

THE IMPACT OF WOMEN'S FEARS ON GENDER INEQUALITY IN BELARUSIAN IT

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Abstract: This research aims to understand the gender disparity in the IT sector within Belarus by examining both overt and covert factors dissuading women from pursuing careers in the domain. Using a blend of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the study identifies socio-cultural stereotypes, structural impediments, and the ramifications of gender inequality on women's career choices and overall well-being in the industry. The quantitative facet of the study, involving a comprehensive electronic survey, revealed that societal stereotypes about women are primary barriers discouraging 75% of the interested respondents from pursuing IT-related professions. To delve deeper into the on-ground experiences of women in the IT sector, a subsequent qualitative investigation employing semi-structured interviews was undertaken with 23 Belarusian women actively engaged in the field. Preliminary findings suggest that even within the modern IT landscape, societal norms, internalized misogyny, and emotional challenges linked to a predominantly male-centric workspace significantly affect the experiences of women professionals. This research, backed by the "Gender Studies" Master's program at the European Humanities University and the Women in TECH initiative, underscores the need for holistic strategies to bridge the gender divide in the IT sector. The insights from this study not only spotlight the challenges confronting Belarusian women in IT but also pave the way for future research and policy interventions to foster a more inclusive and gender-equitable IT landscape.

Keywords: gender inequality, gender stereotypes, emotional work, IT, Belarus



Introduction

Gender disparity in IT is a complex, multi-layered, and structural issue that has persisted for many years despite many efforts to address it (World Economic Forum, 2021). In the global expanse of the IT sector, gender inequality remains a stubborn challenge. Although some countries around the world have made headway in embracing female talent within this domain, the gender disparity is conspicuous, with no country achieving a perfect equilibrium (World Economic Forum, 2023). The scenario in Belarus, often dubbed the “Silicon Valley of Europe” (World Economic Forum, 2023), exemplifies this paradox. Despite witnessing a commendable increase in female representation, from 19.2% in 2017 (Dev.by, 2018) to 27.4% in 2020 (Dev.by, 2020), the industry in Belarus remains largely male-centric.

The history of gender inequality in technology in Belarus can be traced back to the Soviet era, during which women were encouraged to pursue careers in science and technology (Goldman, 1993). The Soviet government viewed the advancement of women as a key component of its socialist ideology, and actively promoted women’s participation in science and technology fields. However, after World War II, women faced a reversal in rights and equality in access to education and careers, which severely hampered progress in STEMs for women in the USSR (Buckley, 1989, p. 80). Despite the implementation of inclusive measures, the Soviet Union failed to fully challenge prevailing gender stereotypes ingrained within society (Lapidus, 1978). Traditional gender roles and biases persisted, both within STEM professions and in broader societal contexts, perpetuating unequal power dynamics and inhibiting genuine progress towards gender parity. Consequently, the gains made in gender equality were largely transitory, as they relied primarily on structural reforms rather than addressing the root causes of gender inequality.

This phenomenon has left a significant imprint on the socio-cultural fabric of Belarusian society. Females continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic and child-rearing responsibilities (UN Women Data Belarus, 2022). Moreover, there is a conspicuous underrepresentation of women in numerous remunerative sectors, particularly within technical professions.

The narrative of gender imbalance in the Belarusian IT industry is not a solitary tale of disparity. It is intricately woven with socio-political strands that shape the nation’s broader tapestry. In 2020, Belarus became the focal point of international attention due to widespread civil protests following the presidential election in August (Freedom House, 2021). The election, which resulted in a sixth term for long-standing president Alexander Lukashenko, was widely criticized for alleged vote-rigging and suppression of the opposition. The government’s violent crackdown on protesters, arrests of opposition figures, and curtailment of media freedoms led to international condemnation.

The tumultuous events of 2020, marked by extensive civil protests, led to the dissolution of over 857 civil society organizations, a significant portion of which catered to women's rights (United Nations, 2021). This monumental upheaval had dire repercussions for Belarusian women, who found themselves vulnerable, without institutional backing, often facing economic instability and the distressing prospect of emigration. Amidst this backdrop, the IT sector emerged as a beacon of resilience and potential stability. IT companies, renowned for supporting their employees during these times, extended assistance for safe relocations and provided unwavering support to their teams (Dev.by, 2022). Yet, the numbers reveal a stark disparity: by the end of 2020, women constituted a mere 13.8% of IT developers in the nation (Dev.by, 2020).

Fast forward to 2023, and Belarus finds itself in the midst of an unprecedented emigration wave (Nasha Niva, 2023). This mass exodus has brought to the fore an array of challenges for the IT sector, ranging from potential workforce shortages to the imminent need for retraining and facilitating re-entry. In this climate of uncertainty, the lure of the IT profession, especially its conduciveness to remote work, has become increasingly palpable for women. Yet, despite the evolving landscape and evident potential of the IT sector, the integration of women remains notably sluggish (Dev.by, 2023). What, then, causes this hesitancy among Belarusian women to delve into the world of technology?

The goal of this research is to delve deep into this enigma and shed light on the myriad factors that deter Belarusian women, especially those harboring a penchant for technology and an imperative for economic security, from embracing the transformative potential of the IT industry.

In the initial section of this article, a succinct historical overview will be provided to elucidate the historical antecedents that have shaped the current gender disparity within the Belarusian IT sector. Subsequently, I will reference seminal studies and scholarly contributions that informed the selection of the research topic and methodological approach for this investigation. This will be followed by a presentation of two distinct research outcomes: First, a quantitative analysis stemming from a survey of Belarusian women who possess an inclination towards IT but hesitate to engage. Secondly, qualitative insights drawn from interviews with established female professionals within the Belarusian IT domain. This latter phase aims to authenticate barriers identified in the preliminary study and to derive a more comprehensive understanding of gender-based challenges in the Belarusian IT landscape. In the concluding segment, a synthesis of the findings will be presented, and, drawing from this analysis as well as extant scholarly discourse, recommendations for Belarusian IT firms will be proffered.

Background

In pre-USSR Belarus, women's roles were largely defined by traditional gender norms and socio-economic circumstances (Bazan, 1999), though they held key roles in agriculture and crafts, occasionally achieving economic independence. However, opportunities were generally limited by prevailing gender biases. The USSR's inception catalyzed an emphasis on gender equality, with women granted unparalleled rights, especially in education and employment (Clements, 1979). By the 1930s, women were present in a range of industries, from textiles to STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) sectors (Ashwin, 1999). Despite these advances, a decline in birth rates and a subsequent resurgence in traditional values by the mid-1930s saw the reintroduction of policies that curtailed women's freedoms (Lapidus, 1982).

Paul R. Josephson's work, "Rockets, Reactors, and Soviet Culture" (Josephson, 1990), highlights the intricacies of women's roles in Soviet STEM fields. The USSR did initiate several policies bolstering gender equality in STEM, but societal norms and stereotypes often hindered true parity. The "Great Patriotic War" further complicated this, with women assuming vital STEM roles. However, the post-war era marked a reversion to patriarchal norms, diminishing women's wartime contributions and reinforcing gender disparities in STEM.

In Belarus, despite progress in STEM fields, the cultural recognition of women's contributions remained sparse. For instance, in Minsk (Belarus's capital) of the over 1,300 streets, a mere 1.2% (ResearchGate, 2018) bear the names of women, and only one is dedicated to a STEM professional, mathematician Sofia Kovalevskaya (who is not Belarusian). The overarching sentiment was contradictory: while there was rhetoric of comprehensive gender equality, underlying gender inequalities remained pervasive (Fortescue, 1986).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus, like many other former Soviet states, underwent a period of economic and political turmoil (Rutland, 2023). Numerous initiatives to promote gender equality in the STEM industry were discontinued, and the discontinuation of various benefits and incentives for women in science and technology ensued (Bridger et al., 1996). Although many of the measures implemented by the Soviet Union were disintegrated, their implementation had a significant impact on the progress of women in STEM (Aivazova, 2003). The transition to a market economy brought with it new challenges for women in the IT sector. The industry became increasingly male-dominated, and women faced persistent gender-based discrimination in terms of hiring, pay, and promotion (Shchurko, 2018).

