for not entering a field are not performance related, it suggests the cultural factors at play are perpetuating inequality. With increasing vocal youth regarding political activism, this will catch their attention and prompt discussion. Beyond this, it will be interesting because there are many students who identify as women, so the question pertains directly to their identity, which they are discerning especially because of the developmental stage that tenth graders experience.

Not only is the guiding question engaging, it also encourages analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creativity. This is because there is not just one answer to why there is such a large disparity between men and women in technical academic fields. In fact, plenty of research contradicts each other, suggesting a lot more research still needs to be done to make a determination. For example, some researchers suggest that this disparity is due to a lack of confidence in women’s abilities in technical fields, whereas other researchers insist that this is not the case and that the disparity has more to do with how successful women believe they will be in technical careers. With many different findings, students are forced to think critically about what each finding says and make an independent decision that creatively synthesizes all the texts.

Naturally, the guiding question also prompts students to consider important events, ideas, and beliefs because what is certain in the research is that the disparity between men and women in technical fields is correlated with internalized sexism. As a note, internalized sexism is “When members of an oppressed group come to believe (consciously or unconsciously) the negative messages about their group” (S. Seider, personal communication (lecture), January 31, 2022). Inherent in internalized sexism is also a belief men are superior to women. Consequently, students who identify as women have to face a startling question: Even as a woman, am I sexist? Though likely an emotionally difficult question to consider, students are shown to be more objective in their judgements by tenth grade, allowing them to answer the question honestly. They may even be able to recall times where internalized sexism has affected them, and men are prompted to consider how they have potentially contributed to internalized sexism. It is inevitable that students thoughtfully take into consideration their beliefs and the important events in their lives, and in the greater world, that perpetuates them.

The first text in the text set, the Ted Talk “Breaking the Cycle: My Journey with Internalized Misogyny” by Riya Kumar, is most appropriate as an introduction because it invites students to a conversation about internalized misogyny by sharing personal experience. Because of the personal nature of the text, students will naturally listen to what Kumar has to say with empathy. Students will be able to see her, as opposed to simply her words on a page, as she describes her experience with internalized misogyny. Therefore, students will be interested in giving their time to watch it because it is similar to listening to a peer – it will be a refreshing alternative to typical reading assignments.

Kumar’s story is also worth students' attention because in it she cites common examples of misogyny that happen today, which many students will recognize and relate to. For example, she discusses how she internalized subtle misogynistic messages that came from family debates, particularly political ones that are all too common at holiday gatherings. Familiar comments that she references are “God help her husband” and “Good luck finding someone who will marry a girl like that who’s loud…” in response to expressing her academic opinions. Other women in her family would also question her desire to get a PhD after college, asking her how she would still have time to have time to get an academic degree when “she had to get married.” Such comments implied that her purpose was to please her future husband. If students have not already considered the subtle misogynistic messages in these comments, it will be alarming since they may have heard these very comments from their own families. If they were previously in denial about sexism, it will serve as clear evidence of it. Furthermore, Kumar’s story demonstrates that internalized misogyny can be intersectional since there is an increased difficulty being both a woman and South Asian in a misogynistic society, as the South Asian community particularly insists that a woman's purpose is to find and please her husband.

Kumar’s story helps students answer the guiding question “Why do more men pursue studies in technical fields than women when they perform equally well in school?” because she says that the subtle misogynistic messages she received from her family were internalized, influencing her behaviors in the classroom. After expressing her opinions during a debate and being considered obnoxious, she thought that she should shy away from expressing herself and engaging in school. While her particular interest was in politics, a non-technical field, Kumar makes clear that sexist messages can influence women's educational choices. With this in mind, it can prompt students to consider how other gendered stereotypes, such as the belief that women are less capable than men in the sciences, could lead to disparities in STEM.

The next text in the text set is the interview of Michelle Obama done by The Star, in which Obama explains imposter syndrome, believing that you do not deserve the success that you have. She is also sure to note that this is particularly common among women and minorities. This is sure to catch students' attention (and is worthy of their attention) because she is a prominent figure in society – the first black woman to be a first lady to a United States president – who has had great success in every sector of society (education, business, politics, etc.). Further, it serves as encouragement for students who do experience imposter syndrome. She argues for them to believe in themselves, lets them know they are not alone (she says that she experienced it), and brings public awareness to the phenomenon, thereby acknowledging imposter syndrome as a problem students should consider in decision making and address. Additionally, by bringing awareness to the phenomenon, students are better able to fight it and more likely to believe in their abilities if ever faced with it since they will be able to recognize it.

This text contributes to the students’ body of knowledge relevant to the module’s guiding question, as it suggests that women may not pursue technical academic fields because they may feel like they are imposters in technical fields. If they are not confident in their abilities, or feel like a fraud because of their achievements, students could reason that this may prompt them to switch to studying another disciple. Students can also consider that the prevalence of imposter syndrome in women would also mean that they would not pursue more difficult and highly regarded professional roles, as they may not feel capable of them. The resulting lack of women leaders in technical fields means lack of guiding women role models, a plausible answer to the module’s guiding question.

