

Disparities in work-integrated learning experiences for students who present as women: an international study of biases, barriers, and challenges

Women's
experiences in
WIL

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Abstract

Purpose – This study identifies gendered disparities among women students participating in work-integrated learning and explores the effects of the disparities on their perceptions on perceived opportunities, competencies, sense of belonging, and professional identity.

Design/methodology/approach – A series of semi-structured focus groups were run with 59 participants at six higher education institutions in four countries (Australia, Canada, Sweden, United Kingdom). All focus groups were designed with the same questions and formatting.

Findings – Thematic analysis of the transcripts revealed two overarching themes, namely perceptions of self and interactions with others in work placements. Theme categories included awareness of self-presentation, sense of autonomy, perceived Allies, emotional labour, barriers to opportunity, sense of belonging, intersections of identity, and validation value.

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Originality/value – This study fills an important gap in the international literature about gendered experiences in WIL and highlights inequalities that women experience while on work placements.

Keywords Gender bias, Gendered competencies, Professional identity, Sense of belonging, Self-efficacy, Sense of self, Work-integrated learning, Women, International study

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Students who participate in work-integrated learning (WIL) programs – such as cooperative education or internships – in higher education (HE) – are often better prepared for work post-graduation compared to students who do not receive this practical experience (Rowe and Drysdale, 2020; Rowe, 2017).

The educational value of WIL is well documented and has been a critical part of HE programs for many years (Rowe, 2017). Although there are many forms of WIL around the globe, they all involve the integration of academic learning (theory) and workplace learning (practice). The acquisition of the essential skills and qualifications needed by new graduates and required by industry (Campbell and Price, 2016), lead to enhanced employability (Drysdale *et al.*, 2009) and success in the labour market after graduation (Rowe and Drysdale, 2020; Jackson, 2018). WIL programs have also been argued to be an ideal site for students to develop professionalism (Trede and Flowers, 2020; Zegwaard *et al.*, 2017) and a sense of self within the workplace (Smith *et al.*, 2019; Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021).

However, the quality of student experiences may not be the same due to bias and discrimination within and across work contexts and WIL opportunities may not be accessible to all (Hora *et al.*, 2021). Disparities, such as those pertaining to gender (Acker, 2012; Bowen, 2019), could potentially impact opportunities for growth and skill development, denying access to the professed benefits of WIL programs and hence affecting the transition to work after graduation. Numerous studies have examined the merits of WIL, as referenced above, however few have explicitly examined gender bias, gender barriers, and the challenges that some genders experience, even though diversity, equity, and inclusion are priorities in HE. Exploring gendered experiences of WIL is needed to better understand the impact of these experiences. While gender is not the only bias experienced in workplaces, this study provides insight for understanding gender disparities across global contexts. Specifically, we aim to build awareness about the scope of the disparities students who identify as women face.

Gendered competencies, disparities, and WIL

Culturally, ascribed meanings of gender influence different facets of identity (Epstein, 1988), which includes professional identity (Zegwaard *et al.*, 2017). Gender, as described by Acker (1990), “is implicated in the fundamental, ongoing processes of creating and conceptualizing social structures” (p. 147). However, the consequences of gendering social structures are not always explicit. Organizations and institutions that do not attend to surfacing systemic bias such as gendering competency, undermine the desire for equity (Acker, 2012). Often, gender bias within organizations becomes a subverted and invisible form of control through perpetuated assumptions regarding expectations, codes of conduct, and organizational procedures designed with the ideal white man as the foundation (Acker, 1990; Amis *et al.*, 2020). The design of protocols, organizational beliefs, rhetoric, language, and day-to-day operations and interpretations of an individual’s skills and competencies facilitate and perpetuate invisible gender bias. Gendered organizations are defined by patriarchal principles that are so embedded, they are accepted as neutral and normal – but they are not, as is often assumed. These organizations subversively support a culture of gender bias, reinforcing assumptions, undermining and denying existing inequalities, and leading to discrepancies in individual experiences, opportunities, and recognitions within the organization (Acker, 2012; Amis *et al.*, 2020). Some inequities may be unconscious as highlighted by Hora *et al.* (2021),