The gender imbalance in the IT sector in Belarus has worsened over time, particularly in the 2000s, as Belarusian IT companies began to shift their focus towards developing more complex software and hardware products for international markets. This transition brought

about heightened demands for technical expertise and skills, which intensified the gender gap in the industry. Despite global efforts to promote gender diversity and inclusion in STEM fields, women have found it increasingly difficult to break into the IT industry in Belarus or advance their careers within the field. This can be attributed, in part, to the prevailing narrative of “realized gender parity”, and the misconception that women no longer encounter obstacles in their pursuit of professional advancement. The lack of female representation in leadership positions in IT companies and the persistent gender pay gap reflect the challenges that women face in the industry.

This trend continued into the 2010s, with women in Belarusian IT facing a variety of challenges related to gender-based discrimination, including pay inequity, biased hiring practices, and a lack of opportunities for advancement (Ananyeu et al., 2013). Despite these challenges, however, women in the industry have made significant strides in recent years, and have begun to challenge gender-based stereotypes and discrimination in the workplace (UN Women, 2015). Overall, the history of gender inequality in technology in Belarus is complex and multifaceted, reflecting broader patterns of gender discrimination and social inequality in the country.

What is happening in the modern world with the rights of women in STEM professions. One of the world's leading resources for IT executives, CIO magazine published (CIO, 2021) an article on the statistics of women's participation in the technology industry. The article discusses some of the difficulties women face when working in the technology industry and presents statistics that support this problem:

- Women make up only 24% of the workforce in the tech industry.
- Women receive 25% less salary than men working in the same positions.
- Only 5% of women hold CEO positions in Fortune 500 technology companies.
- More than 50% of women working in the technology industry face discrimination based on gender.

The article also discusses some of the reasons for the low participation of women in the technology industry, such as stereotypes and discrimination, and suggests some ways to solve this problem, but focuses more on Western countries, ignoring the specific difficulties that women from other regions face.

The situation with gender equality in STEM professions in post-Soviet countries is complex and varies by country. While progress has been made in some areas, women still face significant barriers to enrolling and advancing in STEM fields. According to a report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018), women are underrepresented in STEM fields in most post-Soviet countries, with the exception of Estonia and Latvia (OECD, 2018). The report notes that women make up only about 25% of STEM graduates in the region, below the OECD average of 32%. In addition, women are

often focused on low-paying and low-status STEM occupations such as teaching and support functions.

According to the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (2022), as of January 1, 2021, the share of women in the total number of employees in the research and technical field was 49.7%. However, the proportion of women among highly skilled workers is much lower. Thus, only 22.2% of women work in the positions of heads of research organizations. And in scientific institutions registered as legal entities, women occupy 36.7% of managerial positions. According to the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus, in 2020 the share of women among students of technical universities was 38.6%. At the same time, women make up about 20% of technical university professors. Thus, it can be said that in Belarus the proportion of women in the STEM field is high, however, their participation in high leadership positions and in research work is limited (UN Women, 2020).

Like many other countries, Belarus is also taking declarative measures to achieve gender equality in the STEM industry. However, despite these measures, studies show that women in Belarus continue to have difficulty accessing STEM career opportunities and often face discrimination and stereotyping. Belarus, like other post-Soviet countries, has a difficult history in the field of gender equality, which may be one of the reasons for this situation. However, the main obstacle for girls in the STEM profession is the political repression of the autocratic regime, which has increased significantly over the past few years (TIME, 2020).

Political repressions in Belarus have had a significant impact on gender equality in the professional environment (Serhan, 2020). The Belarusian government's crackdown on opposition figures and civil society activists, including women, has led to a shrinking of the space for women's participation in public life and decision-making (Swerdlow et al., 2020).

According to a report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on Women in Politics and Decision-Making in Belarus. The current political climate has led to an increased fear among women of participating in politics and public life, as they fear being targeted by the authorities. The report also notes that women's representation in decision-making positions is low, with women comprising only 18% of members of parliament and 17% of government officials in Belarus (UNDP, 2022).

In addition, political repressions have led to a shrinking of civil society organizations, including women's rights organizations, which are crucial for advocating for gender equality in the professional environment (BTI, 2022). The crackdown on the media has also led to a decrease in the number of platforms available for women to voice their concerns and advocate for their rights (LawTrend, 2022). Overall, political repressions in Belarus have led to a deterioration of the environment for gender equality in the professional environment, particularly

in the STEM industry and an increase in the number of various fears among women in Belarus.

Literature review

Across the world, the IT sector is predominantly male-dominated (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022). Research shows that women are underrepresented in technical roles, leadership positions, and technology entrepreneurship (Ashcraft & Blithe, 2010). Various reasons such as gender stereotypes, lack of role models, socio-cultural norms, and systemic barriers have been identified as contributors to this disparity (Huyer, 2015, p. 85–103). According to the Gender Employment Gap Index (GEGI) published by the World Bank (World Bank, 2022), achieving gender parity in employment opportunities—ensuring that both men and women have equivalent access to paid work—has the potential to augment per capita GDP by nearly 20%. Yet, this disparity remains notably unresolved in numerous nations, particularly within remunerative sectors such as IT.

For example, in the US technology sector, only 26% of employees are women, contrasting with their 49% representation in the general workforce (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2022). Although women constituted 45% of STEM graduates in 2020, a mere 22% and 20% earned degrees in engineering and computer science, respectively (National Girls Collaborative Project, 2023). The STEM sector's environment appears unwelcoming to women, evidenced by reports of isolation, microaggressions, and diminished workplace confidence. In the UK's tech industry, which employs five million individuals, a mere 17% of roles are occupied by women, contrasting with their 49% representation in the general workforce — a manifestation of the gender gap (Hired, 2022). This disparity originates from gendered educational choices: merely 35% of higher education STEM enrollees are women (CompTIA, 2021). Three primary reasons emerge for this underrepresentation: a lack of female role models in a male-dominated sector, insufficient encouragement from educators—with only 16% of women compared to 33% of men being advised on technology careers—and girls' career-consideration influencing their A-level selections, often excluding STEM subjects (STEM Women, 2021).

The history of gender roles and IT in Belarus during the Soviet era offers essential context. During the Soviet period, efforts were made to advance women in STEM fields, driven by socialist ideals of gender equality (Bridger et al., 1996). However, these initiatives often fell short in practice, and the entrenched societal norms and gender stereotypes persisted. This phenomenon can be attributed to the deep-rooted cultural norms that were reinforced by both society and the state, which often led to contradictory policies and their effects on women's progress in STEM fields (Pollack, 2015). Regrettably, both a century ago

and in contemporary times (Pyrkosz-Pacyna et al, 2022), employers and governmental entities have focused predominantly on the overt barriers that hinder women's entry into the IT sector. Concurrently, invisible obstacles persist, constraining the capacities of numerous proficient women in the technological field.

A notable barrier to women's participation in remunerative sectors in Belarus is the societal expectation regarding their primary role in caregiving and domestic chores (UN Women Data Belarus, 2022). Even as women achieve higher education levels and engage in professional careers, they are still expected to bear the primary responsibility for home and children (Korolczuk, 2016). This dual burden often discourages women from engaging in demanding careers, such as those in the IT sector (Tech Returners, 2023).

The political unrest in Belarus in 2020 brought challenges and opportunities for women. Notably, women were at the forefront of protests against Lukashenko's regime (Rácz, 2020). This activism underscores the resilience and leadership potential of Belarusian women. However, the dissolution of numerous civil society organizations, many focusing on women's rights, significantly impacted the support structures available for women (UN Women Data Belarus, 2022), especially in fields like IT where they are underrepresented.

