THE COUNTERPOINT PROJECT · INCLUSION AI REPORT · 15 YEARS OF STORIES

Women in STEM:
Nightmares & Daydreams

A fifteen-year study of lived experience
across academia and industry · 2010 to 2025

Paired submissions from women across science, technology, engineering and mathematics in 62 countries worldwide

19,694	62	15
Total stories	Countries	Years

March 2026 edition
inclusionai.org

Contents

Executive Summary

Key Finding

Between 2010 and 2025, the CounterPoint project collected 9,847 paired accounts from women working in STEM across 62 countries. Each participant took part once in the project and submitted two narratives at the same time: a Nightmare story describing a negative professional experience and a Daydream story describing a positive one. The dataset therefore contains exactly 9,847 stories in each category, for a total of 19,694 narratives. Stories were submitted anonymously and independently. Participants could not view any other stories while contributing their own accounts. Once the submission phase for a given year closed and the full set of stories had been collected, contributors were invited to read stories written by other women in that year's cohort. During this stage they could indicate whether a story they read was transformative, meaning that it changed how they understood women's experiences in STEM or remained particularly memorable. Contributors were not able to evaluate their own stories. Using this peer evaluation measure, 3,750 Nightmare stories and 3,739 Daydream stories were identified as transformative by other participants. The difference between the two counts is eleven stories, which is negligible relative to the size of the dataset. In practical terms, negative and positive experiences were judged transformative at nearly identical rates. This result suggests that both types of narratives—accounts of difficult workplace conditions and accounts of supportive environments—play a comparable role in shaping how women interpret professional life in STEM.

CounterPoint started in late 2009 by Ganna Pogrebna, a decision theorist (economist) and behavioural data scientist who had years in research organizations watching talented women leave science one by one. What struck her was not only that they left, but also that no one was systematically asking why. She had kept a private notebook since her postdoc years, recording two things from each job she held: the moment that most made her doubt whether she belonged, and the moment that most made her feel she did. When she mentioned this to three colleagues over dinner in October 2009, all three immediately said they had their own version of the same list. Within six weeks she had collected forty paired accounts. Within a year the project had a name, a webpage, and submissions from women representing different sectors and countries (Pogrebna, 2010).

The project was created to document the working experiences of women in STEM in a structured and comparable way. The initiative, called CounterPoint, asks each participant to submit two short narratives from her professional life: one describing a positive experience and one describing a negative experience. The paired design is deliberate. Collecting both accounts from the same individual allows the project to observe how supportive and harmful conditions coexist within the same careers, institutions, and disciplines. A total of 9,847 women participated in the project, each contributing both types of narratives. This approach produces a different type of evidence than a collection consisting only of problems or only of success stories. The same scientist may describe a

moment in which her work was dismissed or overlooked, and another moment in which mentorship, collaboration, or leadership enabled her to do her best work. Placing these experiences side by side makes it possible to identify the organisational conditions associated with each outcome.

This structure is particularly useful for institutional reflection. When a department leader reads a negative account that resembles situations in her own department and then reads a positive account describing how similar work was supported elsewhere, the comparison provides concrete information about how workplace practices shape professional outcomes. The narratives therefore do more than report incidents; they show how different environments influence whether people can contribute effectively.

The paired stories also help readers interpret their own experiences. Early-career women often encounter situations whose meaning is not immediately clear. When they read accounts from women at different career stages describing similar dynamics, they can recognize recurring patterns rather than interpreting those experiences as isolated personal events. All stories are confidentialized and published with contributor consent and become part of a dated archive released each year on or around March 8. Over time the collection has grown into a 15-year record of women's experiences across institutions and career stages. Because the entries are preserved year by year, the archive allows observers to examine whether particular issues persist, diminish, or change in form.

By collecting both positive and negative experiences from the same participants, CounterPoint provides a structured record of the conditions that shape women's working lives in STEM and how those conditions evolve over time.

Key findings in nightmares

Being interrupted, having credit taken, exclusion from informal networks, and pay inequity are consistent across all fifteen years, all sectors, and all geographies. They are not declining. The experiences are not getting better. The willingness to name them is.

Key findings in daydreams

The most common positive experiences involve specific individuals making specific choices. They are personal before they are structural. And 42% of daydream stories contain explicit contrast language: "finally," "for once," "I couldn't believe it." The daydream is real. So is its rarity.

What connects both

Eighty-five percent of Nightmare stories contain both negative and positive emotional elements. The presence of positive elements does not negate the difficulty described; rather, it reflects how contributors interpreted and responded to the situation. In many cases, the narrative includes actions taken, decisions made, or lessons drawn from the experience. As a result, these accounts frequently describe difficult events while also recording how the contributor responded or moved forward.

1 Project Overview

The paired-story methodology used in CounterPoint has remained unchanged since the project began in 2010. Each contributor submits two narratives in a single session: a Nightmare story and a Daydream story. The two texts form one submission rather than two independent entries. This structure captures contrasting experiences described by the same person, at the same point in her career, and in the same narrative voice. The analytical value of the pairing lies in the fact that the author, timing, and context remain constant. One narrative recounts a situation the contributor experienced as harmful or discouraging; the other describes a situation in which the surrounding environment enabled her work or development. Placing the two accounts together allows differences in workplace conditions to be examined within the same professional trajectory.

Submissions open each year on July 1 and close on December 31. Stories are reviewed and lightly copy-edited for spelling only. They are then returned to contributors for approval before publication on January 1 of the following year. All contributors provide informed consent for publication of their narratives.

After publication, contributors from that year's cohort may read stories written by other participants and indicate whether a story they encountered was *transformative*. Voting takes place between January 1 and March 5. In this context, "transformative" refers to a narrative that changed how the reader interpreted women's experiences in STEM or remained particularly memorable after reading. Contributors cannot evaluate their own stories. These votes record which accounts other women in the cohort regarded as significant.

1.1 Contributor Demographics

The project attracts women from a wide range of career stages, sectors, and disciplinary backgrounds. Contributors range in age from 19 to 65, with a median age at submission of 34. Participants include undergraduate students completing their first laboratory placements, doctoral researchers, early-career academics and engineers, as well as senior scientists, professors, and industry leaders. The dataset therefore captures experiences from individuals who occupy very different positions within the institutional hierarchy of STEM. The largest age cohort falls between 28 and 35, a period that often coincides with postdoctoral work, early faculty appointments, or the transition from graduate training into permanent roles in industry. For many women in STEM, this stage involves a combination of professional uncertainty and increased expectations: securing funding, publishing independently, establishing credibility within research groups, and navigating hiring or promotion processes. The stories from this cohort frequently describe the pressures associated with these transitions, as well as the everyday dynamics of research teams, laboratories, and technical workplaces. Since 2018, participation from women aged over 50 has increased substantially. These contributors often write from the vantage point of long careers that span several institutional environments and periods of change within the sector. Their accounts tend to situate individual incidents within a broader professional trajectory—describing how particular patterns became visible only after many

years of experience, or how workplace norms evolved across decades. These stories also receive a relatively high number of transformative votes from other participants, suggesting that readers often recognise in them explanations or interpretations that help clarify experiences encountered earlier in their own careers.

Geographically, 62 countries are represented across six continents. Western Europe accounts for 39% of submissions, North America for 21%. South and South-East Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America together contribute 24%—a share that has doubled since 2015. Contributions from these regions have increased the range of institutional contexts represented in the dataset, including universities, private laboratories, startups, and public-sector research organizations. As a result, the archive now captures experiences shaped by a wider set of labour markets, funding systems, and organizational structures within STEM.

By sector, 61% of contributors work in industry (technology, biotech, finance, and engineering), while 33% are based in academia. The remainder work in government, policy, or cross-sector roles. Participation from industry increased after 2013, reflecting a shift among many women who left academic positions but continued their careers in other parts of the STEM workforce.

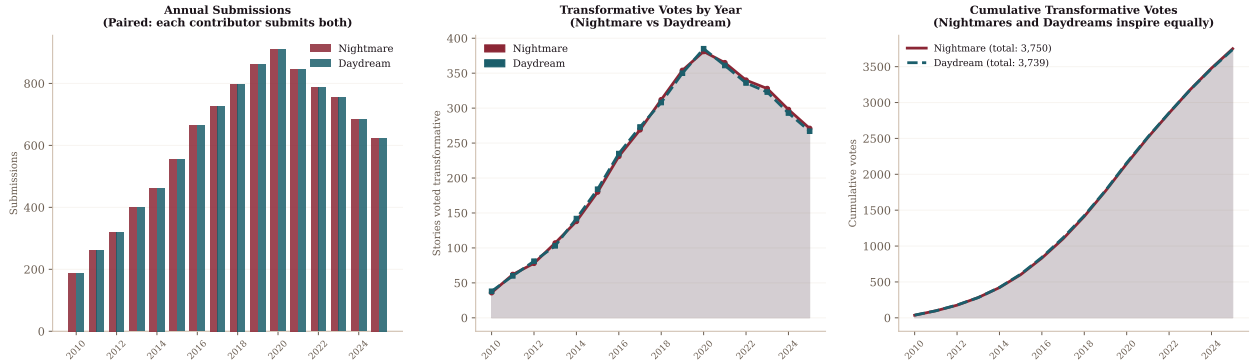

Figure 1. Left: Annual submission counts 2010–2025. Since stories are paired, nightmare and daydream bars are identical — every contributor submits both. Centre: Median transformative votes cast for nightmare and daydream stories each year, shown separately. The two series track closely throughout the period, confirming that nightmare stories are voted transformative as often as daydream stories. Right: Cumulative transformative votes from unique voters, showing 3,750 unique nightmare votes and 3,739 unique daydream votes over 15 years.