through the deficit model of assessing competencies, focusing on what students lack, rather than what they bring to the placement. For the purposes of this paper, gendered organizations may be workplaces, cultural, and/or social collectives, agencies, NGOs, and educational institutions. The substructures of gendered organizations facilitate the gendering of competencies. The formation of policies, procedures, and hierarchies traditionally based on the ideal man, skew narratives about aptitude and technological competency. Cultural constructions that presume men have natural aptitude and women just work hard (Ottemo *et al.*, 2021) continue to perpetuate the traditionally patriarchal notion that men are good and women are nice (Kohlberg, 1966). The long tradition of gendered attitudes toward competency in the sciences is often reinforced by aligning “the mind and reason with maleness” and “the body and emotionality/irrationality” with “femaleness” (Ottemo *et al.*, 2021, p. 2). The problem however is that discourses of competence are also tied to recognition and opportunity (Acker, 2012). When competency is constructed based on the ideal man, so is opportunity – a problem that impacts gender disparities in both education (Cheraghi and Schött, 2015) and work (Andersen and Bloksgaard, 2008). Although gender biases are ubiquitous in both education and the workplace, they are more often normalized in workplaces with little chance of being recognized in ways that affect change (Acker, 2012).

Education and STEM literature further posit that science and technology fields are perceived as “symbolically masculine” and reject outward markings of femininity (Francis *et al.*, 2017, p. 1099). Science disciplines, which claim to be *gender-neutral*, project an outward *serious* appearance through lab equipment and attire, denying feminine markings. Femininity implies being soft (signifying irrationality) and lacking the seriousness, rationality, and reasoning embodied by men and required by science (Ottemo *et al.*, 2021). Neutrality leads to invisibility and invisibility leads to a potentially consequential gap in providing equitable experiences that are counter productive to HE programs such as WIL.

Given how success is conceptualized according to man-centred reasoning, it is noteworthy that women are often punished for stepping across gendered boundaries when they assume masculine characteristics to achieve success. For instance, women leaders demonstrating authoritarian leadership styles may be characterized as aggressive, as their behaviors are incongruent with stereotypically feminine characteristics (Rhee and Sigler, 2015). However, if their leadership is more participatory, they may be seen as weak, thus undermining their leadership abilities. In some cases, women may adopt the strategies or behaviors of their male colleagues to better compete in an inequitable workplace (Martin and Barnard, 2013).

Acker's (2012) theories regarding gendered organizations and Ottemo *et al.*'s (2021) and Francis *et al.*'s (2017) theories regarding gendered competencies, underpin workplace cultures that engage with WIL programs. These assumptions, perspectives, biases, and cultural attitudes about work are potentially woven into students' WIL placement experiences, yet the disparities they may cause have not garnered much attention within WIL research. Although Hora *et al.* (2021) studied disparities regarding college students' opportunities for *acquiring* internships, including the intersections of race and economic circumstances that impact the social and cultural capital of students; the impact of gender disparities specifically *during* students' placements are under-researched. Those studies that do incorporate gender as a variable, usually involve comparisons related to skill acquisition, personal attributes, and performance (Chopra *et al.*, 2020; Drysdale *et al.*, 2016).

To better understand the gaps within the WIL literature, Bowen (2019) conducted a pilot study focusing on the perceptions of WIL students on the challenges they faced during their work placements. The study was conducted with a small sample at only one institution and not generalizable beyond that context. However, recommendations for further research included examining how gendered substructures and the gendering of competencies impact the equitable assessment of women's capabilities, and the impact of these substructures on how women develop social and emotional intelligence within the workplace. These

recommendations and expanding upon Bowen's (2019) work to include international contexts, prompted this larger global study. WIL has been adopted by HE institutions worldwide as a strategy for helping students transition from academic studies to practical work settings [1]. Broadening the scope of research on the challenges and disparities that are compounded by gender bias within WIL placements across a range of HE institutions globally will heighten understanding about the role HE must play in affecting change and facilitating positive experiences and outcomes during placement. Experiencing gender bias during WIL placements can negatively impact not only learning and skill acquisition, but also students' professional identity and self-efficacy (Bowen, 2019). Identifying the common challenges that women face across contexts and programs on an international level will help with designing overarching strategies for new curricula, strategies for strengthening industry-learning partnerships, and thus improve WIL programs for all.