Since forced emigration, Belarusian women have encountered persistent apprehensions, particularly when integrating into professional environments traditionally dominated by males (New Eastern Europe, 2022). Their relocation often exacerbates feelings of self-doubt regarding their professional competence. Consequently, they may exhibit a heightened reluctance to assert their employment rights, stemming from the presumption that alternative employment opportunities might be scarce. Notably, there are documented instances where Belarusian women in the IT sector, post-emigration, encountered highly detrimental working conditions. Such environments characterized by excessive work demands can exacerbate mental distress, with severe cases culminating in tragic outcomes. In March 2023, following the relocation of the Belarusian IT firm HQ Software to Tbilisi, a tragic incident occurred involving Ms. Ekaterina Kruchok, a 29-year-old tester from Belarus (Dev.by, 2023). Relatives and acquaintances of Ms. Kruchok underscored her frequent encounters with an adversarial professional ambiance. Nonetheless, the economic exigencies consequent to her political emigration compelled her continued association with the firm until her untimely demise (Kosa Media, 2023).

In recent scholarly investigations, the toxic work environment has been increasingly recognized as a significant factor contributing to the underrepresentation of women in technical professions (DIAL, 2018). Such an environment, characterized by a culture of exclusion, persistent microaggressions, gender biases, and overt instances of harassment, serves as a deterrent for women considering entering or advancing within these fields (Williams & Dempsey, 2014). The pervasive

nature of these negative workplace dynamics not only impacts women's job satisfaction and performance but can also jeopardize their mental health, leading to increased attrition rates (Wang et al., 2019). Furthermore, the dearth of supportive mechanisms to counteract this toxicity exacerbates the situation, dissuading potential future female talent from pursuing careers in technical domains and perpetuating a male-dominated industry landscape (PwC, 2017).

This same toxic environment requires women to regulate their reactions and emotions (Institute of Development Studies, 2019). Emotional work, also referred to as emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), encompasses the effort involved in managing one's emotions and expressions in line with societal or occupational expectations. Historically, women have been expected to take on roles that require significant emotional labor, such as caregiving, teaching, or nursing. The intertwining of emotional work with stereotypically female roles has perpetuated gender norms that position women as being naturally adept at professions that necessitate emotional care and support (Hochschild, 1983).

While IT and other technical disciplines might not explicitly demand emotional labor in the way caregiving professions do, they are not devoid of it. In male-dominated fields like IT, women often find themselves navigating a complex emotional landscape. They may experience the need to suppress or express certain emotions to fit into the predominantly masculine culture, deal with potential microaggressions, or even overcompensate to gain respect and legitimacy (Snyder, 2014). These unspoken emotional challenges can further deter women from entering or persisting in such fields.

Gendered fears are another crucial dimension to consider. For women, these fears can manifest as apprehensions about being perceived as less competent due to gender stereotypes, anxieties regarding work-life balance, or concerns about facing gender-based discrimination or harassment in male-dominated fields (Catalyst, 2023). Such fears, whether grounded in personal experiences or broader societal narratives, can discourage women from pursuing careers in technical disciplines.

The collective impact of emotional labor and gendered fears contributes significantly to the exclusion of women from various professions, especially technical disciplines (Gaines, 2017). The emotional toll associated with continually having to prove one's competence, managing perceptions, and navigating male-centric workplace cultures can be exhausting and discouraging. When combined with systemic issues such as unequal pay, lack of mentorship, and fewer advancement opportunities, the emotional challenges can act as significant deterrents for women, contributing to their underrepresentation (Crawford, 2020).

Beyond the organizational reluctance to acknowledge and address the tangible and affective challenges women confront in male-dominated sectors, one must consider the unique socio-cultural context of Belarus. This nation, steeped in a historical conviction rooted in its

Soviet past, frequently upholds the notion that gender parity has already been actualized and that women have attained comprehensive rights. The organizational deficiency in fostering a conducive environment for female professionals can intensify the sentiments of alienation and disenchantment, further marginalizing women from the IT domain.

Despite the large amount of literature on the topic of gender disparity in engineering disciplines, the academic landscape remains deficient in rigorous research addressing gender disparities within the technology sector in Belarus. There is a marked paucity of scholarly investigations that go beyond observable inequalities, such as wage discrepancies and the quantitative representation of women in the industry and leadership roles. Few studies probe the more covert barriers intricately linked with the region's socio-cultural history and contemporary events. This study holds significance as it pioneers a multifaceted discourse, emphasizing, for the first time, the affective dimensions of Belarusian women's professional experiences within a traditionally male-centric domain.

Methods and sample

Our investigation into the gender disparities within the Belarusian IT sector, conducted in collaboration with the Women in TECH (Mentusova, 2022) project, employed a dual-phase, mixed-method approach. This approach aimed to elucidate both the overt and covert impediments faced by women who exhibit a proclivity toward the IT domain but hesitate to take the initial steps. Additionally, we sought to juxtapose these perceptions with insights from women who have successfully navigated the IT landscape in Belarus. Initially, the emotional aspects and invisible barriers were hypothesized as potential contributors but not the main thrust of our investigation. However, as the research unfolded, the prominence of these elements became more pronounced. For the quantitative online survey, we strategically targeted a specific demographic. This focus was reinforced with auxiliary demographic queries encompassing gender, age, and birthplace. The chief criterion was the respondent's inclination towards the IT domain. Prioritizing accuracy over sheer numbers, the sample constituted 233 respondents who fulfilled our stringent selection criteria, offering rich, targeted insights.

My research entitled "Belarusian women on the way to IT: Myths, Fears, Obstacles" embarked on an intricate exploration into the realm of gender dynamics within the IT domain of Belarus. Conducted during the months of August and September 2022, the study employed an online survey format with a diverse range of 16 questions, each tailored to extract crucial data points pertinent to the study's objectives. The survey, which took participants between 10 to 15 minutes to complete,

was a composite of various question types, encompassing demographic queries, single and multiple-choice questions, as well as Likert scale queries. The principal aim was to unravel and discern the factors contributing to the gender imbalance evident within Belarus's IT companies. Furthermore, it sought to understand whether the prevailing educational structure was truly inclusive for women or if deeply rooted gender stereotypes and personal self-perceptions were significant deterrents. The aspirations, perceptions, and concerns of Belarusians keen on delving into IT, particularly concerning women's roles in the industry, were also pivotal to the study.

To ensure a comprehensive interpretation of the amassed data, a dual analysis methodology was adopted. The closed-ended questions were subjected to a quantitative analysis via Google Forms' inherent analytics capabilities. This facilitated instant data visualizations, shedding light on primary patterns, frequency distributions, and descriptive statistics. Conversely, open-ended questions underwent a rigorous thematic content analysis, whereby responses were perused for depth and subsequently coded iteratively, highlighting recurring themes and patterns. An additional correlational analysis was implemented, which shed light on intriguing relationships between various variables, such as the discord between high self-perception of digital skills and feelings of professional inadequacy. The study's participants consisted of 233 women from Belarus, selected based on criteria like an unequivocal interest in IT careers. The demographic snapshot revealed an age bracket of 25-45 years, with the majority hazing from urban hubs.

Emerging results revealed a gamut of encounters with gender-specific prejudices, self-imposed limitations due to gender-based social conditioning, and fears associated with what's perceived as an "overwhelmingly male environment". These revelations necessitated a deep dive into the qualitative space, resulting in semi-structured interviews with 23 Belarusian women actively engaged in IT roles. Spanning approximately 23 hours, these dialogues encompassed professionals from varied IT roles, cutting across companies and hierarchies. While there was an inherent limitation in the study's focus on a particular demographic, the research successfully elucidated the emotional complexities associated with IT as a "male profession", hindering female participation. Central to the qualitative inquiry were questions related to the emotional experiences of women in male-centric professions, strategies adopted for emotional management, genuine barriers encountered, and elements that contributed to their success in the IT industry. Before the interview, we sent out an information letter to all respondents, in which, in addition to important technical information and a safety guide, we explained why this interview was important.