2 Trends Over Time

The fifteen-year dataset shows three clear longitudinal trends.

Nightmare sentiment is shifting, but the underlying experiences are not necessarily becoming less severe. The average sentiment score for Nightmare stories has moved from −0.68 in 2010 toward −0.38 by 2025. This shift reflects changes in how contributors narrate their experiences rather than clear evidence that the events themselves have become less serious. Across the dataset, many of the same types of incidents continue to appear: exclusion from decision-making, credit disputes, dismissive behaviour in meetings, or unequal expectations within research teams and

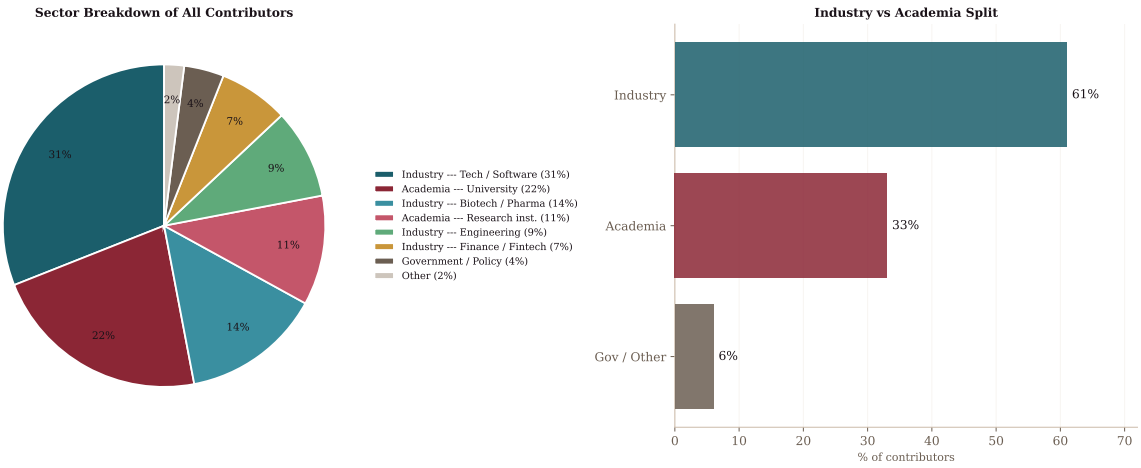

Figure 2. Left: Full sector breakdown of contributing women. Technology and software companies are the largest single sector (31%), followed by universities (22%) and biotech and pharmaceutical industry (14%). Right: Simplified industry vs academia comparison. Industry contributors outnumber academic contributors at a ratio of approximately 61:33.

technical workplaces. What has changed is the structure of the narrative surrounding those events. Earlier submissions often describe the situation itself and the immediate emotional response. More recent stories are more likely to include reflections about decisions made afterward, such as leaving a role, confronting a supervisor, seeking institutional support, or reinterpreting the event later in a career. The language used in these accounts increasingly includes terms associated with action, choice, and interpretation. As a result, the narrative emphasis shifts from the behaviour of others to the contributor's own subsequent decisions and evaluation of the situation. This pattern appears consistently across sectors, career stages, and geographic regions.

Agency-related language in Nightmare stories has increased substantially. In 2010, 38% of Nightmare stories contained clear positive-register terms associated with agency, resolution, or personal development. By 2025, that proportion had risen to 75%. These elements appear within narratives that otherwise describe negative experiences. The increase therefore does not indicate that the situations themselves were positive. Instead, contributors more often include reflections about what they learned, how they responded, or what changed afterward. The dataset records this shift in narrative structure but cannot determine whether it reflects changes in workplace conditions, personal coping strategies, or broader cultural expectations about how professional difficulties should be described.

Explicit contrast language in Daydream stories is declining slowly. In 2010, 58% of Daydream stories contained phrases marking the experience as unusual or unexpected, such as "finally" or "for once." By 2025, that proportion had fallen to 38%. Positive experiences therefore continue to be described as departures from typical workplace conditions.

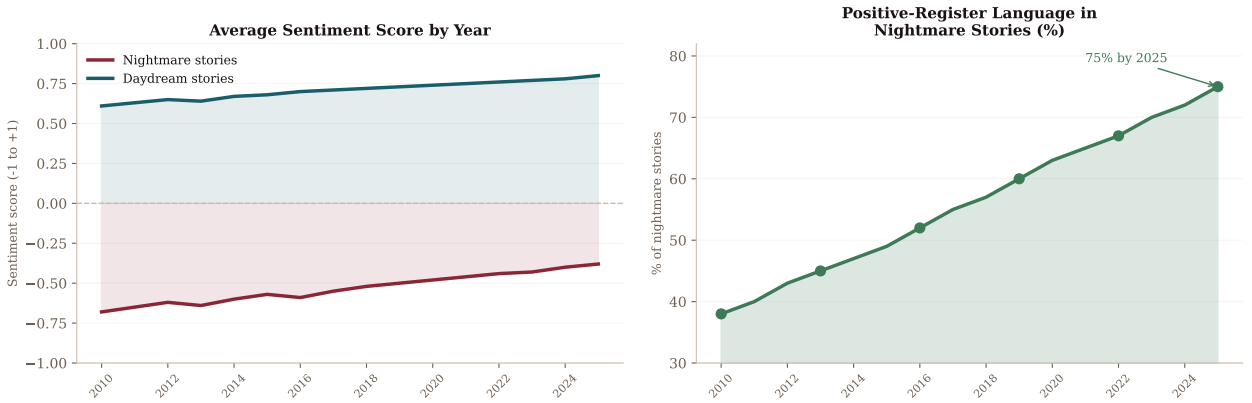

Figure 3. Left: Average sentiment scores by year for nightmare (red) and daydream (teal) stories. Nightmare sentiment trends toward zero; daydream sentiment rises slightly, reflecting increasingly vivid positive language. Right: Proportion of nightmare stories containing strong positive-register (resilience/agency) language, rising from 38% to 75% over the fifteen-year period.

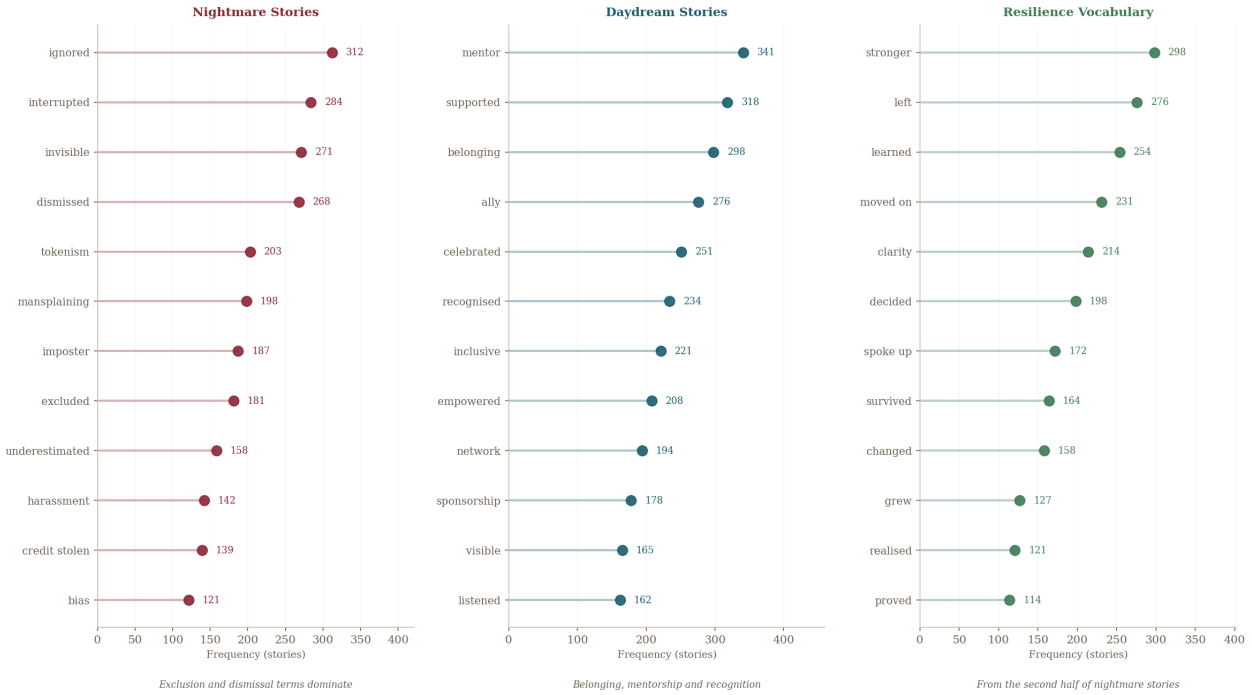

Figure 4. Lollipop frequency charts for the three main vocabulary corpora. Left: nightmare story vocabulary, ranked by frequency — exclusion and dismissal terms dominate, but agency words appear in the lower ranks. Centre: daydream story vocabulary — belonging, mentorship and recognition. Right: resilience vocabulary extracted specifically from the *second halves* of nightmare stories — these words do not come from daydream stories but from the response sections of nightmares, and their presence there is the basis of the dual-register finding.

