

The women quoted here responded to the questions:

What do you say to a woman who feels she has never experienced discrimination for being female? Have you experienced it, in the distant or recent past? What was it like? Is there anything that you must do or cannot do because you are female?

[Age: early 30's, recent Ph.D. in the humanities]

You are definitely on to something with women's issues being sensitive; there are several reasons why no one wants to post about it in the public sphere: if we complain about it, we sound like cry babies, and that's not likely to put us ahead, now is it?

Yes, women are discriminated against all the time. Me personally? Well, students treat me differently, for one. Professors, too. It's like everyone is secretly worried I'm going to up and have a baby and forget all about my career.

I have to overcompensate for being female by being serious, well-dressed, and super prepared all the time. Really I should be wearing glasses, too, but I don't like them.

[Age: mid-70's, Ph.D., practicing psychologist]

I have been sensitive to women's issues since the sixties, and have been gratified at the changes I've seen. For example, when applying for a home loan in 1969, I was told that the bank would count only half of my income because I was a woman and "might get pregnant." I was a professional, with a master's degree, and able to raise enough hell that the bank gave in and we got the loan. Later, I was told by a professor not to go for a PhD because it would be "unfair to my husband and family." I got the PhD anyway, and don't think any innocent men or children were injured. Today, I don't think things like this are so overt, but will be interested to find out what you learn from this discussion.

[Age: – late 50's; Counselor]

One effect of "liberation" to share: I have noted **that my generation of women felt we had little or no choice about whether or not to work. (Is that really liberation?)** One woman I know was a very unusual person in my circle of acquaintances to stay home with her kids, even though she was a teacher in the days before she married. I remember both envying her and wondering how she could do it. I think the difference was that she was in control of the family finances in a way that I would never have been able to ... I did love my sense of accomplishment while working, and it was a good balance for a working mom once the kids are in school. I have continued to be glad that I could have some "of my own money" to spend, which is part of my up-bringing: I did not want to be dependent upon anyone who could look pained when I needed something.

I have never felt that I would not be able to earn as much as a man DOING WHAT I WANTED TO DO, but have been aware of the good ole boy network in the school board system that did not take women as seriously for high posts. I watched as one of my fellow counselors was used as an interim director of schools, did a GREAT job, but when the time came to fill the post, she got the big heave-ho. It was painful, as she knew the system from the ground up and I think would have been excellent.

[Age: late 20s; Scientist]

...definitely talk to some female scientists (professors or researchers at a company). The first time I ever felt like somebody discriminated against me because I was female was actually at Swarthmore, when I was paired with a lab partner who had a really insidious way of talking down to me. I thought it had to do with him being a senior while I was a junior (or him just being a jerk), but my male junior friends never had an issue with him and were actually the ones who pointed out that he was being that obnoxious just to females. I could fill a book with crap I saw and heard while I was in graduate school. If you're looking for that kind of angle, definitely poke around the science world.

[Age: late 20s, Scientist]

I worked on a majority-male science team several years ago. The men were extremely liberal, but were unpleasant to women. Anything they said about a woman tended to include a put-down, whether they were talking about their wives, the secretaries, or other random women. I don't think they even realized they were doing it, but it was a daily occurrence, complaints about female scientists that weren't on our team, or fat women who skew clothing sizes, or whomever was around that day with ovaries. They made fun of a chatty waitress for half an hour, talking about how (sexually) interested in them she must be. They didn't talk this way about men, so far as I can recall. It was a bit uncomfortable: I would notice the pattern, but nobody looked askance at these pronouncements and the pronouncers were my superiors. I wondered what they said about me when I left the room.

The worst time was when we were eating out on a business trip one night, near some noisy college women. The team leader imitated these women, pretending to be a co-ed in a class: he made his voice a falsetto and breathily called the professional name of one of the other (male) team members. I left the team not long after that, mostly for other reasons. (I was unwell at the time.)

I don't think this was really discrimination, and I don't think the men noticed either how uncomfortable this made me, or even that they were constantly maligning women. They were the sort of men who might have self-identified as feminists. I haven't been back to that branch of science again, even though I found it important, intuitive, and kind of fun. I work primarily with women now; it's easier.

[Age: late 20's, Ph.D. student]

I think maybe part of the issue is the use of the term discrimination. Most people think of discrimination as something overt, obvious and blatant. I think that less of that kind of

sexism happens to women these days (in part because of legislation), but that doesn't mean by any stretch that we don't still hold on to (some subtle, some not so subtle) cultural assumptions and expectations about gender that are damaging to women -- Particularly in less urban, wealthy parts of this country.

[Age: late 20's; Businesswoman]

When I saw your post, I immediately thought of my relationship with a male manager on my team. I joined his team about two years ago (never reported directly to him, but to a manager just under him). Two things stand out. One was that he'd get this look on his face like 'is this girl still talking?' when I was discussing things - the first time I remember feeling such hostility at work. The second was that he had nicknames and things he'd jokingly tease the men on the team about (paying too much attention to their hair or clothing for example). I never saw him do that to the women on the team....

