

Careers in STEM

Women's experiences with microaggressions



- Women in STEM careers in Lebanon experience gendered microaggressions at work.
- Dr Yasmeen Makarem and Dr Beverly Metcalfe conducted a qualitative study with 21 women in Lebanon working in STEM fields to better understand these experiences.
- The participants experienced different forms of micro-assaults, microinsults and microinvalidation, and responded using four tactics: adaptation, confrontation, negotiations and beyond bodies.
- Human resources professionals could use these findings to improve workplaces for women and continue to diversify STEM.

Microaggressions are subtle comments, behaviours, or environments that communicate something negative or distressing to certain groups, including women. Gendered microaggressions come in various forms. Professor Kevin Nadal (2010) previously identified three types: micro-assaults (exclusionary, isolating, or threatening language, behaviour, or environments), microinsults (belittling or offensive comments or behaviours), and microinvalidations (dismissive statements or behaviours that invalidate someone's experience). While microaggressions may be unintentionally perpetuated, they damage individuals' mental health, and reinforce problematic and oppressive societal dynamics.

Gendered microaggressions affect working women in the Middle East, who are the least likely in the world to be employed in the formal workforce – especially in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) fields. Stereotypical perceptions of women as carers, mothers, and teachers conflict with stereotypically 'masculine' traits required for those in STEM, like competitiveness. Implicit gender bias theory suggests women are also perceived as inherently less capable than men at STEM subjects. These perceptions not only affect employers but may also prevent women from beginning STEM careers. Women who are in STEM careers are often excluded at work, preventing them from adopting a 'science identity' (building a reputation, forming a network, and achieving recognition) and progressing their careers.

Dr Yasmeen Makarem at the American University of Beirut and Dr Beverly Metcalfe at the École Supérieure des Affaires Business

School aimed to explore how women experienced, and responded to gendered microaggressions while pursuing STEM careers in Lebanon. The researchers recruited 21 women working in various STEM fields

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and at different career stages. As a country where feminism is growing, but patriarchal political, economic, and social structures still create complex barriers to working women, Lebanon proves to be an interesting context for further researching gendered microaggressions.

An onslaught of microaggressions

The women were asked open questions about their careers. From their answers, Makarem and Metcalfe identified micro-assaults, microinsults and microinvalidations, each in two forms. Micro-assaults first emerged as 'Hostile and Alienating Work Environments': male-dominated arenas, like STEM industries, were unwelcoming workplaces for women. As newcomers, unlike most of their male colleagues, women rarely had pre-existing networks of contacts. They were excluded not only socially, but also physically and professionally by their colleagues. The second form of micro-assault found was 'Verbal Harassment'. This broad term referred to comments that undermined

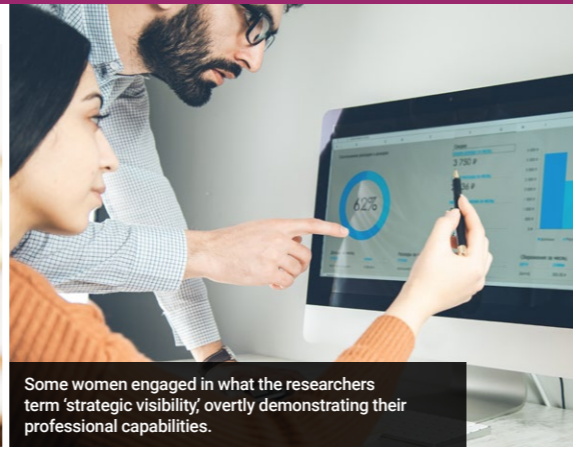
women's capacity, discrediting them professionally, and inappropriate comments about women's personal lives. Verbal harassment was increasingly prevalent for women in more senior positions.

Microinsults were more subtle, appearing first as 'Disparities in the Allocation of Work Responsibilities'. Women were often allocated to less profitable or high-profile projects, impeding their success and career prospects. Additionally, consideration was rarely given to the dual role expectations of women at home and at work. 'The work culture is still very much set by men who have full-time wives supporting them at home,' one woman said. Working women, unlike men, must balance conflicting domestic and professional roles. Another form of microinsult – found uniquely in this research – is 'Body Microaggression' (sexualisation and expectations of sexual work). One woman was paid less after rejecting her client's sexual advances; another was told not to come onto site as she was distracting the male workers. The male-centrism of STEM spaces means that just by existing in one, a woman's body can be perceived as disruptive.

Finally, microinvalidations occurred in two seemingly paradoxical forms: invisibility and hypervisibility. Women experience invisibility when their ideas are dismissed, they are talked over or ignored. While their competence is discredited, their bodies stand out in spaces occupied mainly by men, making them hyper-visible. Women's bodies in STEM challenge perceptions of feminine roles. These two themes interlink: women can be ignored professionally but remain hyper-visible as one of few female bodies in a male-dominated space.