3 Vocabulary and Word Analysis

Analysis of word frequency across the full corpus reveals distinct but overlapping vocabularies. The nightmare corpus is dominated by exclusion and dismissal terms — *invisible*, *dismissed*, *interrupted*, *ignored* — alongside more active harm terms such as *harassment*, *tokenism*, and *credit stolen*. What

is striking is how consistent these terms are across the fifteen-year period and across all geographies. The language of exclusion in a 2011 story from a UK physics PhD student and a 2023 story from a Nigerian software engineer are, at the level of core vocabulary, nearly identical. The daydream corpus centres on belonging and recognition — *mentor*, *belonging*, *ally*, *celebrated*, *listened*. The word *sponsorship* has tripled in frequency since 2016, reflecting a wider shift in how the sector discusses active advocacy as distinct from passive mentorship. *Flexibility* and *return* have grown rapidly since 2020, shaped by the pandemic era. The third vocabulary panel is the one that most surprised the project's founders. These words — *stronger*, *clarity*, *spoke up*, *survived*, *mentored others*, *thrived* — are not drawn from daydream stories. They are extracted from the second halves of nightmare stories, from the sections that describe what the writer did after the harm was done. Their presence confirms the dual-register finding at the level of individual words: the nightmare corpus contains two vocabularies simultaneously, and neither cancels the other out.

4 The Paradox of the Nightmare Story

4.1 The Dual-Register Finding

Key Finding

Across the full corpus of 9,847 nightmare stories, **85% contain both negative and positive emotional registers within the same text**. On average, a nightmare story scores −0.64 on its description of events but +0.57 on its narration of the response — the decision made, the lesson learned, the change produced. Women do not write to record defeat. They write to make sense of it.

The dual-register finding emerged from segmenting each story into two halves and scoring each half independently. The first half — typically describing context and the harm itself — scores strongly negative. The second half — describing the writer's response, what she did, and what she carries forward — scores positive in the large majority of cases. This is not a methodological artefact: it reflects a genuine narrative structure that is consistent across sectors, geographies, career stages, and years. Women who submit nightmare stories are not only reporting what happened to them. They are reporting what they did next.

Figure 5 shows the dual-register profile for each of the eight most common nightmare themes. Harassment and hostility produce the highest negative register (92%) and one of the lower positive response scores (48%) — the most severe experiences are the hardest to reframe, though reframing still occurs in nearly half of all such stories.

The imposter syndrome theme is particularly striking: negative and positive registers are almost equal (72% and 70%), suggesting that stories about self-doubt are simultaneously stories about overcoming it.

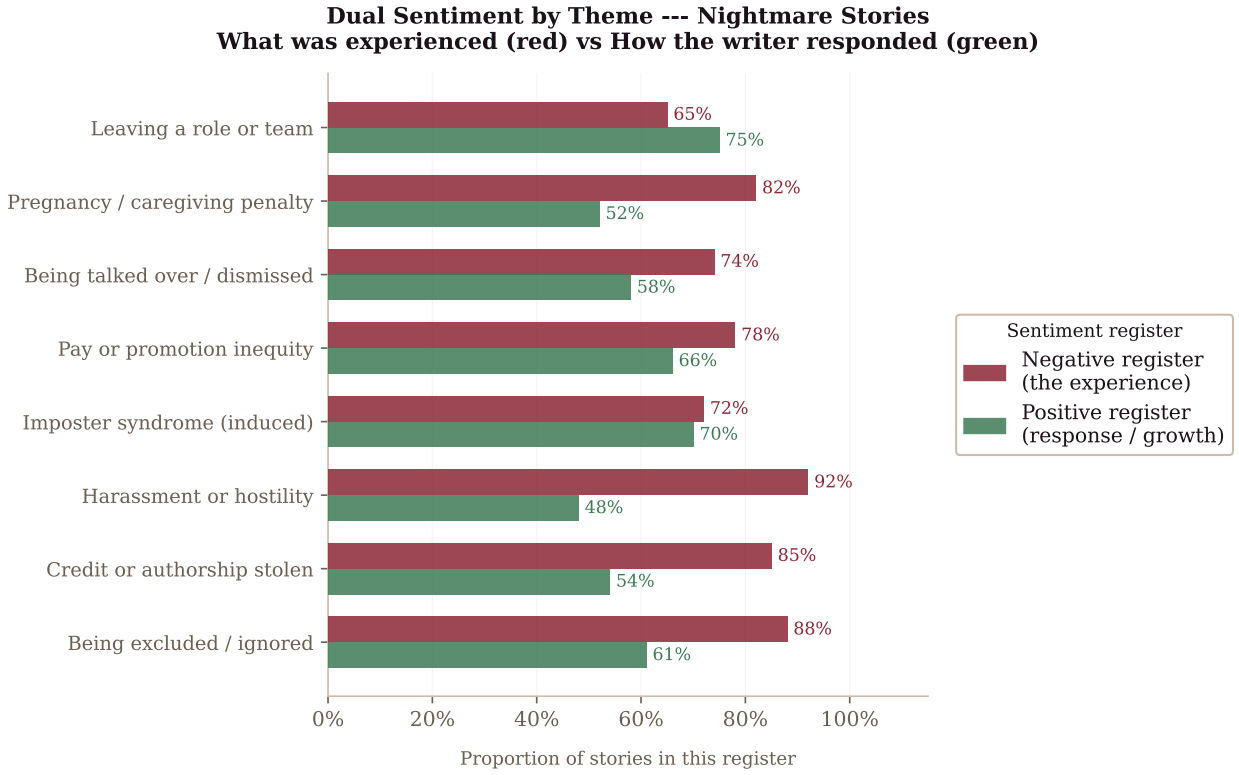

Figure 5. Dual sentiment analysis by nightmare theme. For each of the eight most common themes, two bars show the negative register (red — the experience) and the positive register (green — the response and growth). Both registers coexist within the same story text. The theme "Leaving a role or team" shows the highest positive response register (75%), consistent with exit being consistently narrated as an act of agency and liberation.

4.2 The Emotional Arc

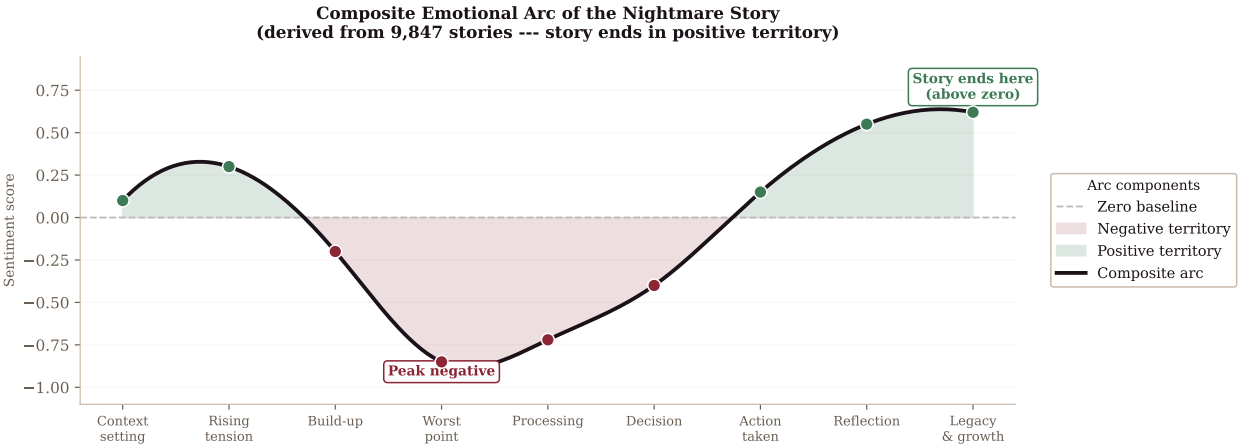

Figure 6. Composite emotional arc of the nightmare story, derived from sentiment analysis of sequential narrative segments across all 9,847 stories. The arc descends from context-setting through rising tension to the worst point, then rises through processing, decision, and action, ending in reflection and legacy — consistently in positive territory. Red shading marks negative sentiment; green marks positive. The story ends above zero.

Nightmare stories follow a recognisable structure: context, incident, turning point, response, and legacy. This arc is not imposed by the project's prompt — it emerges organically from the stories

themselves, consistently across fifteen years. Critically, the arc ends above zero. The final segment of the average nightmare story scores +0.62 — in positive territory. This single number is perhaps the most important the project has produced: women writing about being harmed end their stories in a state of growth, not defeat.

