

California Academy of Sciences Women in Science Summit Statement  
Shaila Kotadia, Synberc Education, Outreach, and Diversity Manager

I had the privilege of being asked to speak on a panel at the California Academy of Sciences Women in Science Summit on January 28, 2016. Below was the prompt provided and a written version of my self-introduction for the panel. The entire summit is available to watch [here](#). A recap of the summit can be watched [here](#).

Prompt: “Perceptions of Gender in Science” How do perceptions about gender affect women’s work in academia, industry, and the general public? Speakers will discuss the value of gender diversity in science and share inspiration for navigating the challenges that negative perceptions can present. All panels will start with 5-minute lightning talks by each panelist. These lightning talks are an opportunity for you to share your story or experience, as it relates to the panel topic. After which, the moderator will begin the discussion with the panel as a whole. The panel will then close with Q&A from the audience.

I was trying to think of a specific story to share and realized that it isn’t one story that really affected me but the accumulation of several experiences, all of which related to my gender. I am female and go by the pronouns she/her/hers. It was comments on the way I dressed in the lab and at meetings – skirts too short, heels too high, liked your talk, loved your dress – to my abilities in science – a student asking for my help describing me as a “bitch” because I was recommended by professors in the department for my knowledge and ability to ask in depth questions (note to anyone asking someone for help – don’t insult them when you ask). This is not new. Many individuals experience gender bias and it has tremendous effects including the reason why this summit is occurring and why there is research and articles on the lack of gender equity in STEM education and careers in academia and industry. It is one of the reasons I chose to not pursue a faculty position – for that and other reasons, I felt like I would not fit. It is also the reason why we have negative perceptions of women in science in the public – if our own community cannot treat all genders equally, then how do we expect external communities to do so?

So, how did I navigate these challenges when I was in academia? I mostly called people out on their behavior. Sometimes I would do so in front of a group of people and not in the most tactful manner. I matured and learned how to speak to people individually about their actions. I don’t think that I was necessarily trying to stop bias, or even knew that there was a defined term for this type of behavior or situation, but rather it made me mad and I tend to share my opinions very openly. This is not easy for everyone and it is a personal individual strategy.

How I choose to navigate it now is through my profession. I started at Synberc, a national research center, as an education and outreach manager where all of our programming is centered on helping underrepresented STEM groups. The center had selected a diversity director and diversity fellow a few months before I started but not an individual to run the programs full-time. I decided to take advantage of the opportunity and requested to be the diversity manager as well because these issues are incredibly important to me. They agreed and supported me to take the lead in diversity and inclusion efforts. Working with Synberc’s diversity team, I used my personal experiences to identify the gaps that exist in higher levels of academia and developed and grew programming to address these inequities. Now, diversity and inclusion permeates through many aspects of our center. This takes persistence and it is essential. I urge all of you to take advantage of professionals like myself to help support your path and to implement and grow any programs that you see changing the landscape of inclusivity in STEM.

I always notice that there is an ask for an explanation on why diversity is important and there is a need for data to support these claims. This bothers me. I want to help individuals because maybe if the environment had been more welcoming, I would have pursued an academic position. Diversity is important because we should want to make everyone feel welcome. It is human nature. It is empathy for all individuals. I don't need proof or an explanation of why we should make STEM diverse and inclusive, we should be doing it because it is the right thing to do.