

Promoting gender equality in academia through comic strips

Alice Adenis (1), Maëlis Arnould (2), Marie Bocher (3), Nicolas Coltice (2), Mélanie Gérault (4), Claire Mallard (5), and **Martina Ulvrova** (3) (mail.didthisreallyhappen@gmail.com)

(1) Dataswati, Massy, Ile-de-France, France, (2) Laboratoire de Géologie, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris, France, (3) Institute of Geophysics, Department of Earth Sciences, ETH Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland, (4) Earth, atmospheric and planetary sciences, MIT, Cambridge, United States (5) Earthbyte Research Group, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

Abstract

Besides institutional barriers to gender parity, sexist behaviors in the workplace contribute to discourage women to pursue an academic career, and reinforce gender stereotypes that are harmful to their progress and recognition. **didthisreallyhappen.net** is a community-based platform that fights against this type of sexism by means of illustrations.

The aim of the project is to raise awareness on gender imbalance in male dominated scientific environments, to reveal the unconscious biases that are present in decision making and expose the community to sexist situations predominantly experienced by female scientists. Through the website **didthisreallyhappen.net**, we collect anonymous testimonies about sexist behaviours in academia, we turn the stories into comics and publish them without any judgement or comments on the webpage.

By now, we have assembled over 50 testimonies based on recurring scenarios. We have identified three main issues that stand out in the stories: 1) scientific skills of female researchers are frequently called into question 2) deeply-rooted stereotypes tend to maintain females in traditional roles, and 3) stereotypes pressure males to conform to traditional roles.

Here, we present how the project has evolved into its present form and show several comics that illustrate the problems described above. We would like to encourage the sharing of stories with us via our platform and discuss further actions.

1. Introduction

We are *Did this really happen?!*, a team of 7 scientists that collects testimonies of everyday sexism in academia, and publish these stories in the form of comic strips on our blog [2]. Our aim is to show the reality of being a female and working in academia nowadays.



Figure 1: Questioning the scientific skills of female researchers.

It started as a 5-year research project in Earth sciences: together we were working on plate tectonics and its relation with the internal dynamics of the Earth. Also, the team happened to be mostly feminine in a male dominated research area. This situation had two main consequences. The first one is that our group quickly became a magnet for sexist remarks and jokes, within our department and at conferences. The second consequence is that we could share our individual experiences as female in academia, realise that we were not alone, and that we were facing common obstacles in our careers. The **didthisreallyhappen.net** website [2] emerged from discussions within the group and the Earth science community at large, as a way to show stories on everyday sexism in academia. The comics have become a resource for the Earth science community to talk about the multiple facets of sexism in academia and unconscious bias.

We have identified three main issues that recurrently appear in the collected testimonies: 1) competences of female researchers are frequently called into question 2) persisting stereotypes confine female researcher to



Figure 2: Assigning female researchers to traditional roles.

traditional roles such as being a secretary or someone who takes care about children, and 3) similar stereotypes assign males to traditional roles such as being leaders or experts. Figures 1,2 and 3 illustrate stories that represent each of these categories and that have been reported to us. All comics collected so far represent real life experiences of individuals in scientific environments. We want to reveal unconscious biases that are present, for example, in decision making, and illustrate sexist situations that female scientists are often confronted with in their professional life.

2. Summary

Our project is not here to judge or propose solutions. We simply want to raise awareness about daily sexist behaviours. We hope that these comics will serve as starting points for discussions, encourage dialogue on gender equality and help to create more balanced environments. So come to us, we are thrilled to chat and share ideas to promote gender equality in science!



Figure 3: Assigning male researchers to stereotypical patriarchal roles.

Acknowledgements

All comics are hand drawn by ©Alice Adenis [1]. All rights reserved. This work is volunteer based. We are thankful to Philippe Liotard and Cléo Schwyer who guided us in the very beginning of the project.

References

- [1] Alice Adenis. 2018. *Entrelacs*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://entrelacsbd.wordpress.com/>. [Accessed 01/05/2019].
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