



THE TICKER

THE EQUALITY PARADOX

The standard explanation for why women around the world are less prevalent than men in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields is discrimination. But a recent study published in *Psychological Science* complicates that assumption.

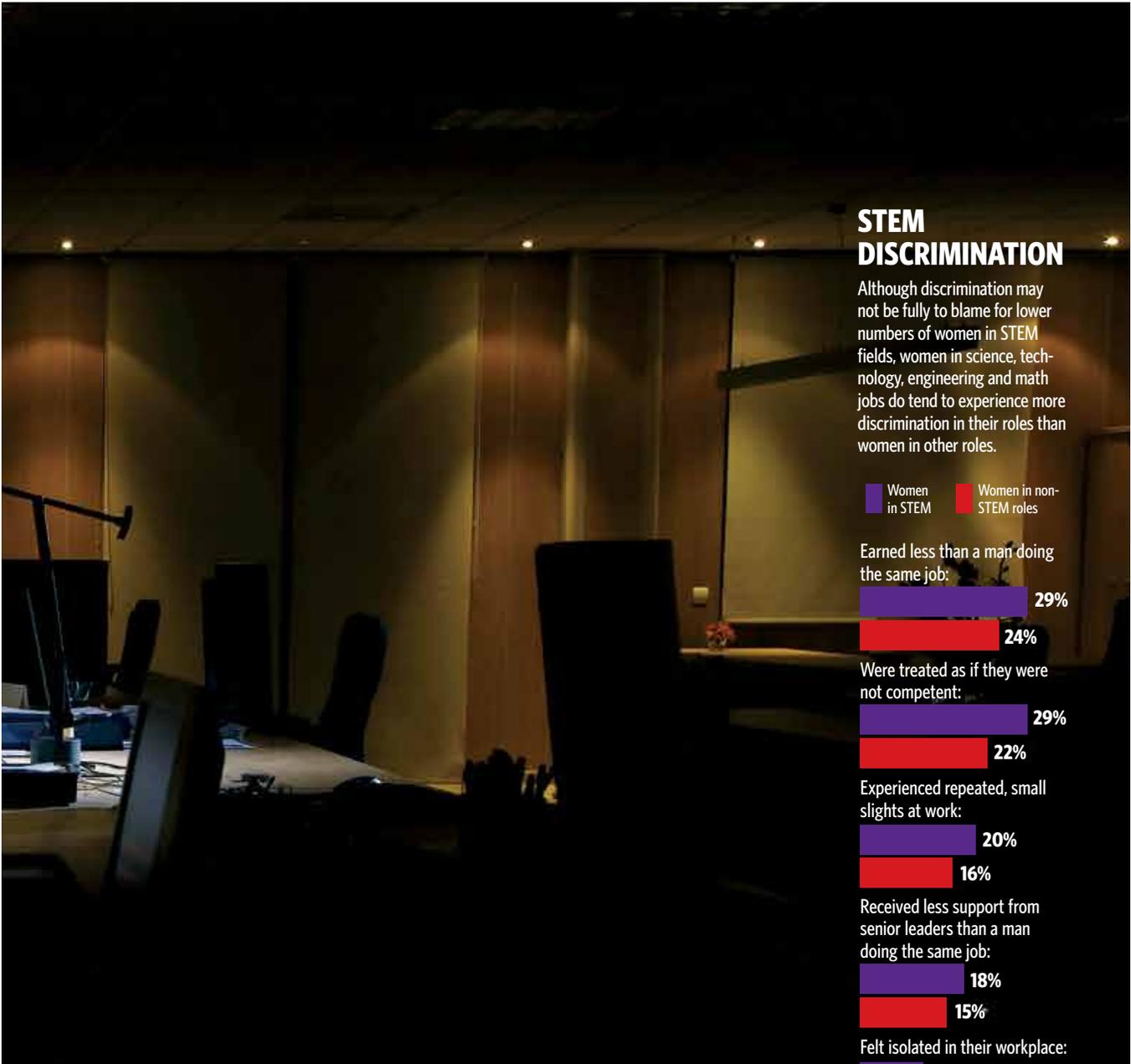
An analysis of almost half a million adolescents in 67 countries drew a surprising conclusion: Countries with less gender equality have a greater representation of women in STEM than countries with more gender equality. Authors Gijsbert Stoet and David C. Geary dubbed this the gender-equality paradox.

“If women are held out of STEM, you

would expect that in gender-equal countries there would be far more women engineers. But the opposite is the case,” says Mr. Stoet, professor of psychology at Leeds Beckett University in Leeds, England. “And that means that discrimination itself is not that useful to explain the situation.”

It also is not useful to claim that girls are inherently worse at STEM than boys. In fact, the study finds that girls do just as well as or better than boys in math and science in most countries. Girls, however, do even better in the humanities. And because students tend to pursue the subjects where they excel, girls self-select into the humanities and soft sciences—like sociology or psychology—while boys opt for STEM. “When people have

GETTY IMAGES



STEM DISCRIMINATION

Although discrimination may not be fully to blame for lower numbers of women in STEM fields, women in science, technology, engineering and math jobs do tend to experience more discrimination in their roles than women in other roles.

Women in STEM Women in non-STEM roles

Earned less than a man doing the same job:
29%
24%

Were treated as if they were not competent:
29%
22%

Experienced repeated, small slights at work:
20%
16%

Received less support from senior leaders than a man doing the same job:
18%
15%

Felt isolated in their workplace:
11%
8%

Been passed over for the most important assignments:
9%
10%

Been turned down for a job:
7%
7%

Been denied a promotion:
6%
7%

Source: *Women and Men in STEM Often at Odds Over Workplace Equity*, Pew Research Center, August 2017

freedom to choose their studies, they're led by their interests and how good they are in different subjects," Mr. Stoet says.

That finding leads the authors to an intriguing hypothesis. In more gender-equal countries—which also are more economically developed countries—people follow their own interests because they are not as concerned about their economic security. Indeed, nations with the greatest gender equality—countries like Sweden and Switzerland—have the fewest female STEM graduates, at about 20 percent. But in less gender-equal countries, more girls pursue STEM careers for a more secure future.

"We hypothesize that, in less gender-equal countries, people are more concerned

about the financial gains a job might offer them," Mr. Stoet says. "Whereas in wealthier countries, people are driven more by their own interests and less concerned about their financial outlook."

The study could have real implications for educational policy. "We have to focus on making girls more interested in STEM rather than portraying them as victims of an unfair system," Mr. Stoet says. One possibility, he suggests: Do not give adolescents so much curricular choice. Rather than letting them decide that they can drop physics or computer science, require more STEM field instruction throughout school to develop girls' skills until they are older and ready to embark on a career.