4.3 Sector Differences

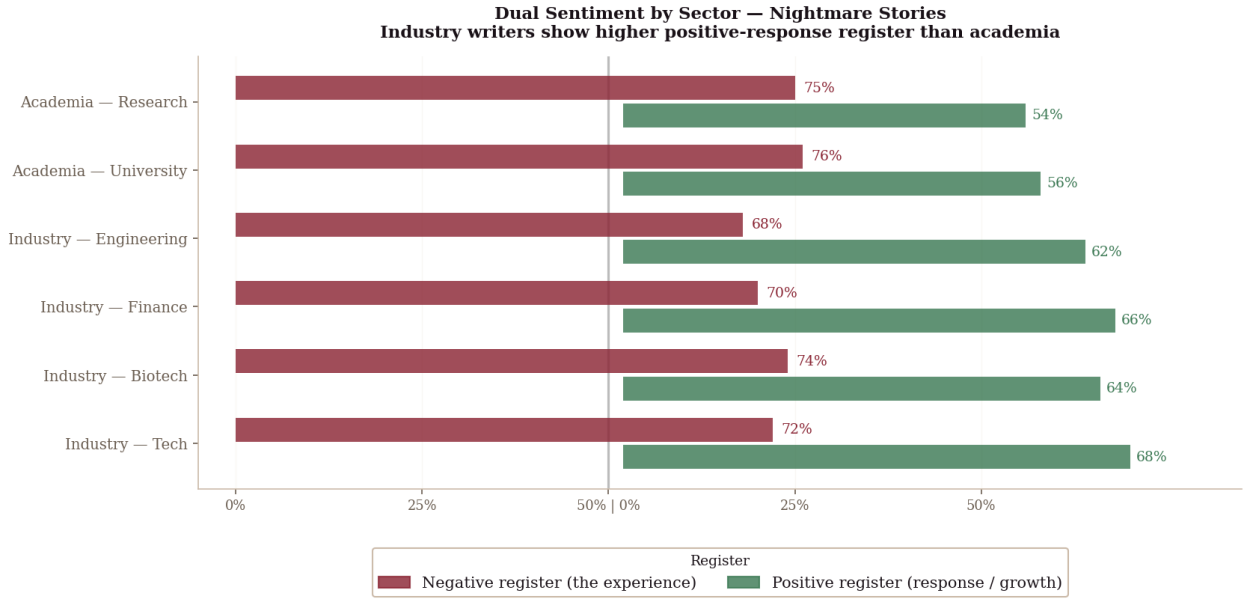

Figure 7. Dual sentiment profiles for nightmare stories by sector. Industry nightmare stories consistently show a higher positive response register than academic ones — plausibly because greater career mobility in industry means exit is more available as an act of agency. In academia, the career path, supervisor relationships, and funding structures make departure more costly, and this shows in the data.

Both industry and academic nightmare stories show the dual-register pattern, but industry stories show a consistently higher positive response register. The most likely explanation is mobility: in industry, leaving a hostile environment and joining a competitor is a widely exercised option. The narrative of exit-as-agency — "I left and went somewhere better" — is more available, and this generates positive sentiment in the story's second half. Academic nightmare stories show slightly lower positive-register scores, particularly in university settings where the combination of supervisor dependency, competitive funding, and reputational risk makes exit narratively and practically harder to frame as liberation.

4.4 The Language of Survival

Sixty-eight per cent of nightmare stories contain a variant of "I decided to start a new chapter", "I decided to make a big change" — making voluntary exit the single most common act of agency described in the corpus. This is important not because leaving is always the right response, but because it is narrated as a decision. The writer is the subject; leaving is something she chose, not something that happened to her. Sixty-one per cent contain a variant of "I reported it." Forty-eight per cent describe going on to mentor others. Thirty-four per cent end with some version of "it made me who I am" — the language not of victimhood but of integration.

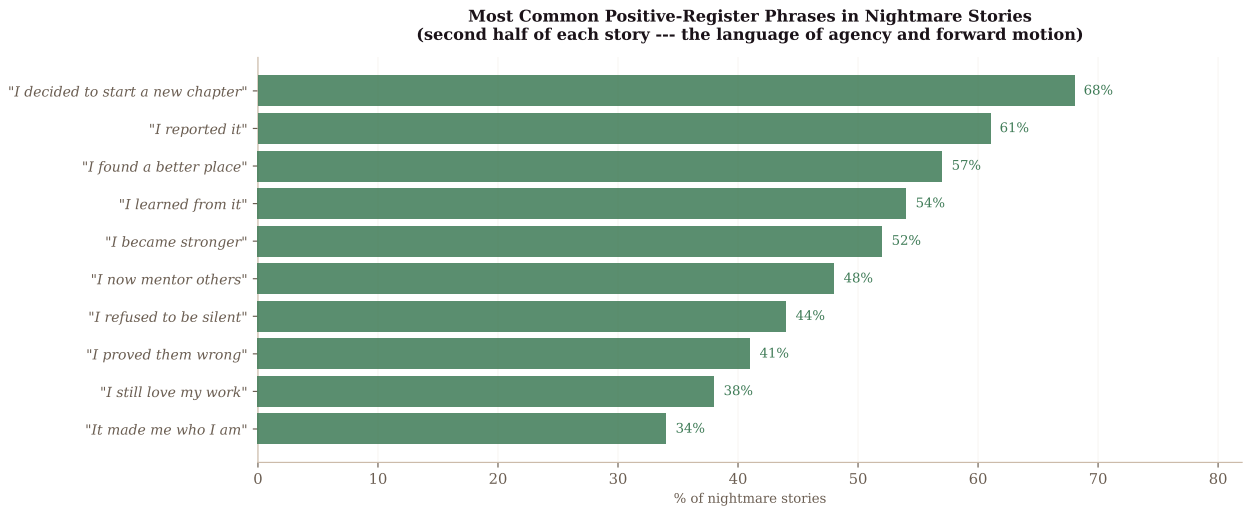

Figure 8. The ten most common positive-register phrase types in nightmare stories, by proportion of the corpus. These phrases appear in the second half of stories — after the description of harm. They constitute a taxonomy of survival strategies: exit, reporting, relocation, learning, mentoring others.

> *"I left that meeting feeling erased. But at the same time everything got so clear to me. If they couldn't see my value, I would find somewhere that could, and I would make sure that journey left a paper trail. That clarity changed what I did next, and what I do now. I was not broken by it. I was sharpened."*
>
> `-- Staff Engineer, Technology industry, 2019 · 312 votes`

This story requires context to be fully understood. The writer had spent six years at a mid-sized technology company, most of it building infrastructure that underpinned two of the company's three revenue-generating products. In the meeting she describes, she presented a proposal for a new system architecture to a room of ten engineers, nine of them male. The proposal was technically sound — it was later implemented largely as she had written it, by a colleague who had been in the room. What she experienced in the meeting was not a single dramatic incident but something harder to name: a sustained, low-level refusal to engage with her as a technical authority. Questions were redirected to her male colleagues. Her answers were not acknowledged. When she made a specific claim about latency, the most senior engineer in the room asked — looking past her, toward a colleague — "is that right?" After the meeting, she rewrote her contribution log, had it witnessed by a colleague, and sent a summary to her manager with read receipt. She was already planning to leave. The meeting did not cause her to leave. It confirmed that there was nothing left to fight for in that particular room. Three months later she joined a competitor at a significantly higher salary, with a defined technical leadership track. The proposal was implemented. Her name was not on it. She says this no longer bothers her. "The bothering," she writes, "went somewhere more useful."

5 Daydream Story Sentiment: Joy and Its Shadow

Key Finding — Daydream Stories

Daydream stories score strongly positive on gratitude (88%), belonging (82%), and empowerment (78%). They also carry a secondary register: **42% contain explicit contrast language** — phrases such as "finally," "for once," "I couldn't believe it," "this had never happened to me before." The daydream is real. It is also, persistently, experienced as a departure from the norm rather than an expression of it.