In summation, the research was a profound endeavor to elucidate the lived experiences of Belarusian women in IT, pinpointing barriers, and understanding avenues for fostering inclusivity and success.

Results of an online survey of the causes of gender inequality in the IT sector of Belarus

The research confirmed previous findings that women face numerous fears and obstacles that hinder their choice of profession. These fears include self-restraint due to gender socialization and stereotypes, as well as social fears stemming from an “aggressive male environment”, as reported by many respondents. Global studies (LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2022) also confirm that women often do not enter the IT field due to stereotypes, fears, and a toxic work environment, and more often than men, leave companies to pursue careers in other fields.

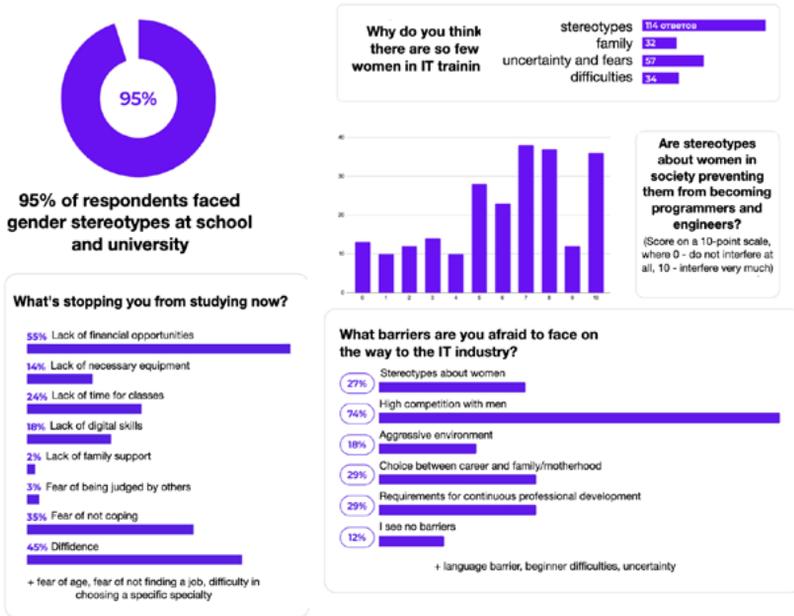


Figure 1. Fragment of Quantitative Research Results

From early childhood, girls are convinced that technical disciplines are not for them, and it is not surprising that many begin not only to believe in this, but also to broadcast it outside. Educational inequality, starting with access to technical devices at school (labour lessons for girls, and additional computer science for boys) and at home (computers are more often given to boys), continuing in the misogynistic expressions of teachers (boys-techies, girls-humanists) or parents (the main thing is to get married) does not end even with the choice of profession. This observation aligns with numerous international studies that have long highlighted the influence of societal and familial expectations on gender roles and career aspirations. For example, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) published a report in 2010 titled “Why So Few? Women in Science, Technology, Engineering,

and Mathematics” (Hill et al., 2010) which similarly identified societal beliefs and stereotypes as significant barriers that deter women from pursuing STEM fields. Much like our study’s observation that girls are often convinced that technical disciplines aren’t suitable for them, the AAUW report highlights that cultural stereotypes can lower girls’ aspirations for science and engineering careers.

Most IT courses are taught by men, successful examples in technical fields are again men, it is quite difficult to imagine a successful career in a field where there are no role models with which you could associate yourself. Even if girls decide to enter the university in STEM professions, many of them do not complete their studies, or do not find a job in their specialty after receiving a diploma, as they face an aggressive environment where men help men, and all the same stereotypes about “women’s destiny” or “non-women’s professions”. Self-restrictions due to gender socialization, social pressure and lack of nursing support (similar to the male solidarity that exists in the field) significantly limit women’s potential in technical disciplines. A research paper titled “The Role of STEM Self-Efficacy on STEM Identity for Middle School Girls after Participation in a Single-Sex Informal STEM Education Program” (Hughes & Roberts, 2019) published in the *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology* concurs with our findings. It highlights that the lack of visible female role models in STEM industries directly impacts young girls’ perceptions of their suitability for these fields.

While the technical professions are called the “work of the future”, one of the highest paid and fastest growing professions in the world, women due to digitalization lose hundreds of thousands of jobs and find themselves in a vulnerable position. Retraining in technical professions could help both understaffed employers and women in need of financial security and stability. In this vein, the situation of women in Belarus, who have faced repression, forced emigration and layoffs in the wake of the 2020 political crisis in Belarus, is of particular concern. The “Silicon Valley of Eastern Europe” itself, which was called the IT industry in Belarus, was also under threat — most companies were forced to relocate employees and restructure the work of offices to the rules and laws of the new country. On the one hand, this is a really difficult and unstable period, but on the other hand, it is an opportunity to change the status quo in the IT sector of Belarus, where women could use their creative potential not only in HR departments, but also build a career in technology. However, this will not be possible until companies begin to pay attention to the barriers that women have to face on their way to IT and company leaders continue to insist on the thesis that now is “Now is not the time for gender equality.”

Certainly, Belarus isn’t the sole nation wherein women encounter impediments in accessing technical education and IT sector employment, a scenario attributable to its ingrained patriarchal society and non-democratic governance. Nonetheless, a plethora of scholarly

research corroborates the interconnectedness of these challenges. For example, a scholarly examination conducted by Arusha V. Cooray of the University of Wollongong and N. Potrafke from the University of Konstanz empirically explores the relationship between the extent of democracy and gender parity in education across a dataset encompassing 66 nations from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America spanning 1991-2008. Their findings suggest that heightened democratic processes foster enhanced gender parity in educational contexts. In contrast, regimes with reduced democratic attributes appear to manifest educational biases against female students (Cooray and Potrafke, 2010).

A noteworthy observation from our research was that 75% of the respondents believed societal stereotypes about women deterred them from pursuing careers as programmers or engineers. Given that our survey targeted women who expressed an interest in the IT sector but hesitated to enter it, it became evident that these stereotypes and the associated emotional challenges are principal barriers to women's participation in the IT industry in Belarus.

Our study proves the hypothesis that stereotypes are not as harmless as they seem at first glance, because they give rise to self-doubt, which in turn forms fears based not on real obstacles, but on myths, the opinions of others and internal misogyny. Because of these fears, women less often decide to try themselves in a field that is rightly considered one of the most promising and highly paid in the world. Given these findings, it became imperative for us to ascertain whether such apprehensions were unique to women yet to venture into the IT sector or whether these concerns had legitimate foundations. To gain a deeper understanding and to hear from successful women in the traditionally male-centric IT industry, we conducted semi-structured interviews with women actively engaged in the IT profession within Belarus.

The results of the qualitative study are semi-structured interviews with Belarusian women actively involved in the IT profession

In light of the aforementioned observations from our first research, it has become increasingly essential to investigate the inhibitions preventing women with an interest in technical careers from pursuing even basic training courses. This inquiry was prompted by the need to determine whether these reservations were specific to women at the threshold of entering the information technology (IT) sector or if they had substantial justifications. In order to obtain a more comprehensive comprehension of these concerns and to glean insights from accomplished women in the conventionally male-dominated IT domain, we undertook a series of semi-structured interviews with women actively

involved in IT roles within Belarus. We adopted a qualitative research approach, specifically employing semi-structured interviews. This choice was deliberate. In Belarus, societal norms often dissuade women from openly discussing gender-related challenges or acknowledging experiences of vulnerability, weakness, or gender-based oppression. Within the patriarchal framework of Belarusian culture, many women, mirroring the sentiments of certain male counterparts who critique feminism, refrain from feminist identification. They might even deny the presence of stereotypes or any gender-specific challenges, especially given assertions that women have faced no issues since the Soviet era. Yet, a plethora of challenges rooted in gender disparities and stereotypes confront Belarusian women. A confidential and anonymous in-depth conversation offers a more genuine avenue to glean insights and perspectives from these women.

