Sexism a problem in Silicon Valley, critics say

Recent displays of sexism are unsettling for many in Silicon Valley, which prides itself on being a meritocracy where anyone with ambition and a good idea can succeed.

By Jessica Guynn

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SAN FRANCISCO — Speaking before a gathering of women in technology, Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg recalled an uncomfortable exchange with two men on a different stage discussing the scarcity of women in the industry.

One commented that he would like to hire more young women but not all are as competent as Sandberg. The other said he, too, would hire more young women but his wife fears he would sleep with them and, he confessed, he probably would.

Sandberg's husband, Silicon Valley entrepreneur Dave Goldberg, told her later that night that the men did her a favor with their honesty.

"A lot of men think that," he told her. "They gave you a chance to address it."

It's no secret that the tech industry has a shortage of women. What's less well known is that the industry famous for its bravado about changing the world still lags decades behind other industries in its treatment of women, many of whom say they routinely confront sexism in the companies where they work and at the technology conferences they attend.

Many blame the industry's growing gender gap on a "programmer" culture, a hybrid of "bro" and "programmer" that's become a tongue-in-check name for engineers.

Prominent women such as Yahoo's Marissa Mayer and Sandberg have proved they can scale to the top of the technology industry. Yet they are still the exception, not the rule.

Even though women outnumber men at the top schools and in the workforce and use the latest gadgets and apps in equal if not greater numbers, they still represent a small fraction of executives, entrepreneurs, investors and engineers.

The number of women studying computer science is shrinking and at many tech companies, only a tiny fraction of the engineers — 2% to 4% in some cases — are women.
One of Silicon Valley's best-known venture capital firms, Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, is being sued by a former partner, Ellen Pao, for sexual discrimination.

And even the most progressive technology companies have come under fire for not having women in leadership positions. Twitter, which is on the verge of a highly anticipated initial public offering, does not have a single woman on its board of directors.

Women say the problem begins in computer science classes where they are marginalized and persists throughout their careers as they are passed over for jobs and promotions.

That has set off alarm bells. As one of the most vibrant sectors of the U.S. economy, that startling lack of diversity could deal a double blow: greater income inequality in society at large and fewer innovative ideas coming out of the tech industry as it faces rising competition from overseas.

"At a time when the technology industry is becoming increasingly important, I think it’s important to focus on what hasn’t changed and what is still very traditional about this world, what isn't so revolutionary and so progressive," said Kate Losse, an early Facebook employee and author of "The Boy Kings: A Journey Into the Heart of the Social Network."

A rash of recent incidents has only amplified the debate over sexism.

Peter Shih, a start-up founder, published a rant in August on the editorial website Medium, about the top 10 things he hates about living in San Francisco, including the weather ("like a woman who is constantly PMSing") and the 49ers ("the girls who are obviously 4's and behave like they are 9's").

He was pilloried on Twitter, and fliers turned up in San Francisco's South of Market neighborhood telling Shih to move back to New York. Shih apologized.

Pax Dickinson, the chief technology officer of business blog Business Insider, was fired in September after Twitter users noticed sexist and racist comments he had been making for years on Twitter such as "men have made the world such a safe and comfortable place that women now have the time to bitch about not being considered our equals." Dickinson declined to comment.

At a recent hackathon put on by technology blog TechCrunch, Australian programmers Jethro Batts and David Boulton stepped onstage to present their work. Choking back laughter, they demonstrated a "parody" app that uploads photos of men staring at women's chests.

"I think this is the breast hack ever," Batts joked.

Entrepreneur Richard Jordan was in the audience with his 9-year-old daughter, Alexandra, a budding programmer who got rave reviews at the hackathon for building Super Fun Kid Time, an app to schedule play dates.

"We have to show that this is not acceptable and that we are not going to put up with this sort of thing in our industry anymore," Jordan said.

As one of the organizers of the Disrupt conference, Alexia Tsotsis, co-editor of TechCrunch, says she sees progress in the outrage the incidents provoked on social media and on industry blogs.
"It's no longer a safe environment for misogynist attitudes," she said.

The incidents are unsettling for many in Silicon Valley, which prides itself on being a meritocracy where anyone with drive, ambition and a good idea can make it.

"It's not that the industry is bad. This is just something that the industry has to change if it wants to be as progressive as it wants to be seen as," Losse, the former Facebook employee, said.

Nowhere is that more evident than at technology conferences with the booth babes and occasionally crass presentations. Relatively few women turn out for the conferences where major figures in the industry speak, new technologies are unveiled and engineers rub elbows with one another and company recruiters and executives.

The long lines for the men's bathroom — and none for the women's — at the Consumer Electronics Show and Apple and Google developers conferences have inspired their own meme with photos, essays, even a Twitter account, @womeninline, which says it promotes women in technology "so we can achieve the ultimate goal of having to wait in line at a software conference."

But women in the industry say the empty bathrooms are just the most visible sign of the gender imbalance and lack of parity. They say they experience harassment — and sometimes worse — at tech conferences.

Nóirín Plunkett is a senior technical writer with Eucalyptus Systems in Boston. She studied computer science, has a master's degree and can program in half a dozen computer languages.

In November 2010 when Plunkett worked for Google, she says, she was sexually assaulted at ApacheCon, a software conference. After she wrote on her blog about what happened to her, Plunkett said, she received death and rape threats and "more or less dropped off the Internet."

A friend created the Ada Initiative, named for Ada Lovelace, an English mathematician considered to be the first computer programmer. The group persuaded industry conferences to adopt formal sexual harassment policies. Even so, Plunkett says she still gets harassed.

Women leave the industry at much higher rates than men "and there really isn't a single one of them that I'd blame," Plunkett said. "It's pretty toxic."

She says her company, which makes open source software, has a supportive, collaborative work culture and more female engineers than most.

"That keeps me going," she said, "but if it weren't for that, I'd really be looking at getting out of this industry."

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