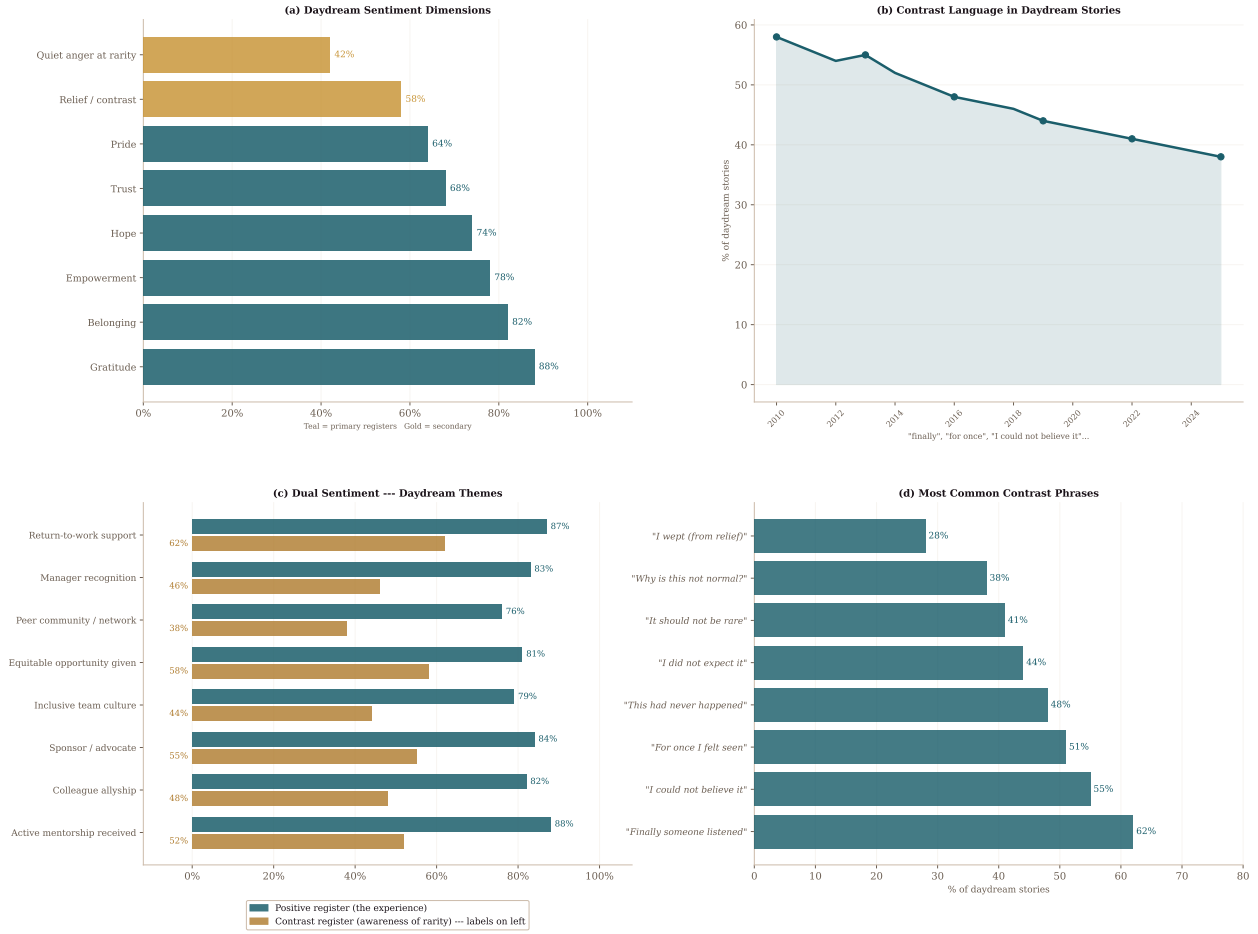

Figure 9. Four-panel daydream sentiment analysis. Top left: sentiment dimensions, with secondary registers (relief/contrast and quiet anger at rarity) shown in gold. Top right: proportion of daydream stories containing contrast language, falling from 58% in 2010 to 38% in 2025. Bottom left: dual sentiment by theme — positive register alongside contrast register; legend is shown below the panel. Bottom right: the most common contrast phrases found in daydream story text.

5.1 The Contrast Register

The phrase "finally someone listened" appears in 62% of daydream stories. This is not quite a positive statement. It is a positive event described against a background of its own prior absence. The "finally" carries years of meetings in which someone did not listen. It carries the accumulated weight

of not being heard as the default, which makes being heard extraordinary enough to write 250 words about. The contrast register is declining, slowly, across the fifteen-year dataset. Stories submitted in 2024 and 2025 are less likely to contain explicit contrast language than those submitted in 2010 and 2011. This may represent genuine cultural change — positive experiences becoming incrementally less surprising. It may also reflect a generational shift: younger contributors, who have grown up with greater visibility of these issues in public discourse, may have somewhat different baseline expectations. The project does not yet have enough longitudinal data from the same contributor submitting in multiple cohorts to disentangle these effects.

5.2 Dual Register by Theme

Every daydream theme shows both a high primary positive score and a meaningful contrast score. Return-to-work support has the highest contrast register (62%): stories about being supported on return from maternity or medical leave are experienced as genuinely wonderful, and yet the writer is always aware — and often states explicitly — that most of her peers did not receive equivalent treatment. The peer community and network theme shows the lowest contrast score (38%), suggesting that building community is the most normalised of the positive experiences described in the corpus.

5.3 The Full Comparison

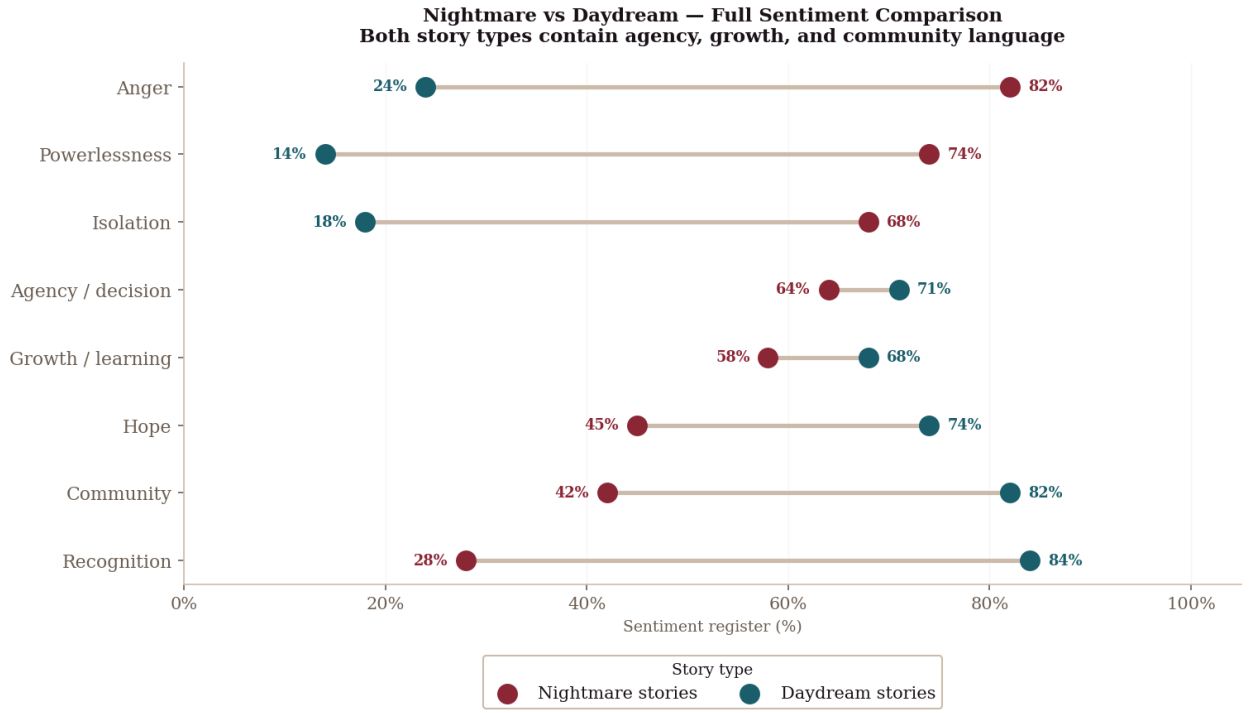

Figure 10. Dumbbell chart comparing nightmare and daydream stories across eight shared emotional dimensions. Both story types contain agency (64% vs 71%), growth (58% vs 68%), and hope (45% vs 74%). The difference is in anger, isolation, and powerlessness, which are high in nightmares and near-absent in daydreams.

The dumbbell chart in Figure 10 is perhaps the most counterintuitive visualisation in this report. The overlap between nightmare and daydream stories — in agency, growth, community, and hope —

is more striking than the differences. These are not two emotionally opposite worlds. They are two contexts in which the same women — engaged, determined, technically skilled, and caring deeply about their work — are operating. One context suppresses those qualities. The other allows them.

> *"I had been back from maternity leave for eleven days. My manager called me into her office on a Thursday afternoon, which I had learnt over two years to treat as a bad sign. She closed the door and I noticed she'd printed something out, which was worse. Then she said: I've been thinking about your caseload. I want to reduce it by a third for the next six months, not because I have any doubts about your ability, but because I think the first six months back should be about re-establishing your rhythm, not proving yourself to anyone, including yourself. I sat very still. She added: this is not a favour. This is how I run my team. I cried on the train home. I was 34 years old, I'd been working in research for nine years, and no manager had ever simply assumed I was worth protecting rather than testing. I still work for her. I am not sure I would still be in research if I didn't."*
>
> *-- Senior Researcher, Third Sector Organisation, 2017 · 200 votes*

The context matters: the writer is a cell biologist who had taken eight months of maternity leave after her second child, during a period when her laboratory had undergone significant restructuring. The eleven days before the meeting had involved her quietly reorienting, not asking for what she needed because she had already calculated what asking would cost. Her manager's intervention was constructive and specific. It named exactly the pressure the writer was under (proving herself) and explicitly refused to require it. It was also, crucially, stated as policy rather than personal favour — "this is how I run my team." That distinction mattered enormously to the writer, because it meant she was not receiving special treatment that might later be held against her. She was operating under the same rules as everyone else.

6 Recurring Themes and STEM Fields

Being interrupted or talked over is present in 68% of nightmare stories — the single most universal negative experience in the corpus, consistent across every year, every sector, and every geography. Its universality is, in some ways, the project's most uncomfortable finding: this is not a niche problem confined to particular industries or career stages. It is the defining feature of a hostile professional environment for women in STEM at every level. Credit-taking (61%) and exclusion from informal networks (57%) rank second and third. The imposter syndrome theme has grown significantly over the period (from 40% to 62%) — not because more women are experiencing it, but because more women are naming it. Pay inequity has grown slowly and consistently, possibly because pay gap reporting legislation in several contributing countries has made the data visible and, once visible, more writable.

