

Row over Google employee's defense of tech gender gap

August 7 2017, by Luc Olinga



The controversy comes as increasing numbers of women are going public with complaints of gender-based discrimination in Silicon Valley

Google found itself at the center of controversy Sunday after an employee in a leaked internal document claimed "biological causes" explained the lack of women in tech industry leadership roles.

The screed—dubbed "sexist" by US media—went viral, reviving the

simmering debate over a culture of sexism and lack of diversity in tech sectors.

"I'm simply stating that the distribution of preferences and abilities of men and [women](#) differ in part due to biological causes and that these differences may explain why we don't see equal representation of women in tech and leadership," read the 3,000-word fulmination by an anonymous male software engineer.

According to the author, natural aptitudes of men allow them to become better computer programmers. Women, he said, have more "openness directed towards feelings and aesthetics rather than ideas"—meaning they "prefer jobs in social or artistic areas."

In response to the leaked memo, Danielle Brown, Google's new vice president of diversity, told employees in an email that "it's not a viewpoint that I or this company endorses, promotes or encourages."

"I found that it advanced incorrect assumptions about gender." she said. "We are unequivocal in our belief that diversity and inclusion are critical to our success as a company, and we'll continue to stand for that and be committed to it for the long haul."

"Changing a culture is hard, and it's often uncomfortable."

Brown added, however, that "part of building an open, inclusive environment means fostering a culture in which those with alternative views, including different political views, feel safe sharing their opinions."

'Harmful assumptions'

It was unclear whether the memo's author would face disciplinary action.

Ari Balogh, a Google engineering executive, said in an internal memo obtained by AFP that "questioning our assumptions and sharing different perspectives is an important part of our culture."

"But, in the process of doing that, we cannot allow stereotyping and harmful assumptions to play any part," he said. "One of the aspects of the post that troubled me deeply was the bias inherent in suggesting that most women, or men, feel or act a certain way."

"That is stereotyping, and it is harmful."

Currently some 69 percent of Google's employees are men, according to the company's latest figures, a proportion that rises to 80 percent when it comes to technology jobs.

In 2016 at Facebook just 27 percent of senior executives were women. At Apple, around 30 percent of total employees are women.

The controversy comes as increasing numbers of women are going public with complaints of gender-based discrimination in Silicon Valley.

Uber's embattled chief executive Travis Kalanick resigned earlier this year under pressure from investors seeking to clean up the company's allegedly toxic corporate culture.

His departure capped a rocky period for the global ridesharing giant, which has been roiled by disturbing reports of cutthroat workplace conditions, harassment and discrimination.

June also saw venture capitalist Justin Caldbeck take an indefinite leave of absence from Binary Capital in Silicon Valley, over allegations he made sexual advances towards female entrepreneurs interested in funding.

A few days later, tech sector investor Dave McClure confessed to being "a creep" for making "advances towards multiple women in work-related situations, where it was clearly inappropriate."

These cases came to light three years after Ellen Pao became symbolic of the debate over Silicon Valley's allegedly sexist culture.

She sued her former employer, a prominent [venture capital firm](#), for gender discrimination—charges ultimately rejected—in a case seen as a proxy trial of the [tech industry's](#) sex bias.

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