

# One Woman's Path to Partnership

by Bobbi Mooney, Manufacturing IT Business Systems Manager at Shell

This article is significant in that it identifies one woman's experience with gender inequity. While Bobbi does not speak for all women, it is an important article that raises the need for deeper conversations between men and women about the effect of gender on the workplace.

Bobbi has graciously allowed White Men as Full Diversity Partners to use this article in our continuing work to deepen partnership, in this case, across gender. Specifically she writes, "I first wrote this in the form of a letter to the executive leadership team of (what was then called) Services International, our IT arm within Shell. It was their first diversity awareness workshop on a global basis and they had a section of the agenda on gender learnings. I was invited to attend (I think they only had one female at that time on their team). I could not attend due to schedule conflicts, so chose to send them a letter as pre-reading to their gender dialogue. It prompted some good questions and discussions afterwards, so I modified it from the personalized letter to the more general article."

We hope Bobbi's words will spark a deeper discussion between you and your work colleagues about the effect of gender differences at work.



## SENIOR LEVEL WOMAN DESCRIBES EXCLUSIONARY TREATMENT

In my work community, a large Fortune 500 company, the diversity dimensions on which I differ most are gender and personality type. I am a woman and I am introverted. These characteristics are consistent in the less dominant groups within my workplace population, particularly in leadership roles.

As an American working internationally in a global company also placed me in a third subordinate group. Sometimes my religion places me in an additional subordinate group. I agree with those who say there is a multiplicity phenomenon when it comes to diversity dimensions: they do not add up, but rather multiply in the face of exclusion.

As a woman, I am comfortable with my gender. Because gender differences have the greatest impact on me at work, I decided to write about my experience as a senior woman leader in a large Fortune 500 company today.

## DISCLAIMERS

It is difficult to talk about what it is like being female in a male dominated society and workplace. I worry that both men and women will classify me as a "man basher." On the contrary, I like men. The male relationships with my father, brothers, husband, son, and many friends and colleagues are a wonderful part of my life. Yet as a collective group, the dominant male community has consistently made me feel excluded, as if I could not be in their world without losing some integrity of my identity. I love my femininity. I embrace it. Yet, I often find myself implicitly and quietly excusing or discounting my own feminine characteristics, or even emphasizing my "masculine" traits, as I assimilate into my male dominant environment.

## MY STORIES

Sometimes other women tell me they do not understand the big deal about gender diversity, because they have never experienced blatant discrimination or prejudice in the workplace. Neither have I. What I have experienced, and still experience often, is the more subtle discrimination of exclusion. My stories below tell the times I have felt excluded by being treated differently or reacting differently, because of my gender difference. I don't talk about these "little" stories to male colleagues very often. They can easily annoy men or reinforce the "here's another whining female with petty complaints" image. And that only serves to further alienate me from the community of men with whom I so much want to get along and be a part.

In isolation each story can seem very insignificant; however, the significance grows with the repetition. The stories don't happen occasionally. They happen every day. They accumulate in a cluttered corner of

my mind where I sweep them into the pile labeled "repress or contemplate." It is the growth of that pile over the years that begins to wear me down. It begins to make me accept things I don't want to accept, because it isn't worth it to react. Repetition brings doubt. It begins to make me believe things about myself or women as a group that I know are not true. It makes me question myself and gradually erodes my self-esteem.

Every once in awhile when the pile gets too high, the next story hits the apex of the pile at just the right angle to send it tumbling. When this happens the pile doesn't get smaller; the base simply widens. At these times it is inexpressibly comforting to be near one of the men with whom I feel safe enough to discuss the stories, someone who can help shore up the base of the scattered pile again. These are men who have gratefully provided that safety and the understanding that they can't always try to "fix" the stuff in the pile.

So here are the stories, the events or patterns that I experience.

- My ideas frequently get discounted by colleagues in meetings, only to be accepted when a man repeats them a few minutes later.
- I walk into meeting after meeting where other women number zero to three. And I always count—whether there are 10 or 1,000 people—I count and track when there are enough women to feel naturally comfortable. The further I move up in the organization, the more masculine the business meetings become.
- I avoid sitting by other women at business meetings when the ratios are low. I don't know why I do this, but it is common with other women also.
- I have lower self-confidence than most of my male colleagues and I've found this to be a common thread amongst women throughout my company and other companies. The good performers hide this, but often say they still feel it inside. We consistently lose opportunities saying, "I'm not sure I can do that" against men with less competence who are very confident they can do it.



- Throughout my career I have over compensated job performance so that no one can possibly think that I'm not qualified for that job. Again, another common thread, particularly in leadership. I hate to hear "she got that job only because she's a woman." (Yes, people really do say that, men and women alike.) So I want to remove all shadow of doubt and prove them wrong.
- Decisions do still seem to get made in the men's toilet on meeting breaks. Sometimes they are shared and sometimes not.
- Men tend to look past or over me when standing in a group.
- Even though my brain is normally wired to be analytical, I also possess a most reliable sense of intuition, often thought of as a more feminine characteristic. My intuition rarely fails me in

making good decisions, so I trust it. After many years of marriage, my husband learned to trust it also. Male colleagues do not. Someday I hope my daughter's colleagues not only understand and trust her intuitive abilities, but seek them out.