Purpose of study

The purpose of the study was to identify perceived disparities in the WIL experiences of students who identified as women and to analyze the impact of those disparities on perceived opportunities, competencies, sense of belonging, and personal identity. Additionally, we sought to identify the recurring themes across multiple global locations and by extension the thematic similarities between these countries. We addressed the following research questions.

- RQ1. What perceived biases, barriers, and challenges do students who identify as women face in WIL placements?
- RQ2. What is the impact of these obstacles on students' perceptions of how their skills and competencies are assessed and valued?

Methodology

To capture rich narratives of participants' perceptions and experiences, the same qualitative design was used by six institutions in four countries (Australia [AU], Canada [CA1, CA2], Sweden [SE], United Kingdom [UK1, UK2]). Specifically, fifteen focus groups were held across the institutions as a means to gain insight into participants' experiences of a shared phenomenon – in this case, WIL placements among student populations who identified as women (Bloor *et al.*, 2001; Krueger, 1993). To promote participant engagement in the focus groups, especially given the potential for sensitive personal experiences to be shared by participants, the researchers purposely organized them to be small – on average, fewer than six participants in each (Morgan, 1998, 2019). Prior to the start of recruitment ethical approval was secured at all six institutions.

All institutions recruited self-selected participants by setting up information booths on campuses, and distributing posters that described the study. The researchers also sent direct emails to WIL advisors at all institutions, so information about the study could be shared with all WIL students. Individuals who were interested in participating either approached the researchers at the information booths or sent them an email, after which they were given (or sent) an information letter outlining the purpose of the study, participant roles, and ethical clearance. Before the focus groups began, all participants consented to the study and to be audio recorded. The audio recordings were transcribed for analysis. Prior to asking questions, the facilitators started by introducing themselves and their roles related to guiding the discussion. Each facilitator also described the purpose and format of a focus group. Participants were reassured that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions and that they could refrain from answering any questions. All focus group facilitators used the exact same scripts, protocols, and semi-structured format. All sessions lasted between 90 and 120 min. Focus group questions were open-ended, which prevented facilitators from leading

participants to specific answers and allowed for participant elaboration about their perceptions and experiences. Questions focused on topics such as experiences where feedback was given during WIL placements, how those experiences made participants feel, and participants' perceptions of being supported during their placements. Two example questions were: (1) Can you think of a time when you received negative feedback for something you thought you did well at your work placements? (2) What are the obstacles that prevent you from taking initiative, speaking up and/or proposing new ideas?

The criterion for participation was completion of at least one WIL placement. The fifteen focus groups totaled 59 participants including 48 women, 10 men, and 1 non-binary (self-identified). For this paper, only the perceptions of those who identified and presented as women in the workplace were analyzed [2]. This included the non-binary participant, who stated they presented as a woman.

Thematic analysis was selected to analyze the content of the focus groups and identify common patterns in the responses (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Four members of the research team followed the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), highlighting key words and narratives in the transcripts. The team then created an excel spreadsheet to document and organize all themes across all focus groups with supporting quotes to gain more intimate knowledge of the data. To ensure inter-rater reliability, initial coding was completed independently, followed by comparative thematic analysis to establish agreement regarding the final themes and categories and the consistent ways in which each theme emerged across all institutions.

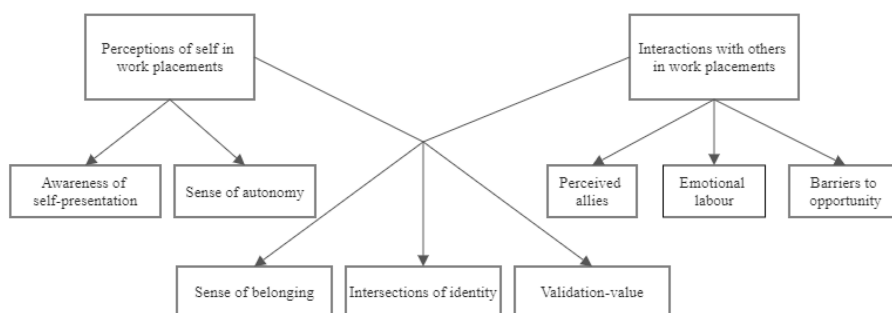
As asserted by Braun and Clarke (2006), themes and categories are not strictly derived from any quantitative properties of the data, but rather are a function of how they address the research questions. During discussion, the four coders also made note of any relationships among the themes and categories.

