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# Before You Stir: How Kant and Stanton Prove the Tech Industry is Failing Women

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Much of our world's history can be defined by disadvantaged groups struggling for their right to be treated equally. Even in countries like the United States which pride themselves on freedom and equality, many groups are regarded as inferior. This includes women, despite the fact that they make up fifty percent of the population. This inequality manifests itself in many ways, but this paper will focus on women in the technology industry, and how a solution to this inequality may be found through philosophy. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's demands in the *Declaration of Sentiments* and Kant's moral imperatives can explain the history of the devaluing of women in the tech industry, the negative impacts it has, and why current efforts to remedy these impacts are not sufficient.

In the Seneca Falls *Declaration of Sentiments*, Elizabeth Cady Stanton demands that women be recognized as having equal rights to men in the eyes of the government. She begins by reading the Declaration of Independence and changing it by explicitly including the word "women" when discussing who should be guaranteed these rights. Stanton holds men directly accountable for these actions, stating, "The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward women, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her" (Stanton). She then states a list of grievances, similar to the original Declaration of Independence, using the list to state all of the ways in which men have oppressed women, including taking her right to her own property in marriage and denying her the right to vote.

The lack of dignity afforded to women in 1848, when Stanton gave the *Declaration of Sentiments*, and the continued lack of dignity today, are in direct violation of Kant's practical imperative to treat people as ends as opposed to means. The subhuman view of women that Stanton critiques views women simply as means to marriage and children without taking their

own dignity and desires into consideration. According to Kant, all people have equal human dignity, meaning refusal to treat people as such shows a lack of basic morality.

Another moral concept brought forward by Kant that is violated by men who regard women as inferior is the categorical imperative, which mandates that humans, “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law,” (Kant). This means that one should only commit an action if they are satisfied with the idea of all people committing the same action. Another example Kant uses to illustrate this is the example of repaying debts. If all people neglected to pay off their debts, there would eventually be no more money to loan and exchange for goods and services. Stanton’s demand for male accountability mirrors this, as the language she uses is a clear call for all men to consider their treatment of women and the impacts it has. If all men regard women as means, the world is an unsafe place for women in which they cannot prosper, which means no single man can view women in this way.

Violations of both of Kant’s moral imperatives and Stanton’s demands for gender equality are apparent in the treatment of women the tech industry. Tech is viewed as a boys’ club today, but that was not always the case, and this transition is a direct result of the devaluing of women and their dignity. During World War II, when a computer was a person doing mathematic equations rather than a piece of technology, many of those computers were women. This continued into the 50’s and 60’s, when women made up somewhere between thirty and fifty percent of computer programmers writing data processing languages that are still used today (Shapiro).

However, by the 70’s and 80’s, things began to change as men realized programming was actually difficult and valuable labor. During this time, men started new work associations and

established educational requirements in the field that began to phase women out. This coupled with advertising discouraging the hiring of women and aptitude tests that favored job candidates with traditionally “masculine” attributes lead to an increase of male dominance in tech as its prestige and societal value increased (Shapiro). While this is in alignment with many of the problems outlined in the *Declaration of Sentiments*, it is most clearly an example of Stanton’s grievance that states, “He has monopolized all profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scant remuneration,” (Stanton).

This relationship between the gender composition and prestige of an industry should serve as no surprise, as a study of U.S. census data from 1950 to 2000 by Paula England, professor of sociology at New York University, found that large numbers of women moving into an industry has a negative effect on its average pay, even when factoring in education, geography, experience, and race (Miller). The continued struggles of women in these high-ranking industries such as tech begs the question of how to make them an environment in which they are valued as men’s equals. Kant and Stanton can show us why current initiatives to carve out a space for women in tech are not sufficient.

Oftentimes when people study the problems for women in tech, their research starts and ends with the gender composition of the field. This is a good start, as it is clear there is an issue when women are holding only twenty six percent of all tech jobs (Wojcicki). However, when the only issue researchers identify is the gender composition of an industry, they place too much emphasis on solving that issue rather than its root causes.

Treating the number of women holding tech jobs as the primary issue that needs to be solved fails women because men begin pushing them out before they are even trying to get tech jobs. From a young age, women are taught in the home, in school, and through the media that

STEM is a field for men, leading them to feel out of place when they start to show interest in the field, and it's getting worse, as the women went from occupying thirty seven percent of computer science majors in 1984 to eighteen percent in 2008 (Wallace). A world in which all men stigmatize women working in STEM would damage their presence in the field even more, so any instance of a man discouraging women from entering the field would be a violation of his categorical imperative.

Initiatives to make space for women in tech companies and educational programs may do some good, but at the end of the day it is nothing more than the often criticized idea of "add women and stir." Before this can work, the industry must find solutions for the causes the problem, including stigma surrounding women pursuing STEM before they enter the field, and pay inequity, sexual harassment, and underestimation of women's skills after they enter, or else their representation will continue to suffer, and men will continue to monopolize this profitable field.

Further, as long as officials at tech companies focus on numbers of women in their field, they are still seeing women as means to appearing diverse and accessible. As long as women are seen as tools for optics, and ultimately profit, they are not being treated as ends with human dignity. It is not an act of good will to put women at the table if they are merely a decoration once they get there. Their voices must be heard, and anything less is an attack on their dignity. As Stanton puts it, "He has endeavored, in every way that he could to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life," (Stanton). These attacks on self-respect continue to drive women out of the industry, proving that increased hiring of women is not a long term solution.

Through Elizabeth Cady Stanton's demands in the *Declaration of Sentiments* and Kant's moral imperatives, people today can learn about the history of the devaluing of women in the tech industry, the negative impacts it has, and why current efforts to remedy these impacts are not sufficient. The current emphasis placed on quotas and diversity initiatives fails to solve the underlying causes of the unfair treatment of women. All people, starting before girls even express interest in learning about tech, must examine how they treat women and girls, and ensure they are not working against them by promoting the idea of STEM careers being just for men, or making them feel undervalued at work. Only by respecting women's dignity, autonomy, and intelligence in home, school, and the workplace can they find a safe place in the tech industry, and that is the real key to increasing their numbers in the field.