The third text in the text set, the 1936 letter from Robert Millikan, a Nobel Prize winning American physicist, to W. P. Few, the President of Duke University, serves as an example of the early sexism pervasive in attitudes and institutions. Within the letter, Millikan encourages Few that the department of physics at Duke University should consist of men supposedly “in view of the fact [that] at least 95% of the ablest minds that are now going into physics are men” (Millikan, 1936). While he admits that women have done outstanding work in other scientific fields, he holds that this is not the case with physics, and, therefore, he suggests that women who succeeded in physics would be an exception. Beyond being worthy of attention simply for how blatantly and alarmingly sexist the text is, it is worthy of students' time and contributes to the student's body of knowledge relevant to the module’s guiding question for the same reason: it shows that sexism is not simplistic. Internalized sexism and gender disparities in education are problems that trace their roots to institutional problems that created disparities between men and women in the sciences decades ago.

The article “The Brilliance Paradox: What Really Keeps Women and Minorities from Excelling in Academia” by researchers Andrei Cimpian and Sarah-Jane Leslie is the fourth text in the text set, which describes a phenomenon titled the brilliance trap. After finding a negative correlation between a disciple’s value of intellect and their representation of minorities and women, the researchers suggested that fields regarded as “genius” function as a subconscious “keep out” sign to women and minorities. This is likely because they have been wrongly stereotyped as intellectually inferior in society. This finding is valuable for students because it makes an unconscious phenomenon now conscious for students, making it less likely that they will let the difficulty of an academic field deter them from a study they are interested in. Additionally, it is important because gaining awareness of what subconsciously influences women can help them act accordingly and think differently. Without this, harmful ideologies can continue making them seem true (New Group 2, personal communication (small group notes), April 4, 2022). Student Gerald Mastellone in Scott Seider’s Social Oppression and Transformation course also notes this saying, ““If [internalized sexism is] not properly recognized and affirmed by others, sexist comments can seem more natural, and hold a false sense of truth in a person's mind” (Gerald Mastellone, personal communication (discussion post), March 24, 2022).

The brilliance trap finding is important for students' knowledge in answering the question because it is a research-based suggestion for why men and women are disproportionately in technical academic fields. With such a clear answer from the research, though not the only one, this will prompt students to look for further research that answers the question. Perhaps, they will even be inspired to conduct their own to answer the guiding question. Additionally, by knowing about the influence of the brilliance trap on representation in such disciplines, they can again reason this creates less women role models in the fields, which makes it harder for women to feel encouraged to and supported in pursuing technical studies – another possible answer to the guiding question.

The fifth text in the text set is the article “It’s not lack of confidence that’s holding back women in STEM” by Subramaniam Ananthram, Dawn Bennett, and Sherry Bawa. The authors in this reading present findings that women in STEM are often more confident than men in STEM, suggesting that the gendered disparity in technical fields is not due to a confidence gap between women and men. In doing so, they direct readers to look for alternative reasons for the disparity of men and women in STEM. This will be worth students' time because the findings are at odds with common belief that the reason for the gender disparities in STEM is due to confidence. It is also valuable and contributes to their ability to answer the guiding question because it shows students that there is sometimes not a clear answer. As with many great questions, it forces students and scholars to thoughtfully consider and synthesize many sources to determine what forces are actually at play to cause social phenomenons.

The final text in the text set is analysis accompanied by visual representations of survey results regarding perceptions of intelligence and gender in the field of business at Boston College. The analysis shows that nearly forty percent of students identifying as men perceived their intelligence to be above average as compared to their peers, whereas nearly fifty percent of students identifying as women perceived their intelligence to be about the same. Despite the significant differences in perception, women performed slightly better than men when comparing GPA, showing an overconfidence from men and slightly underconfidence from women in their abilities. This text is worthwhile for students because the findings are presented visually, which can have a much stronger impact for students who are visual learners. Additionally, by seeing the findings in this way, it engages a different part of students’ brains, making it more memorable and facilitating new discussion with the text set.

The survey analysis is valuable in developing a student’s body of knowledge relevant to the guiding question because it shows that women in a technical field underestimate their abilities while men overestimate theirs, contradicting the previous article in the text set. It demonstrates a positive correlation between the number of men or women pursuing a technical degree and their levels of confidence in their intelligence, suggesting that confidence in ability could indeed be a reason for the disparity between men and women in technical fields. This opposite finding shows that more research is needed to have a complete answer to the guiding question.

It goes without saying that these texts speak to one another because they all offer valuable information to synthesize an answer to the module’s guiding question. However, they also speak to one another because the findings of some contradict others, such as with the last two texts indicating whether or not confidence in intellectual ability could play a role in the gender disparity in technical fields. Other texts speak to one another in that they offer an explanation for some of the happenings in others. For example the letter from Millikan to the president of Duke University encouraging him to place men in the physics departments shows that sexism is an institutional problem. This connects to the texts on imposter syndrome and the brilliance trap because these phenomena have its roots in institutional problems. The same goes with Kumar’s TED Talk: Her experience with internalized misogyny was a result of beliefs pervasive in her community’s institutions, particularly marriage. Taken together the texts show this is not one reason for the gender disparities in education. It is the result of all different forces spanning across decades, institutional, ideological, and interpersonal sexism that lead to internalized sexism.

While the guiding unit question “Why do more men pursue studies in technical fields (such as science, technology, engineering, and math) than women when they perform equally well in school?” has no simple answer, the text set in the adapted module on internalized sexism in education gives students a place to begin exploring possible explanations. Because of the personal relevance of the topic to students, as many tenth graders are in the process of discerning their identities and engaging in introspection, the module comes at the perfect time. It enables students to see how internalized sexism has potentially played a role in their lives and greater society, explore how it is influenced by other forms of sexism, and begin problem solving the gender disparity in education, having thoughtfully considered its possible causes.

**References**

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