The scale of sexism

Highlighted codes and number of mentions:

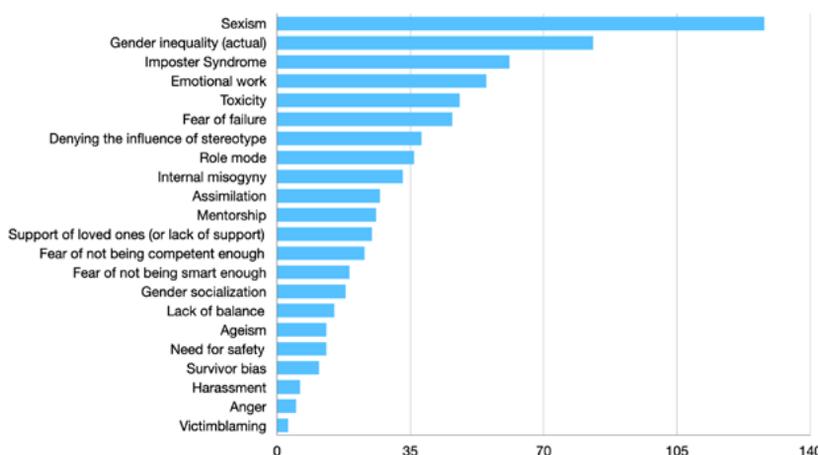


Figure 2. Qualitative research codes and mention frequency

If we look at the frequency of mentions among the codes, then the undisputed leader will be code number 2 “Sexism” – 128 mentions. Even those respondents who denied the existence of gender stereotypes and obvious obstacles for women in the IT field spoke about the normalization of sexist jokes and remarks in the workplace. Sexism is a major barrier to achieving gender equality in the IT industry, especially in patriarchal cultures where gender roles are rigidly defined. Sexism manifests itself in different ways, for example, in the form of gender discrimination (code no. 5 – de-facto inequality, 83 mentions), harassment (code no. 18 – harassment, 6 mentions) and stereotypes. These factors create a hostile work environment that prevents women from succeeding in IT.

“And you really need to prove, constantly prove, prove and prove that you can, that you should be reckoned with, what you need to listen and hear” (Anastasia, 28).

As previously emphasized, for Belarusian women, acknowledging their vulnerabilities and identifying with feminist ideologies poses significant challenges. When the topic of sexism—a relatively benign form of discrimination—was broached at the outset of our interviews, many women exhibited a defensive posture. They often downplayed or entirely negated their genuine experiences, reflexively asserting, “*There is no sexism*” or “*There is no problem*”. Yet, as the conversations unfolded, subtle admissions began to surface, revealing encounters with gender discrimination, pervasive stereotypes, and indeed, sexism.

To elucidate this occurrence, reference can be made to a testimonial from our data collection process. Initially, the participant negated experiencing any form of sexism, asserting an absence of gender-based discrimination. However, as the discourse progressed, marked by her utilization of varied metaphors, subtle humor, and apparent assessments of the conversation’s security, her narrative shifted. Concluding her account, she candidly remarked on the prevailing toxicity in the IT domain, emphasizing the inherent bias and prejudiced treatment towards women, irrespective of their appearance. “*IT in this sense is really a very toxic environment, very much. Women will be shamed here right a priori. If you are a pretty normal girl or any unsympathetic one, you will be poked in every way that you are a woman*” (Elena, 32). Individuals discussing traumatic events often employ a narrative strategy reminiscent of preliminary encounters in therapeutic contexts, designated as “safe spaces.” Initially, they navigate the conversation with caution, assessing the safety and receptivity of the environment. As trust in the setting solidifies, layers of denial and minimization are progressively peeled back, unveiling genuine testimonials of discrimination and aggression.

While some might argue that the initial disavowals of sexism warrant concluding the interview, it’s essential to contextualize these reactions within the overarching patriarchal framework. Openly identifying as a feminist or admitting to experiences of sexism equates to acknowledging victimhood, thereby necessitating action. However, in a deeply patriarchal society like Belarus, how do women navigate these challenges, especially when they lack clear mechanisms or resources? Moreover, many IT professionals, due to their relative financial stability, might perceive themselves as privileged, further complicating their willingness to voice concerns.

This dynamic is emblematic of the broader interplay between Belarusian women, feminism, and the country’s political landscape. While women are actively engaged, their voices often remain muted or sidelined, especially given societal norms that relegate women to non-public spheres. The advocacy for women’s rights and feminist

ideologies isn't mainstream, and societal stereotypes often lack appropriate linguistic expressions.

While sexism in the IT sector isn't novel, this research underscores the intricate ways women navigate and mask it. For many respondents, these interviews offer a sanctuary—a rare space where they can voice concerns without societal backlash, even if they remain uncertain about the path forward.

Studies (Brouns, M., & Rohen, 2010) have shown that sexism has a negative impact on the participation and advancement of women in the IT industry. Women often face barriers in accessing training, promotions and opportunities that are critical to career advancement. This lack of access to career opportunities further perpetuates the gender disparity in IT.

“And I understand that, let's say you're working with a new team. You have people on your team that you don't know. You have to evaluate their competencies. But if this is a man, then initially as if such a *carte blanche* in terms of trust in him is higher. You still need to fucking prove that you're not stupid” (Anna, 27).

Sexist attitudes and stereotypes can also lead to the exclusion of women from certain positions, IT projects, or even from consideration for employment. These biases can be both conscious and unconscious, leading to unfair treatment of women in the workplace.

“And I directly talked with the head of either the company, or here, well, there was a small startup, and he told me such a phrase, like, you know, everything is very good, you tell everything so cool, you have a really cool resume, everything is super cool, but I don't see how can a girl be a tech lead, it must be some bearded man” (Vera, 34).

However, sexism does not only manifest itself in the form of inappropriate remarks and jokes, but can also become the basis for physical violence. Several respondents experienced harassment and sexualized violence in the workplace.

TW: VIOLENCE

The impact of sexism on women's career development in technical fields is well documented (Sheri et al., 2021). Women are underrepresented in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), in part because of gender stereotypes, hidden biases, and discriminatory practices that limit access to education and employment opportunities. These prejudices, stereotypes and practices, in turn, influence workplace culture and contribute to the spread of sexism, harassment and violence in IT. Violence and harassment against women

in the IT industry can have serious and detrimental consequences, including psychological, physical, and professional effects. Given that women are already underrepresented in this industry, such incidents can contribute to a perception of a hostile and inhospitable work environment that can hinder professional success.

Several participants in our research reported instances of diverse workplace harassment. One particular respondent, during her initial tenure in the IT sector, recounted being coerced into non-consensual activities by her superior during an official corporate party. This testimony highlighted a prevalent sentiment among harassment victims: a deep-seated apprehension that any perceived misstep on their part could result in irreversible professional repercussions: *“Plus there was a feeling that if I do something wrong, I won’t get anywhere else. I didn’t really believe that if they suddenly fired me, then they would take me somewhere else, a year ago everyone refused, so the stakes were high”* (Veronica, 25).

Women who experience harassment and violence may suffer from physical health issues, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can lead to decreased job satisfaction, decreased productivity, and even leaving the industry altogether. Additionally, these incidents can affect their self-esteem, leading to self-doubt and reluctance to assert themselves in the workplace. One participant in our research, recounting an instance of workplace impropriety, narrated her experience with a touch of humor: *“So, I come for an interview, the manager conducts me, like this, he conducts me, it turns out, the project manager goes to a separate office, closes the door, and immediately says, you are so beautiful, I got up on you. That’s how I got my first job”* (Maria, 31). While Maria did not face physical violence and managed to navigate the IT sector post this encounter, it’s imperative to consider potential survivorship bias in such narratives. We must be cautious not to overlook the numerous women who may have been unable to recuperate from similar or more severe instances of workplace impropriety, compelling them to exit the tech domain entirely.