[Age: early 30s, Ph.D. student]

My husband and I deposited our car at the authorized dealer repair shop and were told it would be ready in 3 days. 3 days pass, not even a phone call. Being the one with the more flexible schedule, I tend to handle service appointments (cable, plumber, etc.). When I inquired about our car, the guy on the phone was completely offensive and dismissive. Basically I could tell he was insulted that a woman was taking them to task for not being on schedule. Incensed, I called my husband, who immediately called back, got the same guy (who my husband said sounded sheepish when he mentioned me) and our car was ready that day. It's just a hunch, but I feel pretty sure that if I didn't have a male partner to follow up, they would have delayed even further in retaliation, and I suspect, tried to take advantage of me financially. Obviously I'm not prevented from getting a car repaired because I'm a woman, but there are still people out there who think they can bully us and act against our interests just because of our sex.

Something similar happened to my aunt, who is "just" a housewife: when she asked her contractor why he was doing something, he shot back, "don't you have some shopping to do?" Nothing like belittling someone in their own home!

And these brief, punchy comments were posted publicly:

[Age: early 40s, works in the non-profit sector]

I can't safely go for a walk or hike by myself. That's why I got a dog. A couple of months ago, in the early morning but after sunup, a jogger was pulled off the sidewalk and raped right here in one of West Hartford's many nice neighborhoods. No one heard the commotion coming from the rhododendron bushes.

[Age early/mid 20s, in response to the question: Is there anything you feel you can't do because you are a woman?]

No. I'm a female pilot and proud of it. Shame on people who think women can't do things.

The following mothers responded to the questions:

Do your daughters face mixed messages about what they should do when they reach adulthood?

And ask daughters directly:

Is there anything that you must do or cannot do because you are female?

[Age: late 50's, Daughter: 17]

As a teenager I think at that age young women are rarely 100% confident of their feelings or reactions to things, issues, commentary, etc. Getting mixed messages or feeling mixed emotions is normal. We need to guide them and support them.

I always encourage my daughter to pay attention to her gut feelings and instincts. Follow her heart when something doesn't feel right or sound right and make her conclusions. That THE WORLD is full of mixed messages and we, she, I, all women and people need to tone down the chatter in our heads and focus on the issues at hand. While also being informed and responsible about our decisions and actions.

My daughter has been raised to feel she can be and do anything she sets her mind to be and do when she grows up. As a divorced single parent, I have tried to raise her like a thoroughbred race horse and have always told her she is strong and capable of running her own race. Watching or worrying about the other horses doesn't help you win YOUR race. Be focused and believe in yourself and that you can achieve your goals and objectives. Stand up straight with your head held high and know who you are, and that you matter. That is what we should all be telling our daughters as we send them out into the world as our legacy.

[Age: 50's, Daughter: 16]

I think my daughter encounters mixed messages--she says "I can be anything except play on the football team" -- but she also says "You have to look good always." There is still the demand to conform to expectations about how one looks, only the stress is increased by the (newer) demand to be anything you want to be. As for the second question, Liz said she feels there's no clear message about what she must do or can't do because she is female. She feels the path is undefined. In a way, it's so unclear it's difficult to figure out.

[Age: early 50's, Daughter: 16]

My daughter has always been confident. There is nothing she feels she can't do. When she sets herself out to do something, she is determined...there is no stopping her

[Age: early 50's; Daughter, 17]

I heard the other day that it is going to be harder for girls to get accepted to certain colleges because there is a 60/40 ratio, girls to boys and they want to make it 50/50. Qualified girls will have harder time getting in. Mixed messages are, motherhood and homemaking versus significant professional contributions. She has serious anxiety about her future.

[Age: early 40's; Daughter: 13]

My daughter has been taught you can do anything a man can do and some of the time you can do it better.

She said she can do anything she puts her mind to. She says she can do anything she is shown how to do. She can learn anything if she puts her mind to it. She would like to be a writer someday. She said that the only thing women have to do that men can't do is have the babies, but the men can stay at home and raise them while the women go out to work if they want to.

She has no problem with that.

In our household we are a team - men do things that the older generations deem as being "woman's work" and the women do "men's work". Whatever needs to be done you do it no matter who you are.

My mother is 65 and although she was a stay at home mom she has taught me men and women should work as a team. Sometimes one can't give 100% so the other one has to step up and give extra to make things work. She still had some of the old ideas though while I was growing up. Dinner had to be on the table at a certain time everyday - women did the laundry and the men fixed the car - my mom and dad both did the lawn work and the cleaning and cooking. They both took out the trash. I think the idea of what men and women should do was starting to change with their generation.

[Age: 46, Daughter: 16]

Social expectation is that as a girl she must master all gender specific roles (cook, clean, raise kids, balance career family husband, etc) while having a job and retaining femininity. On jobs, all she felt was that being a surgeon ...was discouraged because she was a girl. And she reminded me that I had told her to avoid law and finance as I found them to be rewarding but with huge personal sacrifices. I kept thinking of that horrid commercial advertising perfume (enjoli) with the woman in an evening dress "I can bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan..." sigh.

[Age: late 50's, Daughter:14.] She is very confident in her female-ness. The world is her oyster. She feels that she has as many choices as the boys do.

[Age: ? Daughter: 17]

The field is wide open for my daughter in all aspects, career, relationships, family. No stereotypes in her life but we do not have the traditional family model. She feels that being a mother (and all the physiological aspects) is the only thing that she has to do because she is a woman. Everything else is up for grabs.