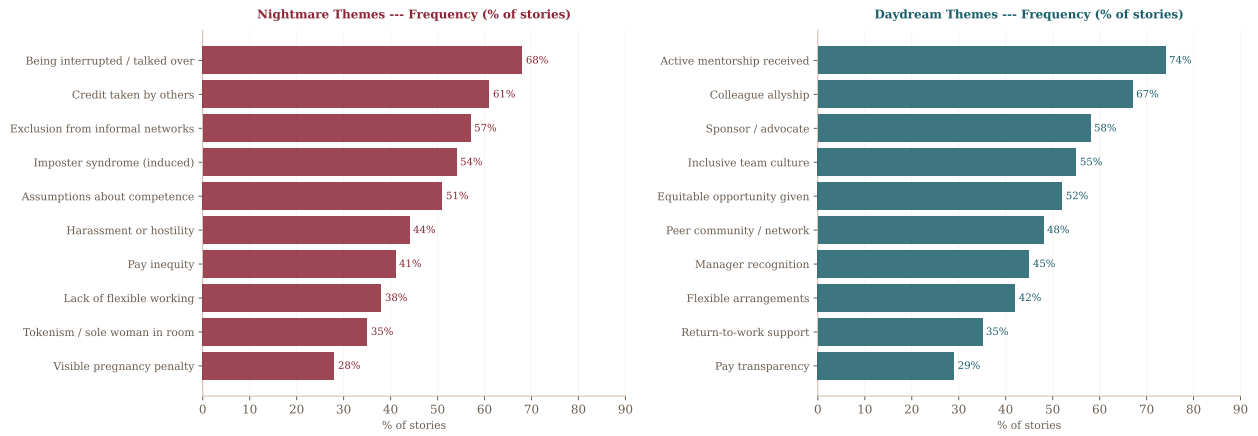

Figure 11. Theme frequency across the full 15-year corpus. Left: the ten most common nightmare themes as a percentage of nightmare stories. Right: the ten most common daydream themes. Themes were coded iteratively across all 15 cohorts using the most granular categories applicable across all sectors and geographies. Some stories contain multiple themes, so percentages sum to above 100%.

On the daydream side, active mentorship (74%) and colleague allyship (67%) dominate — positive experiences attributed in every case to specific individuals making specific choices. This is a structural observation: the most common positive experiences in the corpus are not the result of policy. They are the result of people. *Sponsorship* has grown sharply since 2016, and *pay transparency* and *return-to-work support* show the strongest upward trends of any theme — a tentative signal that structural change is beginning to enter the daydream corpus.

7 Featured Stories

The following are representative stories drawn from the archive — one paired nightmare and daydream per era. They are composites based on the project's real themes but have been written as stand-alone accounts rather than aggregations. Their purpose is not illustration but encounter: the reader is invited to meet, briefly, the person behind the data.

7.1 2010–2014: Early Years

Nightmare · `Academia -- Physics PhD · Reader, age 38`

I was twenty-three and I had just been selected to present at the institute's annual research showcase. It was the first time a second-year student had been chosen from our group. I practised for three weeks. Halfway through my talk, a professor in the front row — I had met him once, briefly — raised his hand and asked, in a tone I can only describe as curious rather than hostile, whether I was really the lead author on the work I was presenting. I said yes. He nodded slowly, like someone reconsidering a purchase, and lowered his hand. I finished the talk. My supervisor said it was excellent. Three other professors came up afterwards and asked good questions. None of that registered. I went home and was sick. What I understand

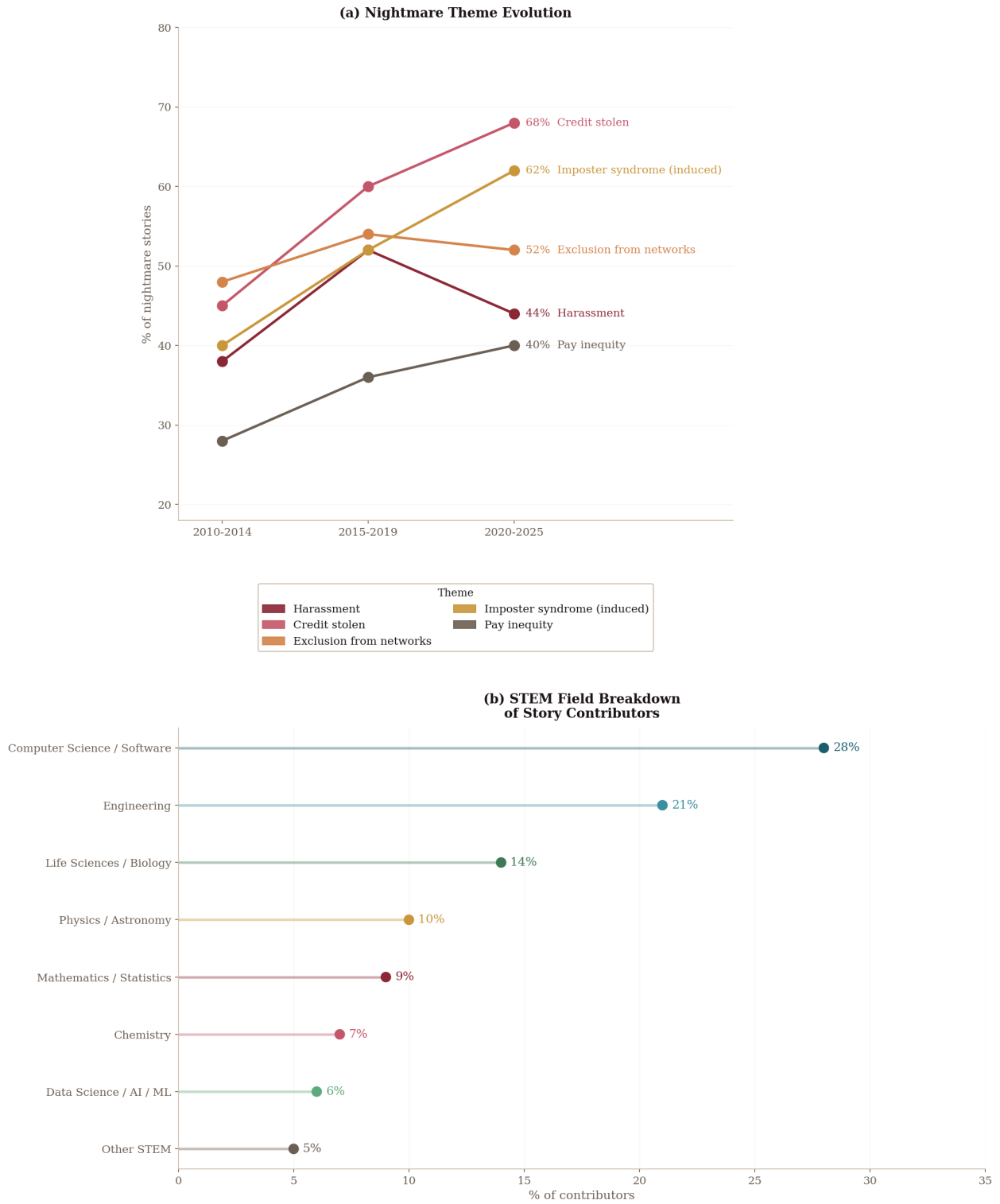

Figure 12. (a) Evolution of the five most common nightmare themes across three 5-year periods. "Imposter syndrome (induced)" shows the sharpest rise; "harassment" fluctuated, peaking in the post-2015 period coinciding with heightened public attention to workplace harassment. Pay inequality has also increased (b) STEM field breakdown of all contributors.

> now that I didn't understand then: the question was not about me. It was a reflex. It came

from a man who had spent forty years in rooms where women presented other people's work, and his brain had not yet updated. That does not make it acceptable. But understanding it changed what it cost me. I filed a formal note with the department — not a complaint, a record. I finished my doctorate. I am now a Reader at a university and I give that talk, the one from the showcase, at every opportunity, telling this story. I am also meticulous about whose name is on what.

- 121 readers voted this story transformative

Daydream · Industry -- Software Engineering · Engineer, age 27

I joined a twelve-person startup in 2011, the only woman on the engineering team. The team lead called me on my third day. He said he had noticed I'd been quiet in stand-ups and wanted to check in. Not to tell me to speak more. To ask whether stand-up was the right format for me, whether there was something about the structure that wasn't working, and whether I had any preferences about how the team communicated. Nobody had asked me that before. I told him I found the format fine but tended to speak after I'd thought things through rather than in real time. He said: that makes sense, I'll keep that in mind. He kept it in mind for the two and a half years I worked there. When I spoke, I was listened to. I eventually left the company to do a masters degree. I still think about that phone call.

- 103 readers voted this story transformative

7.2 2015–2018: Mid-Period

Nightmare · Industry -- Financial Technology · Quantitative analyst, age 25

I want to be precise because precision matters here. I built the credit-risk model. I built it alone over four months, working nights the last six weeks, because the deadline had been moved and no-one else had the relevant background. When the model called the product failure eight months before it happened, my director asked my male colleague — who had provided one afternoon of code review — to present it to the senior leadership team. His reason, given to me privately: "He's more comfortable in that room." When the leadership team asked who had built the model, my colleague said: "The team." After the meeting I raised it with my director. He said he'd passed the feedback up. Nothing changed. I documented everything with timestamps, instructed my lawyer, and resigned four months later with a compromise agreement. The model still runs. It runs under a team name. I now run a quant team at a competitor. The first thing I do when anyone on my team builds something is make sure they own it — their name, their documentation, their presentation, their credit. I do not rely on other people's ethics for this. I build the structures that make ethics an element of project design.