Harassment and violence can also impede women’s professional development and career advancement in the IT industry. Those who experience such incidents may become frustrated with their professional choice, avoid participating in activities that could benefit their careers, and miss opportunities for skill development, mentoring, and advancement. This can exacerbate the gender gap in leadership positions in the industry.

To address sexism in the IT industry, it is crucial to create a culture of inclusion and diversity that values women’s contributions to the sector. Without addressing the root causes of gender inequality and implementing anti-harassment policies in the workplace for all employees, regardless of gender, it is not possible to achieve gender equality in this industry. Sexism is not the only problem for women in technical disciplines, but practices that discriminate against women

in the workplace are based on it. In order to research what these discriminatory practices are and how they affect women, I suggest moving on to other research codes.

Imposter Syndrome

As I mentioned in the Methods, before the interview we sent out an information letter to all respondents explaining why this interview was important. This proved to be a useful tool, as the majority of potential respondents declined to participate in interviews, referring to their “incompetence” or their “unsuitability” in the context of “unprofessionalism” or “lack of professionalism”. Thus, the research began even before the start of the interview. The method of observation was not included in my research methods, but it seems important to note that such a characteristic as “self-doubt as a professional” accompanied almost all interviews with all respondents, regardless of their work experience and professional achievements. There was practically not a single respondent who would call herself a “real” professional and would not question her achievements. In total, the code “Imposter Syndrome” was present in the interview 61 times.

“Since you decided to start such a conversation yourself, then you have to convince the management that you really deserve it, and I’m not always sure that I’m doing well, which is probably why. And I often feel like I’m being paid too much. That my job isn’t really worth as much money as I make. I sometimes even think that someone will figure me out, understand that I actually cost less and fire me” (Ekaterina, 27).

Back in 1990, Sandra Lee Bartky analyzed shame and gender in the educational environment and concluded that it was female students who “feel something defective in themselves” (Bartky, 1990, p. 91–107). Bartky pointed to cases where women held conflicting views to demonstrate that gender emotions are shaped through dominant spatial discourses. Later, on the basis of this work, feminist theorist Fiona Kumari Campbell (Campbell, 1994) would write: “When we express ourselves, we must do so within gender restrictions” (Campbell, 1994). She views emotions as collective forms in which emotionality changes and dynamically reveals the contradictions of the dominant discourses of our culture.

Previous scholarly texts and studies suggest that in male-dominated professions there are gender differences not only in what is said and by whom by gender, but also in how it is said (Crawford et al., 2010). Men in the workplace are more likely to engage in aggressive communication (eg, yelling, insults, and humiliation) than women in the organization (Childs, 2004), while women tend to behave according to traditional feminine characteristics: submissiveness and obedience.

In salary negotiations, for example, men use an active negotiating strategy that can become aggressive in nature (Kaman & Hartel, 1994), while women in our interviews prefer to remain silent until the organization's management itself initiates talking about a pay rise.

Self-silence is observed both in ordinary conversations with work colleagues and with management (Maji & Dixit, 2020). Self-silence is characterized by “the tendency to suppress self-expression and action” (Jack and Ali, 2010, p. 5). Women admit that it is difficult for them to initiate a dialogue about promotion or salary increase. Because of the “imposter syndrome”, they psychologically devalue their achievements and experience, as a result of which they do not apply for higher positions and do not dare to look for a better job. It literally seems to them that they are nowhere and no one needs them anymore, and any attempts to change the situation will only lead to a worsening of their situation.

“Well, it's more like helplessness, or something, or senselessness of actions, that is, I understand that nothing will change anyway, they won't raise my salary, from what I say that I know that you get more money for me, they'll probably give you some kind of fine for disclosing trade secrets, some” (Elena, 32).

There are various obstacles in the way of women in the IT industry, but almost all of them face stereotypes about women. Such stereotypes speak not only about abilities (for example, intellectual, professional), but also go into the area of emotional.

Toxic environment and emotional work

In a professional environment, women are secretly required to “pacify” their character, reduce their emotionality, because men do not behave like that. Emotionality is stigmatized as “hysteria” and “toxicity”, although this industry that forbids women from expressing natural emotions, regulating them as “right and wrong” is inherently toxic itself. There are some privileges for the “right” women, and the “wrong” women can even be fined. The topic of toxicity was raised by the respondent 48 times in the interview.

During the interview, women in IT also talked about how they tend to gloss over their real opinions, reactions and emotions, such as a sexist remark or joke, in salary negotiations and even sometimes in work meetings when they have something to say on the topic of the issue, but they are insecure. Employees are more likely to “tacitly” agree to do extra work for which they are not paid, because they are afraid to say “no” and appear aggressive. It can be assumed that adapting to the traditional role of a caring woman often leads them to silence themselves, which undoubtedly affects their career growth, as they

decide to go against their desires and opt for femininity / as a socially approved line of behavior. The code “Emotional work” occurs 55 times in the research.

“Experience has taught me that it’s better to keep quiet, work hard and not try to be everyone’s girlfriend. Emotions are for therapy, friends, I’m much safer there. Being emotional at work is considered bad manners” (Ksenia, 26)

Based on the work of Sarah Ahmed (2004) it can be noted that women in IT are becoming gender-oriented professionals who require a certain register of emotions and emotional reactions, and they are given professional value. A participant in our study elucidated the adaptive measures undertaken by her female colleague within a workplace environment tainted by sexism and lack of respect for women. In navigating her professional responsibilities, this colleague assumed a facade congruent with conventional gender norms of a patriarchal society, often resorting to affirmations such as, “Dima, naturally, as a man, the decision rests with you” (Viktorina, 28).

Arlie Russell Hochschild has written extensively (Hochschild, 2003, 2012) on the concept of emotional work, arguing that it is not enough to say that work involves only physical or intellectual labor. She conceptualizes emotional culture, arguing that there are acceptable emotional responses in organizations that include the need to maintain an outwardly restrained and professional self-control, and calls this emotional labor. Hochschild writes that these skills are difficult to measure and often go unnoticed because they are considered feminine qualities. Emotional work is a constant aspect of the daily lives of women in IT as they struggle to keep their composure in light of the many challenges they face at work.

Fears of women in the IT industry

Women in the IT industry are not only afraid of appearing unprofessional, but also have many other fears based on the stereotypes of a patriarchal society. Self-silence can also be caused by Fear of failure (frequency of mentions – 46 times), Fear of not being competent enough (frequency of mentions – 23 times) and Fear of not being smart enough (frequency of mentions – 19 times). All these fears are based on the stereotype that a woman is weaker, dumber and less qualified by default. However, it is important to note that women whose environment supports their professional choice, whose colleagues show respect, are less likely to experience all of these fears and are less likely to talk about the Impostor Syndrome. And those women who most often mention their fears in interviews receive external confirmation of existing gender stereotypes more often than others.

One participant in our research, bolstered by familial encouragement in her IT endeavors and reporting less frequent experiences of Impostor Syndrome than her peers, narrated an encounter where attempts were made to sideline her due to her gender via entrenched stereotypes. She recalled, *“The new manager said some nasty things about the fact that women generally have weak intelligence, and don’t know anything at all, and in general they make bad programmers”* (Olga, 32). However, fortified by external support and her self-assuredness, she remained impervious to these prejudices. Instead of being propelled out of the sector, she felt galvanized to advocate for her professional standing, emphasizing competence over gender.

Resistance tactics

One of the objectives of our second research was to identify success factors for women working in male occupations. In these twenty-three interviews, women often used “male strategies” to excel in a “male”, sometimes even male-hegemonic, profession. Many women deny the presence of gender discrimination in the practice area, or even the very existence of gender stereotypes, despite the fact that their further stories only confirm the existence of such inequality. Illustratively, one participant conveyed her perception that jests aimed at females in IT were humorous, dismissing any prejudicial undertones. Delving deeper into the discourse, this respondent expressed a resignation to the existing gender disparities, commenting, *“While it might seem unconventional, I wouldn’t be particularly taken aback upon learning that certain male counterparts receive a higher remuneration than I do. In all likelihood, I wouldn’t contest it”* (Maria, 31). The code “Rejecting the influence of stereotypes” occurs 38 times in the research.