- I still see personal questions about marital status and children during job interviews in countries outside of the U.S. that can cause us to lose talented women hires. Even though these questions are still legal in many countries, many women believe these questions reveal outdated attitudes towards women in the company.
- I often say, and hear other women say, that it takes more energy for

a woman to do the same job than a man. Though this could sound like we think more is required or expected, I feel that it comes from the extra energy drain. The energy drained from having to spend more time to get my ideas listened to or accepted, or emotionally processing the extra clutter that's going on in the background from the exclusion process.

- Women watch the ratios of men to women on leadership teams. Ratios matter to women in our company, because it tells them the extent to which they are represented, or understood, by management. It also sets the level of ambition for any woman wanting to move up in the organization. Not every woman wants to be the first or only woman on an

all-male leadership team, because it is too hard to do alone. The impact on me personally as my leadership team ratios have risen, then fallen again, has been tremendous. When the numbers fall below about three women in total, or less than 25%, I feel much less positive about my effectiveness on the team, because I feel outside of the team dynamics.

- I've noticed that women who tend to rise further in the ranks in our company and many other companies tend to be ones who stifle characteristics considered to be more feminine and emphasize their masculine behaviors. They talk louder, act more assertive/aggressive, compete harder, etc.
- In a 20-year career with over a dozen bosses, I have only had one female boss and only one male boss whose wife worked outside the home in a professional job. My male colleagues who have dual career marriages generally have a much greater understanding of gender issues in the workplace.
- Others have observed that men begin to understand women in the workplace better when their own daughters reach university age. My own appreciation of the fear of positive discrimination for white men has increased, as my son grows closer to adulthood.
- I've experienced the tendency that women do not do as well as men with professional networking or mentoring. We tend to ignore each other or compete, rather than create supportive structures for one another. As a younger woman, I didn't find myself being taken in and cared for by experienced women or men in the same way the old boys network works. Now as a more experienced woman, I find it overwhelming to think of mentoring the large numbers of women who might want it. My attempts to initiate or discuss more formal networks for women in our company outside of the United States have been difficult. Women have expressed a "fear" of being labeled as troublemakers if they do this. Thus we help perpetuate the systems ourselves.
- Several women outside of the U.S. have expressed that they could never even imagine having the courage to sit with our executives to discuss their feelings about being a woman in our company the way that American women have done.



- The exclusion behaviors within my company vary dramatically from country to country. For example, the exclusion behaviors I experienced in the United Kingdom as an expatriate in the late 90's are very similar to what I experienced in the early 80s in the US.
- When I recruit or talk to university age family/friends, women still question our company's and industry's poor reputation for progressive attitudes towards women in the workplace.
- I feel uncomfortable or demeaned when men:
  - Relish in their wife's stereotypical shopping habits, collections or hobbies.
  - Put down their wife/mother/mother-in-law/etc. over something that is stereotypically female.
  - Are given the bill by the wait staff when I'm the one intending to pay.
    - Tell "dumb blonde" jokes.
    - Brag about their sexual prowess, tell sexual jokes or display girly pinups around their desks.
    - Touch me if they don't know me very well.
    - Assume I will not "hold up" as well as them while traveling or working long hours, etc.
    - Use sports and military analogies excessively.
    - Think the use of masculine terms (e.g. manpower) is a petty matter (if words don't matter then why is it a big deal to change them?).
      - Look to me to take meeting notes, book the taxi/restaurant, etc.
    - Make reference to women belonging in the home.
    - Laughingly "apologize" for any of the above, but continue to do it anyway.

Kudos to all the men who take the time and care to become more aware of language and behaviors that perpetuate exclusion. Women in the workplace have seen many changes in the last century and my company is often looked at as one of the diversity leaders. I celebrate those accomplishments. But my current experiences that continue into the 21st century remind me that exclusion in the workplace is still my foe that leaves me weary at the end of many days.

## PRACTICAL THINGS MEN CAN DO TO HELP

When I talk to men about gender diversity, I generally find they fall into two categories:

- Those who feel they are already very “progressive” and none of this is applicable to them.
- Those who want to learn about their own behaviors and want to create a more inclusive environment for women.

For the latter category, I find a sincere desire to take action, but a lack of awareness about how to get started.

Here are a few practical suggestions.

