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We Should Mind

Before joining VEX robotics, I disregarded any form of gender prejudice and discrimination held against me. It existed, but at the end of the day, my accomplishments would be no less than his if we were to put in the same work, time, and effort. It wasn't until I joined STL Robotics that I recognized the necessity of inclusivity, especially in the STEM field.

Nearing the end of my second year in high school, I began my journey in robotics, which was somewhat late compared to most members. I remember going into my interview with confidence because of some pre-existing knowledge that they lacked female representation. Being a female was laced with weakness and fragility, but at that time, I didn't mind — it's what got me in. The notion helped me by soothing my worries and concerns, but now I realize that it reduced me to nothing but a gender stereotype.

I walked into a classroom of fifty people, eleven of which were girls — not that it mattered to me; I cared more about familiar faces, girl or boy.



I constantly pushed myself out of my comfort zone, ready to learn and experience the world of robotics. This motivated me to apply for Chief Administrative Officer, an executive position on the team. I didn't realize it then, but my speech was littered with gender stereotypes. I played up my role of a sweet, innocent girl that was just trying to help out. I focused on how I was organized and detail-oriented, knowing that they would completely believe me because "girls are organized". I didn't mind.

I won.

I got the most votes compared to twelve other candidates, most of which were boys that were cheered for and applauded during their speeches. I guess my facade worked! If only I knew that my smile and mentality would be completely replaced with insecurities and isolation.



The first time that I experienced negative gender discrimination was when the executive team had to make a presentation to appeal for grants from the parent council. I was happy because they wanted me there, but they didn't actually want *me* there. They wanted a girl, a female presence to show that the team wasn't a bunch of guys playing around with robots. They didn't want me for my skills or my contributions. I was merely a token character that could be used in their pursuits through my appearance and gender.

I became isolated from the group. I felt awkward and uncomfortable to even be there. I was like a nuisance, a burden that they had to deal with. Our meetings would end with one of them saying "That's it, boys!" before they would awkwardly turn to me after processing their words, falling into a strained silence. It was my fault. I was making the meetings awkward. I was dragging them down.

However, this alienation of females wasn't present in only the executive, but also within each individual robotics team. My insecurities that arose from their isolation spread to my interactions with my team where most of the girls were tasked with the design notebook, which none of the boys wanted to do. They would bring the robot to their house and build together, forgetting to include us in their plans. When we did have our weekly meetings, it would be spent explaining to us what they did and why so we could write in the design notebook. We initially didn't know anything about robot parts and designs because we were new members, not because we were girls. But they made us feel like we were incapable and wasting their time with our inquiries, leading to us asking a new male member if he could ask questions for us. They had no complaints explaining anything to *him*. I was beginning to mind.



Slowly, I gained their trust. I built with them even though they didn't explain their design to me. Still, I put myself out there to be the captain's assistant, passing him tools and parts he needed. Since they wouldn't ask us to help, I had to put extra effort into observing so that I could prove that I was useful without them needing to tell me what to do. I started to feel involved and included in the team until we advanced the Provincial level. They bought one hotel room for three girls to attend Provincials. We had six teams with fifty students attending and only three of them were girls. At least they *graciously* allowed me to go.



The problem wasn't even that they weren't inclusive when deciding who to go. Based on what I've heard, none of the girls on the team were participating and putting themselves out there. We were living up to our stereotype of being incompetent in the STEM field. I started to notice the underrepresentation of females, but was never truly affected until during our Provincials competition. I went to go scout and watch other teams to observe their strengths and weaknesses. They said they would inform me when the judges would come by, but they never did. They talked to the judges without me. Was I even part of the team?

This type of separation discourages women from continuing to pursue a STEM career, especially those that are hands-on. A member of our team did not participate in robotics this year because she felt left out. The poor communication led to her feeling useless and discouraged so that by the end of the season, the motivation to push to be included was completely gone. There was nothing to keep her as a part of the team.

This year, we made an almost all-girls team. Five out of the eight of us are girls. For us, to be Girl Powered is to have equality when regarding others. Frankly, the phrase "Girl Powered" is quite isolating. People Powered: to move past all gender stereotypes and establish ourselves as capable individuals based upon our skills and contributions, not on our gender. And in the end, we should mind. We can't stay ignorant about the reasons why there is a lack of female representation in STEM fields. We should mind when women or men are reduced to a gender stereotype, whether it is a positive notion or a negative one.

Ultimately, my current team feels like a group of friends, working together towards a goal. From builder to driver, we've shared and experimented with all team roles to determine what suits us the most. We're open to communicate and to constructively criticize one another because the diversity of our perspectives allow us to design the ultimate solution to VEX's Change Up Challenge. Despite difficulties in meeting up during the pandemic, we've been calling and texting to inform and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to contribute.

I am even more determined this year to be inclusive because of our robotics team's teacher advisor. Previously, we had two teacher advisors: Mr. Morrison and Mrs. Cammalleri. Unfortunately, Mr. Morrison transferred to another school this year, leaving Mrs. Cammalleri to run the team by herself. Despite these circumstances, she has risen to the challenge and is doing an exceptional job. Throughout the years that Ms. Cammalleri has been our advisor, she has shown me how to be persistent and hard-working. Out of all the clubs in our school, she has chosen to lead one where there are more boys than girls that join. Even then, that has not stopped her from pushing to make the Robotics team at STL as successful as possible. From all the extremely late nights supervising all the teams to ordering all the parts that we need, Mrs. Cammalleri inspires me and has become my STEM role model.

All in all, we should mind when we are subjected to gender stereotypes. Our team will not stand for discrimination based on gender stereotypes, and are motivated to put an end to gender stereotypes within the larger community. We are confident that despite our differences, we can come together with a diverse range of people to tackle challenges together.