Many women in the IT industry engage in a phenomenon that can be defined as “assimilation”, wherein they adopt and propagate the same stereotypes that men have about women, support sexist jokes, and defend existing inequalities as “natural”. This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of gender socialization and the need to conform to male norms in male-dominated fields. Women may feel that in order to succeed and be accepted in the IT industry, they must adhere to stereotypical male behaviors and attitudes. This may include downplaying or even rejecting traditionally feminine traits and characteristics, such as emotional expressiveness, caring, and cooperation.

On the one hand, this assimilation may be seen as a non-obvious, covert tactic of resistance because it increases the number of women in male-dominated industries and leads to important changes. However, this approach comes at a cost as it reinforces and perpetuates gender inequalities and stereotypes that women are trying to overcome. One of the respondents said that she sometimes makes fun of herself

and her feminine abilities with technology: “I can joke like “I’m a girl, I have paws”. Someone else can joke like that too, but it’s all in a good way. If this is sexism, then I’m happy with everything about it, it doesn’t interfere, but rather helps me with IT” (Anna, 35). During the interviews conducted, the term “Assimilation” was mentioned 27 times.

Due to the denial of the influence of gender stereotypes, assimilation practices and the need to be “part of the community”, women not only accept sexist remarks and jokes about themselves as the norm, but also broadcast them to other women. “It so happened that it’s believed that intellectual work is more for men. listen, I don’t know about you, but I still catch in myself that if I go to the doctor, even to the gynecologist, if it’s a man, then for some reason it somehow morally seems to me that maybe he is a better specialist”. The code “Internal misogyny” occurs 33 times in the research.

Research shows (Baker, 2020) that internalized misogyny can be a major barrier for women in STEM and IT professions, as internalized sexism is an important factor in lower self-esteem and academic performance among female STEM students. Women who challenge gender stereotypes or advocate for gender equality in technology often face opposition and hostility not only from men but also from other women, which can contribute to feelings of isolation and helplessness. However, some women genuinely believe that tech is a place of gender equality because they have not encountered gender discrimination practices or sexist remarks in their professional lives. However, regardless of whether they really did not experience gender inequality, or chose not to notice it, they fall into the “Survivor Bias” — a cognitive bias in which we perceive our successful experience as the only true scenario, ignoring the stories of those who are less fortunate. “And by the way, regarding maternity leave, I very often heard that many will somehow not take something and will go on maternity leave. I haven’t had anything like this, I haven’t heard of it” (Alina, 23). Survivor bias code occurs 11 times in the research.

An interesting observation was to find that the most liberating emotion in women is anger (mentioned 5 times) that follows fear. When women discover over time that their assimilation practices don’t always bring them the expected benefits, or when they realize how unfair it is for a woman to constantly play a role in order to move closer to equal opportunity in the workplace. In the context of resistance to existing stereotypes, anger can play a crucial role in women’s resistance tactics. Anger and anger can be seen as a reaction to the injustice and discrimination women face in the workplace and can be a powerful motivator for women to take action and challenge the status quo. Anger can also serve as a form of communication that helps women express their frustrations and demand change. By expressing their anger, women can draw attention to the issues they face and demand that their voices be heard. In this way, anger can be a powerful tool for social change.

However, it is important to note that the expression of anger can also be stigmatized and dismissed as “irrational” or “emotional”. In many patriarchal societies, women are taught from childhood to suppress anger and other strong negative emotions, as anger is often associated with masculinity and aggression, and female traits are traditionally considered more passive and submissive. As a result, women are often taught to put the feelings and needs of others ahead of their own, and to express themselves in a more restrained manner. About how such stereotypes are broadcast in Belarusian society and media, appealing to the place of women in society (“in the kitchen”), the initiators of the project *#дамаудобнаявбыту* (Russian: convenient woman in everyday life), which explores gender discrimination in the post-Soviet context, wrote and talked a lot (Nasha Niva, 2022). Many of our respondents also noted similar situations: *“We were brought up this way, when self-abasement was presented as a reward for good upbringing. You have to stand modestly, that’s all, and endure while they beat you there. We were taught patience. Girls are often raised that way”* (Alla, 36).

Such gender socialization can have negative consequences for the well-being and freedom of action of women. By denying women the right to express their anger, society sends a signal that their feelings and experiences are unimportant, which can contribute to feelings of powerlessness, depression, and anxiety. Moreover, when women do express anger, they may face a backlash and be labeled as “hysterical” or “irrational”, which can further undermine their credibility and credibility.

From a sociological perspective, this phenomenon reflects broader cultural norms and values regarding gender and emotion. Gender is a socially constructed concept that defines what it means to be male or female and how people are expected to behave based on those categories. In patriarchal societies, where men have more power and privilege than women, gender norms often reinforce and perpetuate existing power imbalances. By discouraging women from expressing their anger, society reinforces the notion that women have less right to advocate for their own needs and interests and more responsibility to meet the needs of others.

As women challenge these gender norms and regain their right to express their anger, old myths are being replaced in society. Anger has become a tool for social change through movements like *#MeToo* and *Black Lives Matter*, where women demand more justice for themselves and others. This happened in Belarus in 2020 during women’s marches. This is a prime example of how social norms and values can be transformed through collective action and resistance.

However, resistance requires resources, which women in the IT industry face significant challenges in obtaining. Belstat, in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund and UNICEF (National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus, 2021), has calculated

that women in Belarus spend four years on cooking in the family, while men only spend eight months in their entire lives. This implies that Belarusian women have less time for overtime, business trips, and extracurricular work, which are common in the IT industry. Moreover, in addition to inequality in wages and career opportunities, gender stereotyping, sexism, and harassment in the workplace, women also face a lack of work-life balance in the IT field. The emphasis on overtime, tight deadlines, and heavy workloads, common factors in many technical professions, can make it difficult for women to balance their work responsibilities with their personal lives and household responsibilities, particularly when caring for children or other family members. As a result of this work-life imbalance, mothers, for example, may be compelled to choose between work and family, and may face the so-called “motherhood penalty,” where women with children are perceived as less committed or competent than their childless peers, and therefore less likely to be promoted or assigned challenging tasks, offered travel opportunities, or given public speaking roles. The code “lack of balance” is mentioned 15 times in the interview.

From a sociological perspective that is critically examining power imbalances and structural inequalities related to gender in society, this phenomenon reflects broader social norms and patriarchal values regarding gender and work. In many patriarchal societies, women are expected to be the primary caretakers of children and the home, while men are expected to prioritize their careers and earning potential. These gender roles can be reinforced by workplace policies and practices that do not take into account the needs of working parents or penalize women for taking time off, working reduced hours, or even just leaving work on time. Such women are perceived as not professional enough, because in fact they are only insufficiently consistent with the tactics of behavior inherent in hegemonic masculinity.

Scholars (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 122) view hegemonic masculinity as a normative image of masculinity, created by cultural and institutional processes and realized, achieved, or aspired to (by men at the level of interaction). Hegemonic masculinity is often characterized by such traits and values as a preoccupation with status and dominance over other men, being tough, refusing soft emotions; self-confidence associated with aggressiveness and risky behavior, as well as hypercompetition. While earlier research suggested that hegemonic masculinity was always built around “active struggle for dominance”, and the achievement of masculinity was associated with the ability to express dominance over other people (women or men), many modern researchers say that masculinity, including in a professional environment, is unreliable.