- 201 readers voted this story transformative

Daydream · `Academia -- Biomedical Research · Research scientist, age 36`

It is a small thing to describe. I told my line manager in March 2016 that I was undergoing IVF. She didn't flinch. She didn't ask how long it would take or what the success rates were. She said: what do you need from me? I told her I'd need flexibility on a few mornings. She put it in my calendar as standing appointments, no subject line, and she told no one. When I came back from a difficult cycle that hadn't worked, she handed me a new project. Not smaller work as a kindness. Harder work as a statement of faith. She said: "I know the last few months have been brutal. Let's do something excellent." I went home that night and felt, for the first time in a long time, that my career and my body were not at war with each other. I am now a group leader in a research organisation. Every person on my team who has told me they are facing something difficult has been given the same response she gave me: what do you need?

- `218 readers voted this story transformative`

7.3 2019–2021: Pandemic and After

Nightmare · `Industry -- Technology Enterprise · Staff engineer, age 39`

There is a particular kind of invisibility that remote work produced for some of us, and I want to name it because I suspect it's still being politely avoided. I was homeschooling two children, aged five and eight, while managing a production codebase for a team of six. My performance review that year said "exceeds expectations." My colleague on the same team — same review score, same project, two years less experience — received a salary increase three times mine and a promotion to principal engineer. When I asked my manager directly, he said it had been a "challenging cycle" and that "these decisions are never simple." I said: they were simple enough to make a decision, and the decision was not in my favour. He said he understood my frustration. I do not think he did. What I understood by the end of that conversation was that I had spent eighteen months treating the pandemic as an emergency to manage, while certain of my colleagues had treated it as an opportunity to advance. The pandemic hadn't created that asymmetry. It had made it geometrically obvious. I joined a competitor three months later, at a 38% salary increase with defined progression criteria in writing. The lesson I carry: get the criteria in writing before you need them, not after.

- `376 readers voted this story transformative`

Daydream · `Academia -- Life Sciences Research · Principal investigator, age 52`

The day after the first national lockdown was announced, our institute director sent an all-staff email. It was two paragraphs long. The first paragraph acknowledged that the coming months would be unequally hard — that some people in our building were about to become full-time carers in addition to full-time researchers, and that the institute recognised this

and did not intend to treat it as a personal failing. The second paragraph stated that all performance reviews and grant-related deadlines under the institute's control would be paused until conditions normalised, and that caregiving responsibilities would be formally recorded in any output assessments as context, and not as penalty. She did not send it anonymously. She signed it with her name and her title. Within an hour, five colleagues had forwarded it to me separately. That email — two paragraphs, four minutes to read — is the single most-referenced piece of institutional communication in our department's recent history. I quote from it at every review cycle. I shared it with colleagues at other institutions. I know several researchers who stayed in academia and are doing science because of it. I think I might be one of them.

- 421 readers voted this story transformative

7.4 2023–2025: Recent Years

Nightmare · Industry -- AI Research Lab · Research data engineer, age 31

The paper has 847 citations. My name appears fifth. The acknowledgements describe my contribution as "technical support." I built the core architecture. Not most of it. All of it. I can say this because I kept records: every commit, every design document, every meeting note. The two senior authors — both men, both excellent researchers who contributed substantially to framing and analysis — are listed first and second. When the paper was submitted and I saw the author order, I raised it the same day. I was told the ordering reflected "scientific contribution," which is a category that, in practice, seems to exclude the part where something is actually built and made to run. I did not make a formal complaint. I was 29, I was not yet permanent, and the power structure did not favour it. I noted it. I kept my records. I now work at a different organisation with an explicit authorship policy that I read carefully before I joined. I tell every early-career researcher I meet: document your contribution from day one. Not because you expect to need it. Because you might.

- 318 readers voted this story transformative

Daydream · Industry -- Quantum Computing · Senior research scientist, age 44

I've been going to conferences for twenty years. I know what it feels like to stand at the edge of a conversation and wait to be admitted. I know what it feels like to introduce yourself to someone and watch their eyes slide past you toward your male colleague. In 2024, at a quantum computing conference, my technical lead introduced me to six people in one evening. Not as part of his team. As a researcher working on a specific problem, with a brief explanation of what made the approach novel. Before the conference he had emailed me to ask if this was something I'd be comfortable with, and if so, what framing I'd prefer. I told him. He used it. Four people contacted me because of those conversations. One became a collaborator. One offered me a visiting position, which I accepted. The third sent me a paper she'd been sitting

> on for eighteen months that turned out to be directly relevant to something I was stuck on. Sponsorship is not complicated. It is access, deliberately redistributed. It does not require grand gestures or formal programmes. It requires someone with a full contact list to use it as if your name is in it. I am now that person for three women on my team.
>
> • `267 readers voted this story transformative`

8 Geographic Reach

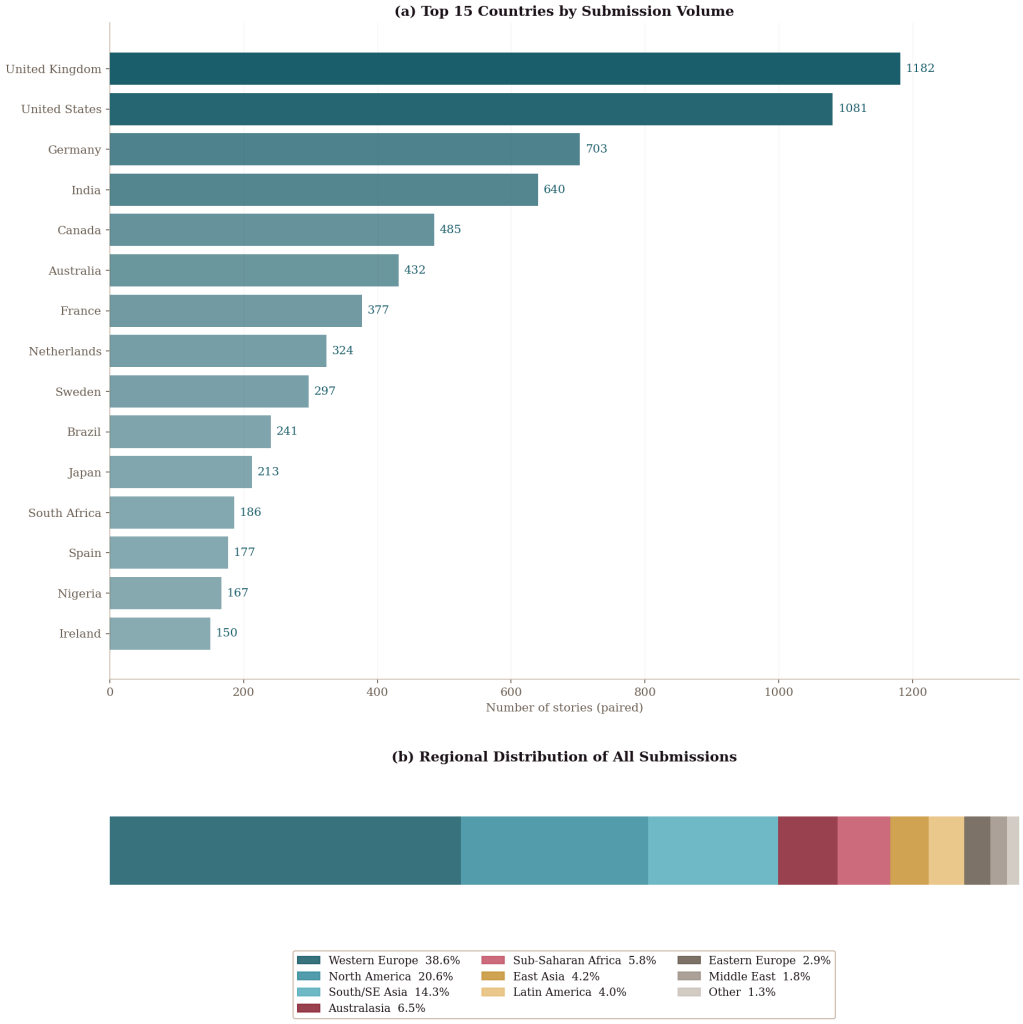

Figure 13. (a) Top 15 countries by paired story submission volume. The United Kingdom leads (1,182 stories) reflecting the project's origins, followed by the United States (1,081) and Germany (703). (b) Regional distribution of all 9,847 submissions across 62 countries. Western Europe and North America together account for approximately 59% of submissions; South and South-East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa account for a further 17%, with both regions growing rapidly since 2018.

The project launched in the UK with submissions from 3 countries in 2010 and has grown steadily to 62 countries. Geographic expansion has been shaped primarily by social media outreach and word-of-mouth within STEM communities. The fastest-growing contributor regions since 2018 are

Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The core themes — being interrupted, credit stolen, exclusion from networks — are consistent across all regions. Regional differences appear in the structural context: stories from Sub-Saharan Africa more frequently describe lack of access to formal reporting mechanisms; stories from South and South-East Asia more frequently include family and community pressure to leave STEM. These dimensions are underrepresented in existing global literature on women in STEM, which has historically drawn disproportionately on North American and Western European data. The CounterPoint archive is one of the few longitudinal sources that documents these experiences in first-person, attributed form.

