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On International Womens' Day, lessons from the front lines on battling sexism in tech

Leah Spontaneo: "I always felt I was working 15 times harder than [the men] to show that I provided value to my team."   Photo: Colin Young-Wolff

by Suzanne Wintrob
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As a video gamer and software engineer, Leah Spontaneo is used to being the only female in the room. In fact, it's the reason the 32-year-old feels a responsibility to be a role model to other young women moving through the technology ranks.

"It felt intimidating coming in as a woman in the midst of all these other male co-workers because you never know how to act," says Spontaneo, who spent several years working at video game firms in New York and California, slogging 100-hour weeks to justify her worth. "The majority of males generally act differently than females, they

speak differently, they joke differently. They would bond differently, so sometimes it was hard for me to integrate into teams. I always felt that I had to prove myself more than the men on the team did. I always felt I was working 15 times harder than they were to show that I provided value to my team. That also attributed a bit to my burnout, this need to show that I'm delivering value to the organization."

Still, Spontaneo is used to being around boys. Her brother was a gamer who got his little sister into Super Mario Bros., Legend of Zelda and Street Fighter. She loved competing in friendly tournaments but her opponents were always boys. She built software solutions for corporate clients while studying software development at Seneca College, did her post-grad in bioinformatics at York University and had stints at Rockstar Games and Riot Games, all the while being one of very few women.

The experience has taught Spontaneo a lot about how to get ahead, especially in an industry like technology that is still battling diversity, and it's the reason she's so passionate about talking it up. She'll be doing it tonight in Toronto as part of an International Women's Day panel called *Empowering Women in Technology* sponsored by digital marketing company Ecentricarts Inc. and Sage Recruiting, a predominantly female firm that recruits for the technology industry.

"It's so important to continue to discuss how far we've come but also where we need to go," says Sage CEO Ashley Alfred, who insists all her employees learn code to better understand their clients' needs. "There are still so many hurdles women have to go through. Especially in a male-dominated industry like technology, we need to support each other, we need to mentor each other and we need to be there for each other. It's so important, especially on International Women's Day and especially with what's going on in this world and specifically in the U.S. There's a big need to make sure women are moving forward, not backward."

Andrea Palmer, another panelist, concurs. At 25, the University of British Columbia graduate has already been around the world to gain valuable entrepreneurial experience and secure funding for her digital health startup called Awake Labs, makers of a wearable device for autism that measures and tracks the body's response to anxiety in real time to better understand behaviour, help with focus and learning in the classroom and encourage long-term independence.

Despite a mechanical engineering degree and a slew of global opportunities and accolades – including StartUp Canada's 2016 Young Entrepreneur Award for B.C. and the North – Palmer continues to fight the gender bias, especially when asking for money. She's been advised several times to bring a man along to make the pitch but she refuses to bend.

"At the end of the day, even if it takes me longer to find capital, I don't want anyone who thinks I can't run a business because I'm a woman," she says. "I'd rather find investors who believe in me as a human, as an individual, and my capabilities."

Andrea Palmer: Tired of being described as a "female entrepreneur" because male entrepreneurs are never described by their gender.   Photo: Linda Wilson

So far Palmer has been successful, raising money from private investors and government grants to turn her university project into a five-person business (with a female software developer), setting up research trials and working with a product design firm and a chip manufacturer on the hardware.

Yet along the way, the double standard continues to annoy her. She's tired of being described as a "female entrepreneur" because she never hears male entrepreneurs or male engineers described by their gender. The focus should be on a person's talent, ability and performance, she believes, not on preconceived notions. (And, she wishes more men would be aware of their language and that of others and speak up rather than laugh off a denigrating remark.)

Palmer feels fortunate to have champions and role models in her life – both male and female – whom she looks up to and continues to draw on for inspiration, especially at critical junctures in her journey. Once, after a difficult moment at a conference, that network saved the day.

"I know that I'm a strong person, both physically and mentally, and I have a voice and I have used it before," says Palmer, who practises martial arts. "But in that moment I felt so weak. If I didn't have that community of other people to talk to about it, I'd have stayed quiet and cried in the bathroom by myself."

As for Spontaneo, she's happy to be back in Toronto as principal engineer at Hubba, a Toronto startup that helps brands, retailers and product influencers present and share product information. Four of the firm's 11 developers are female and she's always looking out for them. Things are improving in tech, she says, but there's still a long way

to go when it comes to diversity – not only for women and visible minorities but for diverse opinions and thought patterns. She's met many people coming at tech from colleges, coding boot camps or are self-taught and they're exceptionally talented. If organizations only hire people with university degrees, they're missing out on some great minds. In her words: "You learn so much more, and your environment becomes so much richer, when you have so many different trains of thought."