The professional realm has long been seen as a place to maintain existing gender hierarchies, to produce, to propagate, and to maintain the boundaries between masculine and feminine. Research shows that highly masculine industries cause men to not only meet the criteria for

masculinity and see it as an integral part of their career, but also strive to excel other men in these qualities. In such an environment, men must constantly prove their dominant masculinity and constantly face social and psychological insecurity due to their inability to nourish normative images of masculinity and therefore question their professional success. However, the precariousness of masculinity lies in the fact that masculinity is hard to achieve and too easy to lose, and this work of “proving” one’s status is never and never completely completed. In this case, the appearance of women in traditional male industries can naturally cause a feeling of tension and anxiety in connection with the reasons for the end of the stage of exclusive access of men to these areas, as well as to the authority and status of a “real man”, which is difficult to achieve even without the participation of women in these professional areas. spheres. Thus, the participation of women in traditionally male industries violates the “natural” environment and norms that men use to maintain their masculine status. As Australian researcher Reyvin Connell notes (Connell & Wood, 2005), “...all forms of femininity in society are built in the context of the general subordination of women to men”. There is no hegemonic femininity in the proper sense of the word, although there are certainly various standards of female behavior that are more or less approved by society. However, in the expected masculine professional sphere, it is the hegemonic male behavior that seems to be more acceptable behavior – lack of emotionality, preoccupation with status, competitiveness, aggressiveness. This is how the organizing influence of hegemonic masculinity manifests itself.

After conducting high-quality interviews with female employees and heads of IT companies, we were able to note how often women describe behaviors that are unusual for them in their life in the workplace. Several participants indicated adaptive behaviors within hostile environments, wherein they internalize or perpetuate gender stereotypes, directing them towards other female colleagues or even self-referentially. Conversely, others observed instances of triumphant women in the IT domain who exhibit traditionally “masculine” leadership traits: *“Even now, when you read interviews with many very successful women, you still hear that many of them say that they had to behave like men in order to achieve success”* (Olga, 32).

Arlie Hochschild (2003) writes that our emotions help us understand the relative aspect of our lives, but they are also manipulated and constructed by larger discourses. During the interviews, the respondents often referred to “illicit emotions”, sometimes stipulating that their incompatibility with the workplace was not related to gender, but only to professionalism. However, when they recalled that male colleagues or male leaders show emotionality (aggression, raising their voice), this was quite consistent with the prevailing ideas and values. One respondent noted that emotions such as anger have historically been considered taboo and punished for women, and she is certainly

right. However, by expressing them, women can challenge their position and become stronger in turn (Campbell, 1994, p. 28-31).

A research participant highlighted a transformation within her organization following the induction of a new managerial figure, which ushered in an environment more conducive to genuine emotional expression. This shift facilitated employees to articulate grievances candidly, or even attribute subpar moods to physiological factors such as PMS. She remarked, *“I no longer feel the need to suppress emotional outbursts nor shy away from disclosing the onset of my menstrual cycle; everyone has their bad days”*. The presence of a female leadership figure, she noted, catalyzed this transition from customary passive-aggressive dynamics to more open emotional exchanges, which played a pivotal role during challenging junctures for the team. This respondent also emphasized the importance of acknowledging her emotional spectrum, eschewing the facade of corporate cordiality, and recognizing the various facets influencing her emotional state, stating, *“Being a woman, myriad externalities can sway my emotional state. I might be grappling with a sick child at home, and my ensuing disposition at work is a testament to my humanity. It’s imperative to realize that my professional role is merely a segment of my holistic life, and dismissing my emotions, which might invariably influence my work, isn’t a judicious approach”* (Anastasia, 29). Potentially, augmenting the representation of women in leadership roles within IT firms could serve as a pivotal strategy to cultivate a more inclusive and less hostile professional milieu for female employees.

Unveiling the Realities Behind the Data. At a cursory glance, statistics might suggest that the issue of gender inequality in the Belarusian IT sector is on the decline. Numerically, certain metrics within the Belarusian IT realm seem promising, even surpassing some results from the USA. However, a deeper exploration reveals a more disconcerting reality: the Belarusian IT community exhibits a significantly toxic environment. Furthermore, Belarusian women lack robust community networks that can offer support or champion their interests. In a context where both a deeply entrenched patriarchal culture and a hostile professional milieu dismiss gender disparities, many women find themselves internalizing these negations. Consequently, they often suppress their experiences and concerns, leading to the invisibility of these issues.

Conclusions

The enduring gender disparity in the IT sector of Belarus, despite its moniker as the “Silicon Valley of Europe”, stands as a testimony to deeply rooted societal structures and norms that have withstood the tests of time, politics, and rapid technological advancements. This research has delved into the myriad factors, both overt and covert,

that continue to deter Belarusian women from participating actively and meaningfully in the IT sector. The quantitative results have poignantly highlighted the influence of societal stereotypes as a primary impediment, 95% of respondents have encountered stereotypes about women's abilities, 45% of them said that the lack of self-confidence that follows stereotypes prevents them from going to study an IT specialty right now. Additionally, the qualitative component of this study, through the lived experiences of Belarusian women in the IT sector, provides further layers to the understanding of the challenges they face, emphasizing the influence of internalized misogyny, societal norms, and the emotional strain brought by a predominantly male-centric workspace.

Historically, the legacies of the Soviet era, despite its ostensibly gender-inclusive measures, did not fully challenge or dismantle the deep-seated gender stereotypes in the society. Contemporary events, particularly the political turmoil of 2020, further exacerbated the challenges faced by women in the Belarusian society. The mass dissolution of women-focused civil organizations and the subsequent mass emigration wave emphasized the need for stable employment opportunities, with the IT sector standing out as a viable option. However, the mere 13.8% representation of women as IT developers by the end of 2020 starkly underscores the lingering barriers.

Respondents of the first research (quantitative research among Belarusian women on the way to IT) were most afraid of encountering a toxic-aggressive male environment, and, despite the fact that most of the respondents of the qualitative research refuted this thesis, most of their stories, on the contrary, confirmed the fears of women who are just about to enter the industry. Inequality in salaries and career opportunities, a lot of stereotypes and even harassment. IT continues to be a toxic male industry, in part because so many women are involved in the game. Adjusting to the existing rules of the game, playing a role or choosing to copy the style of behavior and emotional tone of men. Thus, a successful strategy manifests itself in internal misogyny and the transmission of existing stereotypes. Despite this, many women feel lonely and say they would like to feel more secure, feel more part of a team, socialize more often, tackle work challenges together, and learn new skills. Judging by the fact that the majority of respondents said that they have to regulate their emotions in the workplace, it is clear that women in the IT industry lack the freedom to express themselves even in small things like emotions.

The situation develops in this way not only because of the numerical and status superiority of men over women, but also "thanks" to the fact that in this area it is impossible to show qualities that are not characteristic of hegemonic masculinity. Women's ideas about what will help them achieve professional success in IT are guided by the ability to strategically bargain and compromise in the manifestation of their gender identity, perceiving the strategy of hegemonic masculinity

as a strategy for guaranteed career success in a male profession. But can women really share the patriarchal dividends from such complicity and passive support of the patriarchal model of society, or do they only contribute to the exclusion of women from a significant share of material wealth and social capital and further gender inequality in the professional sphere? Oppression is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that requires complex and multifaceted, complex and systemic solutions: from individual overcoming everyday inequalities to corporate tools and public policies.

The research offers a comprehensive examination of gender disparity in the Belarusian IT sector, but it is essential to note several limitations. The study's sample might not represent the full spectrum of experiences across all Belarusian demographics, given potential biases related to socio-economic backgrounds, education levels, or regions. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases like confirmation or social desirability, while the qualitative analysis, being interpretive, is inherently subjective. The results, deeply rooted in the current political and socio-economic climate of Belarus, might not retain the same relevance as these situations evolve. Lastly, while historical contexts like the Soviet era are mentioned, a deeper exploration could provide added clarity on their lingering influences on contemporary gender dynamics.

Hence, it is imperative to augment the volume of scholarly investigations addressing gender disparities within the IT domain, incorporating considerations of the unique cultural and historical legacies in Belarus, in conjunction with contemporary events, that significantly modulate this issue.

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