1. Talk to women about gender issues. Find a couple of female colleagues with whom you feel safe and actively ask them to become your learning partner. Don't expect them to open up right away or answer your probing questions candidly the first time. Keep trying. Talk to the women who are closer to you emotionally, your partner, your daughter, your sister, your friend. Because of the established emotional connection, you may understand things from them that you wouldn't understand from a female colleague.
2. Begin to track when you see yourself or other men behave differently to women than they behave to men. Don't try to label these as good or bad or make yourself feel guilty about them. Just practice noticing the differences.
3. As you increase this tracking, occasionally be the voice that interrupts a demeaning or patronizing behavior or comment. Women cannot point these out very often, because of the risks involved. It feels very supportive to have a male colleague recognize and “call” exclusionary behavior.
4. Fight the tendency to defend yourself individually that you are “more progressive or more sensitive than most men” when it comes to gender differences. Even if you are, you are still part of the “male group” and will get tagged with things your community represents.
5. Don't treat the diversity learning journey as something that you can conquer or complete. It's a lifelong study and the landscape constantly changes.
6. Be careful about using gender humor inappropriately, and narrow your definition of inappropriate. It usually



removes all shadow of doubt that you are uncomfortable working with women or don't “get it” at all.

- For example, I've heard men address a large audience with “Gentlemen ... pause ... and ladies” realizing it was an afterthought and then laughing.
- Or commenting, “You need to keep her; she's both female and ... an ethnic group ... so you get double points” and laughing.
- And eliminate sexual jokes and direct or implied humor that disparages women. There is simply no place for either in a professional working environment. I don't want to eliminate fun, but this stuff isn't any fun for a significant portion of our population and may be the most common form of exclusion.

7. Remember that men and women both have masculine and feminine characteristics. Cultivate some of your own feminine characteristics; if you always repress them, you give the impression they are “bad.”
8. Observe the times that your female leaders have different opinions on a decision or discussion point than most of the men and explore it. Pay attention to what a different perspective might do to the outcome if you don't ignore it. Even consider accepting a woman's intuition on a decision. Try it out a few times; test it and see that it works.
9. Model your own behavior changes to other men and women below and above in our organization. Nothing else will send a greater message or actually change the system more effectively.

Change takes time. Many fear that setting targets around gender diversity in leadership positions could turn into a numbers game, with token positions, and riddled with cynicism. I share that concern, and I recognize that targets and measurement are very effective change mechanisms in our corporate culture. I hope the process of understanding why the targets are difficult to meet begins to show what is unbalanced within our systemic structures and ultimately causes the necessary personal behavioral changes throughout the organizational culture. Only then do we begin to poke at the core of our systemic structures, which may take a generation or more to significantly change. Deep change takes a long time. Be patient.

# An Update from Bobbi in 2012

by Bobbi Mooney

First, had I known the longevity of this article when I wrote the original letter 12 years ago, I would have polished it up a bit more! I would love to say that the article is now completely dated and irrelevant, but I still get notes every year from women in Shell telling me I had “written their journal” confirming that much of it is still relevant.

My personal experience in how much we’ve changed over the last decade is mixed. I believe we have indeed made some great progress in Shell’s D&I efforts. The business case for diversity is no longer debated. The “D” or the numerical representation has improved for women, albeit mostly for white women and not multi-cultural women. The downside is the numbers are fragile, so that one or two females leaving the organization at the higher levels, makes a significant difference in the representation percentage. And the “I” level of inclusion, which was the focus of my article, is not changing with the speed that I expected. More specifically, here are the negatives and positives comparing the environment in 2012 with 2000:

On the negative side:

- Amongst the behaviors that I wrote were demeaning or made me uncomfortable—almost all of these happen today, although with less frequency than they did 12 years ago. Some may be diminishing more out of political correctness than respect, but diminishing nonetheless. However, most are still frequent enough to be called patterns.
- The one I think we’ve made the least progress on in Shell is the use of gender neutral terms. Many people, both men and women, still see this as a petty matter. I still disagree because I think there is a crucial link between language and behaviors, and willingness to change one impacts the other.
- While 12 years ago I wrote that I had never personally experienced blatant discrimination or prejudice, I have since experienced sexual harassment in the workplace. The good news is it was appropriately investigated and dealt with. The bad news is that anyone would not consider this inappropriate behavior.

On the positive side:

- The leadership teams I have sat on for the last few years have had more females. A couple of years ago I found myself sitting in as a guest member with a leadership team where I was the only female again. It felt very strange and took me back to what used to be “normal.” (BTW, earlier this year that team added three females during a reorganization, so it is now more like the new normal!)
- I doubt many decisions get made in the men’s toilet these days. I think this one has gotten a lot of air time in Shell to the point that it has changed. (We occasionally pretend to make one in the ladies room though, just to have a bit of fun with the guys!)
- I believe women in Shell are focused more on the importance of networking.
- We now have several active women’s employee networks outside the U.S., which is an indication to me that fewer women are worried about being labelled.
- I have had two more female managers, so one in the first 20 years and two (of six) in the last 12 years.
- Most positive of all is that we now have vocabulary to talk about what I described. In 2000, I didn’t use the term “microinequities” to describe my experience, because I didn’t know the term existed yet. Vocabulary provides a vehicle within which to make the un-discussables discussable and goes a long way to legitimize the “is this just me?” feelings.

I believe that sharing personal stories is one of the most effective tools for creating real change, so hope my stories give others courage to share their own stories.