

AN UNSUITABLE JOB FOR A WOMAN?

To promote diversity, the engineering community must tackle the subtle stereotypes that hinder performance and enthusiasm for projects.

By Adrienne Minerick, ASEE Diversity Committee Co-Chair

The need for engineering educators to step up our diversity efforts hit home personally for me recently. A fun project to build a patio soon morphed into a first-hand lesson on the negative influence that society's perceptions can exert – even on an experienced DIY enthusiast like me.

My gender-role revelation began with a four-day “staycation” that my husband and I had scheduled months in advance to construct a retaining wall and patio. At first, everything went according to plan. Dump trucks delivered topsoil, fill dirt, crushed gravel, washed rock, and, finally, 14 pallets of block, toppers, pavers, and sheetrock to the top of our steep hill. We leveled a 350-square-foot area and dug foundations for a 60-foot retaining wall to span behind a pond and waterfall.

Typically, my husband gets all the credit for completing projects like these. So I've adopted a strategy of talking the talk, hoping this will provide evidence about my ability to also “walk the walk.” We had set the first, and hardest, row of blocks when my mother and her new husband arrived for a visit. They offered to help us one afternoon, and things quickly went south.

My husband and I jumped into our usual routine of alternately loading blocks or buckets of washed rock into our tractor, unloading, and shoveling around the positioned blocks. Mom kept pulling me away to get or do things. Each time, her husband picked up the shovel to fill in. In short order, I was isolated from my pet project and trapped doing gardening tasks I resented. I was left with the unenviable choice of creating discomfort by returning to my project or suppressing my feelings to act according

to my proper gender role (as imposed by 65-year-old guests).

When my husband and I went out to work on the retaining wall alone the next night, I was surprised by my lack of enthusiasm for the project. I was timid about decisions and second-guessing my next steps. An established engineer, I have overcome situations like these many times, yet this one rattled my confidence, my self-efficacy!

Why is this significant? Because job selection was determined via peer pressure and a subconscious bias about “women's work,” not on qualifications or who would be most

known, he certainly would have urged me to rejoin the project.

Simply talking to people similar to yourself about uncomfortable topics such as gender roles does too little to change the status quo. The majority remains oblivious while the minority absorbs greater stress, with scant sense of accomplishment upon a project's completion. Well-intentioned individuals who try to be advocates for a minority can still miss indications of a problem. And they also struggle with how to react in situations they don't fully control.

To ensure that the engineering profession has the diversity of expertise and experiences needed to solve society's grand challenges, we educators must proactively prime the talent pipeline. Those in the majority must become aware of damaging biases in unfamiliar contexts and then learn to be advocates. When we are in the minority, we must voice our views on an issue long enough to change it. All of us need to support and empower diverse members of our local and national engineering communities – starting with using language to change the conver-

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effective. Think how much more susceptible our engineering students and newly minted graduates are to the pressure to conform.

In engineering's egalitarian environment, it's often hard to recognize the influence of subtle prejudices on individual colleagues or students. Proactive advocacy, including positive conversations about empowerment and creativity, can help counter stereotypes that push nontraditional individuals away from really cool projects. For instance, my husband told me later he was totally unaware of the tension I was experiencing. Had he

sation (www.engineeringmessages.org).

The ASEE Diversity Committee is working to bring advocacy into the mainstream. This Year of Action will feature such efforts as advocacy tips from the Women in Engineering Division (wied.asee.org/AdvTips.html) and compiling diversity resources and ideas. Please watch our website (diversity.asee.org) for updates.

Adrienne Minerick, an associate professor at Michigan Technological University, is chair of ASEE's Professional Interest Council I and serves on the Board of Directors.