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Facing the challenges

From the various interviews, Makarem and Metcalfe identified four strategies that the women working in STEM in Lebanon used for dealing with microaggressions: adaptation, confrontation, negotiations, and 'beyond bodies'. Adaptation was used by women wanting to avoid conflict and safeguard their careers. They accepted the microaggressions, considering combatting microaggressions as a 'lost battle'. The researchers suggest

Negotiation was a more complex strategy through which women embraced their hyper-visibility and 'otherness' to gain agency. This was mainly adopted by women in their mid-career, who used people's surprise of their gender to their advantage. One woman discussed fluctuating between different identities, moving between 'shy and confident, feminine and masculine, strict and diplomatic' to better suit and work with her male colleagues. This strategy allows

and treated in the workplace. Through this strategy, a growing number of women can take part in STEM careers, challenging systemic gender-based assumptions.

Root and branch change

Through their research, Makarem and Metcalfe demonstrate the scale of microaggressions levelled at professional women working in STEM. While women are already combatting microaggressions, organisations could do more. The researchers suggest Human Resources practitioners could use this research to train staff, challenge tolerance for these incidents, and develop policies that create safer and more prosperous work environments for women. Allyship is crucial in this movement.

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that while adaptation is understandable, it results in the normalisation of gendered microaggressions, perpetuating a tolerance for behaviours that damage women's careers and well-being.

Some women engaged in confrontation: the act of resisting microaggressions and engaging in what the researchers term 'strategic visibility'. This meant strategically challenging what was expected of women: talking more, taking on stereotypically masculine or difficult tasks, and overtly demonstrating their professional capabilities to try to change their colleagues' perceptions about their abilities.

women to demonstrate agency over their work and abilities. It allows them to resist microaggressions while carving out a space for female identities in STEM.

Finally, 'beyond bodies' refers to women's goals of empowering other women by mentoring, supporting, and educating them. Women already working in STEM have a better understanding of the unique challenges their female colleagues face and can start to create systemic change to empower more women to enter STEM careers. While individuals can help support one another, local and international groups and organisations are working together to change the way women are seen

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Personal response

What drove you personally to research gendered microaggressions?

Yasmeen: The exploration of gendered microaggressions is a compelling and necessary endeavour in the quest for a more equitable and inclusive society. These subtle, often unintentional expressions of bias can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, undermine individuals' well-being, and contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequalities. As a researcher that delves into this multifaceted phenomenon, my aim is to uncover the roots, manifestations, and consequences of gendered microaggressions, ultimately seeking avenues for change through inclusive Human Resource Management policies and practices.

To comprehend the motivations behind researching gendered microaggressions, it is essential to first recognise their origins. Microaggressions are subtle, often unconscious, verbal or non-verbal slights or insults that communicate derogatory or negative messages towards an individual. When these behaviours are gendered, they take on a specific form that reflects societal norms and expectations surrounding gender roles. The research into gendered microaggressions is driven by my desire to unveil the pervasive nature of these behaviours at various levels, specifically at the organisational level. Understanding the manifestations of gendered microaggressions enables us to identify patterns and discern how power dynamics and cultural norms contribute to the perpetuation of biased attitudes.

The motivation to explore gendered microaggressions is rooted in my commitment to understanding their impact on individuals and society as a whole. These subtle acts of discrimination can accumulate over time,

leading to adverse effects on the mental health, self-esteem, and overall well-being of those targeted. Furthermore, gendered microaggressions contribute to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes, limiting opportunities and perpetuating inequality. By examining the impact of gendered microaggressions, I aim to raise awareness of their insidious nature and prompt societal reflection. This research is a crucial step in fostering understanding and developing strategies to mitigate the harm caused by these subtle but damaging behaviours.

Research into gendered microaggressions is not solely an academic pursuit; it is a call to action for cultural and systemic change. Understanding the motivations behind these behaviours allows for the development of targeted interventions and educational initiatives that challenge ingrained biases and promote inclusivity. The study of gendered microaggressions is part of a broader movement advocating for gender equity. By shedding light on these subtle forms of discrimination, as researchers we can contribute to the ongoing dialogue about dismantling patriarchal structures and fostering environments that prioritise diversity and inclusion.

Motivations to delve into gendered microaggressions extend beyond academic inquiry to a commitment to advocacy and allyship. As a researcher, I often seek to amplify the voices of those marginalised by these microaggressions, using their findings to inform HR policy changes and institutional practices that promote a more just and equitable society. In conclusion, the research into gendered microaggressions is propelled by a collective commitment to understanding, addressing, and ultimately eradicating these subtle yet potent forms of discrimination.

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Bio

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Further reading

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