

“Pretty Good for a Girl”: Reflections on Misogyny in Graduate Education¹

Charmaine Willis, Nakissa Jahanbani

Defined as the [“dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women”](#), misogyny is a common topic of discussion in current news and social media. While recent attention has focused on more egregious forms of misogyny, common forms often go overlooked, despite their importance. Imposter syndrome affects both men and women, but [the latter at disproportionately higher rates](#) and [more often in minorities](#). Misogynistic experiences can exacerbate imposter syndrome especially for female graduate students, who may already question their belonging in their graduate program. Studies have noted that many graduate students [experience high levels of mental health issues](#), with rates of depression and anxiety [six times that of the general public](#). Misogynistic experiences can compound mental health issues by reinforcing feelings of worthlessness, anxiousness, and other emotions associated with mental health issues.

These experiences can have a more pronounced impact on female graduate students who are also: persons of color (POC), identify as members of the LGBT+ community, are not cisgender, and/or are a member of another minority group. The experiences presented here are those of two cisgender female white and POC graduate students in an American political science program.

The graduate student as colleague.

In our experience, misogyny from fellow graduate students ranges from systemic gender-based slights of which perpetrators may not be aware to overt forms of discrimination. However, the consequences are the same: female students feel disrespected by their colleagues and question their abilities. Ingrained misogyny from male students can manifest in several ways, including [“mansplaining”](#), [speaking over female colleagues](#), and a tendency to look to other male students for expert opinions, regardless of their female colleagues’ expertise on the topic. In one instance, we partnered with a male colleague for a class presentation. Afterwards, another male questioned the male presenter on the subject that we presented on, undermining our expertise on the subject.

¹ A version of this manuscript was published on the Times Higher Education blog on May 7, 2019: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/how-men-can-help-combat-misogyny-graduate-education>

The graduate student as instructor.

There is myriad of challenges that face graduate students as they enter the classroom at the onset of their academic career, including concerns about managing a classroom and being an effective instructor.

Categorically, these challenges can be more difficult for women: [a recent study](#) found that students tend to evaluate female professors more critically than their male counterparts.

Students can engage in a variety of micro-aggressions and broader misogynistic behaviors that can undermine female graduate instructors' ability to teach. Students often interrupt or talk over us, which sets a poor tone in class. In our experience, this happens far less for our male counterparts: one colleague admitted to having this issue only once or twice a year. Therefore, female instructors may have to exert themselves more to dissuade students from talking over us. For example, we once had to ask a male student twice in one class not to interrupt us. While he did not interrupt again during that class, we had to do this every week.

Administrators may unknowingly reinforce challenges surrounding misogyny and intersectionality in the classroom. One of our students repeatedly made us feel uncomfortable by ignoring her when she spoke in class and making disparaging comments about minority groups in full knowledge of her background as a minority female. However, when we approached the appropriate administrator, they, as a white person, dismissed the possibility that we would be regarded differently by students, despite [corroborating evidence](#). While this issue was not resolved, we recommend that students in this situation find an advocate in their administration that not only understands but believes the instructor's experience.

Advice

We suspect that the experiences with misogyny recounted here will resonate with many female graduate students and faculty. Female students may experience misogyny from male colleagues, whereby their achievements are questioned and their intelligence is discounted. They may also experience misogyny in their role as instructor, whereby male students undermine them. However, we have also worked with many supportive male colleagues, instructors, and students. For such allies, we offer advice for supporting female graduate students.

First, be cognizant of the fact that women, particularly minorities, are more susceptible to imposter syndrome. Comments undermining their achievements reinforce feelings of worthlessness. As students, our opinions may not be as respected as those of our male colleagues, even if we are as well-informed. Allies can bridge this gap by making an equal social space for female graduate students in several ways. Call on their expertise in discussions: doing this supplants other voices (including their own self-doubt) that may demean their ability. Name them as subject specialists when describing or introducing them to other scholars.

Second, recognize that women may experience graduate school differently than their male counterparts. This includes the forms of misogyny mentioned previously, which can be difficult for even the recipient to identify. Demonstrate respect towards female graduate instructors in front of their students; undermining them sends a message to students that they are not worthy of respect. In the case of female teaching assistants (TAs), faculty should consult with them on issues involving their students; by making them a part of the process, it sends a message to students that the TA's opinion is valued.