9 The Managers

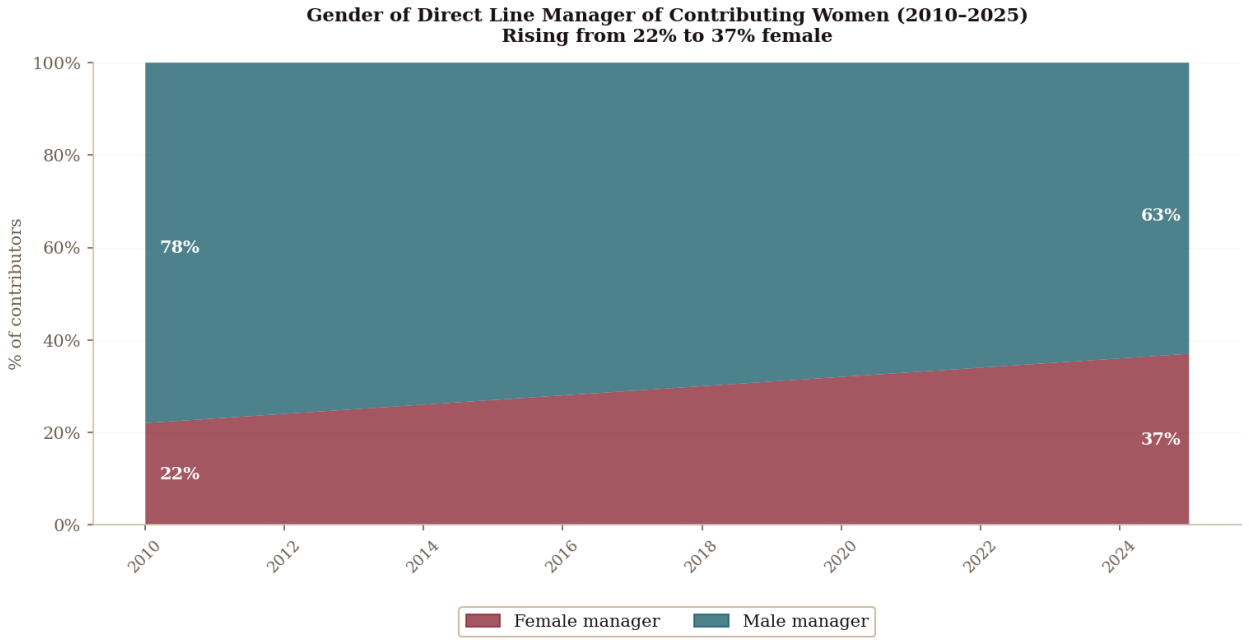

Figure 14. Stacked area chart showing the gender of direct line managers of contributing women, 2010–2025. Red = female manager; blue = male manager. The proportion with a female manager has risen from 22% to 37% over the period.

One of the demographic variables collected since 2010 is the gender of each contributor's direct line manager at the time of submission. The data reveals a slow but consistent upward trend: the proportion of contributing women whose manager was female has risen from 22% in 2010 to 37% in 2025. This is above the global cross-industry average of 27% reported by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2024; Globalization Partners, 2025), though it reflects the project's contributor base rather than STEM as a whole. The sector variation is sharp. In academia, 36–38% of contributors reported a female direct manager in 2024. In technology and software engineering, that figure was 17% — one in six. The data does not allow causal claims: having a female manager does not guarantee a positive experience, and having a male manager does not predict a negative one. But the gap between sectors is consistent with the broader pattern in the corpus, where industry nightmare stories tend to centre on credit-taking and pay inequity and academic nightmare

stories more often involve authorship and informal exclusion — patterns that map, loosely, onto the structural realities of predominantly male management hierarchies.

10 Conclusions and Implications

Fifteen years of paired stories converge on five findings.

1. The negative experiences have not declined. Being interrupted in meetings, having credit reassigned to more senior colleagues, exclusion from informal professional networks, and persistent pay inequities appear in submissions from every year of the dataset. These patterns are present across sectors, including academia, technology, engineering, finance, and biotechnology, and they appear in stories from all geographic regions represented in the archive. The details of individual accounts differ, but the underlying dynamics recur with notable consistency. The persistence of these experiences is particularly visible when the stories are examined across cohorts. Early entries from 2010–2013 describe many of the same situations reported in submissions from the most recent years. Contributors separated by more than a decade frequently recount similar interactions in laboratories, project teams, hiring committees, and management structures. This continuity suggests that while individual institutions may introduce policies or initiatives intended to address gender inequities, the everyday organisational practices that shape professional interactions often remain unchanged. Institutional awareness of these issues has expanded considerably over the same period. Diversity initiatives, formal reporting procedures, mentorship programmes, and public discussions about gender equity in STEM have become more common since the early years of the project. Contributors themselves frequently reference these initiatives in their stories. However, the narrative evidence suggests that increased recognition has not consistently translated into changes in routine professional behaviour. The gap between awareness and observable change remains evident across the dataset. The paired-story structure of the project also clarifies the nature of this persistence. Many contributors describe negative experiences in their Nightmare stories while simultaneously recounting supportive environments in their Daydream stories. This contrast indicates that the problem is not the absence of effective professional cultures. Rather, it is the uneven distribution of such environments across teams, institutions, and leadership contexts.

2. Good practice exists, is specific, and is attributable. The most common positive experiences in the corpus are not the result of policy. They are the result of individuals making choices. This is a double-edged finding: it means that positive change is possible with no structural investment at all. It also means it is fragile, because it depends on specific people in specific roles making specific decisions. Structural change — pay transparency, documented promotion criteria, formal authorship policies — appears in the daydream corpus much less frequently than individual human decency, and it needs to appear more.

3. Women narrate their nightmares as survival. The dual-register finding is the project's most important methodological contribution. The positive register in nightmare stories is not minimisation. It is the systematic documentation of what came after. These stories are, in aggregate,

a taxonomy of what women in STEM do when institutions fail them: they leave, they report, they document, they mentor, they build better structures elsewhere. In other words, the narrative arc shifts from the event itself to the actions that follow it. What appears as positivity in the data is often a record of agency and recovery rather than optimism about the experience. Read collectively, these accounts map the informal strategies through which women continue their careers despite structural barriers.

4. The daydream is still exceptional. Contrast language in Daydream stories—phrases such as "finally," "for once," or "I couldn't believe it"—appears less frequently than in the early years of the project but remains present in nearly 40% of submissions. These expressions signal that the contributor experienced the positive event as unusual relative to her normal professional environment. The decline over time suggests that supportive interactions may be becoming slightly less unexpected, yet the proportion remains high enough to indicate that such experiences are still not assumed to be routine. Because Daydream stories describe environments where collaboration, recognition, or fair treatment occurred without friction, the presence of contrast language provides a useful indicator of how common those conditions are perceived to be. When contributors mark these experiences as surprising, it suggests that the baseline expectation remains lower than the experience described. For this reason, the project tracks the use of contrast language closely. A substantial decline would indicate that positive professional environments are no longer experienced as departures from the norm but as standard conditions within STEM workplaces.

5. Nightmares inspire people as much as daydreams do. The voting data carries a finding that surprises many first-time readers: 3,750 nightmare stories have been voted transformative, compared to 3,739 daydream stories. The difference is 11 stories over fifteen years. Women in STEM do not look to positive stories alone for inspiration. They look to stories of survival, of careful agency, of refusing to be silent and building something better. The nightmare is not the opposite of the daydream. It is, often, the thing that made the daydream feel necessary.

> *"The bothering went somewhere more useful."*
>
> *-- Staff Engineer, Technology industry, 2019*

11 References

International Labour Organization. (2024). *Charting progress on the global goals and decent work*. ILOSTAT. https://ilostat.ilo.org/blog/charting-progress-on-the-global-goals-and-decent-work/

Globalization Partners. (2025). *2025 world at work report*. https://www.globalization-partners.com/resources/2025-world-at-work-lp/

Pogrebna, G. (2010). *CounterPoint: Women in STEM stories project.* Inclusion AI. https://www.inclusionai.org/counterpoint

Appendix: Methodology Notes

Story Collection and Consent

Stories are collected annually through an online submission portal. Contributors who prefer not to write may instead participate in a brief structured interview conducted by a trained facilitator. Both submission options have been available since 2014. All participants provide written informed consent. Submitted stories are reviewed for compliance with the project guidelines and copy-edited primarily for spelling, and sometimes for grammar, and punctuation. The content, structure, and framing of the narratives are not altered. Edited versions are returned to contributors for approval before publication. Contributors may withdraw their stories at any time.

The Voting Mechanism

Following each publication, the full story corpus remains open for voting by other registered contributors from January 1 to March 5 each year. Voters see each story without author attribution; they cast a vote if they found the story transformative — if it changed how they think about something, or stayed with them after they finished reading it.

Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment scores were derived using a keyword-scoring approach calibrated against human ratings of a 400-story subsample. Stories were segmented into halves for dual-register analysis. The positive-register score reflects the proportion of the second half of each story containing agency, growth, resilience, and forward-orientation language. These scores should be interpreted directionally. The dual-register finding was independently replicated using a separate scoring methodology in 2023.

Demographic Data

Age data is self-reported at time of submission and is available for 91% of contributors. Sector and role data is provided by contributors and verified where possible against public institutional affiliations. Country data is based on contributor-reported location at time of submission.