Findings

Two overarching themes were identified from the transcripts: (1) perceptions of self in work placements, and (2) interactions with others in work placements. The concept (Figure 1) highlights five categories identified within the two themes as well as three categories relating to both themes. The themes and categories are operationalized with sample comments provided. The concept map highlights how the themes overlapped in ways that could impact how the participants formed their identity within the workplace.

Perceptions of self in work placements

Awareness of self-presentation. Awareness of self-presentation addresses the ways in which students see and understand how they present themselves within the workplace, how they



Source(s): Figure by authors

Figure 1.
Women's experiences
in WIL – themes,
categories, and sub-
themes

want to appear as a professional and contributor; and their perceptions of the impressions others have of them (i.e. a form of looking glass way of reflecting on the self and their identity, [Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2016](#)). Awareness of self-presentation developed through introspection, reflection, and interacting with others. It emerged as something that could be both internal to participants as they reflected on their positioning, behaviors, and assumptions about social constructions around gender, and external – prompted by observations and comments made by others within the workplace. Awareness of self-presentation was affected by participants' assumptions of socially constructed perceptions including assumptions that others perceived their competencies as lesser than those of men, fear of rejection (risk aversion), and managing their own assumptions about being “an intern” (i.e. imposter syndrome).

Sense of autonomy. For sense of autonomy (i.e. independence to work freely), comments focused on confidence to complete the jobs assigned and ability to take initiative in meetings and projects. See [Table 1](#) for example comments.

Interactions with others in work placements

Perceived allies. Participants mentioned interactions with people they might have expected to be workplace allies including co-workers, team members, and staff in supporting roles. In some cases, these potential allies turned out to be unhelpful: disparaging, undermining and dismissive. For example, it was mentioned that other women were a source of undermining comments, demonstrating unhelpful power dynamics rather than a mentoring approach ([Table 2](#)). These observations of women as more adversaries than allies, although widespread, was not universal and women had also acted as positive role models, asking how work was going and finding time to chat.

Emotional labour. Emotional labour, as originally defined by [Hochschild \(1983\)](#), captures how participants manage and regulate their emotional displays at work for the purpose of strengthening or maintaining workplace relationships. Findings revealed two sub-categories of emotional labour: surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting was characterized by participants' accounts of suppressing their genuine emotions to maintain the professional, emotionally flat demeanor expected of them within the workplace. Deep acting was demonstrated by participants' accounts of attempting to change their genuine emotions so that their displays at work were consistent with what was expected of them. See [Table 2](#) for example comments.

Barriers to opportunity. Findings also revealed the category of barriers to opportunity, which describes the barriers that participants perceived around opportunities in the workplace. Sub-categories here included barriers caused by perceived and felt stigma, the tasks that were assigned to participants as part of their work, and the lack of learning-based opportunities in the workplace (see [Table 2](#)).

Overlapping perceptions of self and others in work placements

Three categories were found to overlap with both themes: sense of belonging, intersections of identity, and validation and value. Each is presented below.

Sense of belonging. Sense of belonging (fitting in and feeling part of a group) within the workplace influenced how participants felt about their WIL placement. Valued competence and social acceptance were found to lead to a sense of belonging, but not universally encountered by the women in this study. Participants encountered challenges affecting belonging when in gender imbalanced workplaces (“patriarchal”) and in workplaces where they might be the only intern, a role that was not always well understood by team members, leading at times to exclusion and hampering sense of belonging. Lack of guidance, lack of feedback, lack of interactions affected how competent the interns felt, reducing their sense of belonging. [Table 3](#) provides participant comments reflecting this theme.

Category
Sub-category

*Awareness of self-
presentation*

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| Internal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I tried to hide it [pleasure at being told they did a good job]. . . I deal with issues with my identity, um, I’m . . . I would say that I am gender fluid, in a way. . . . when I walk into the room I do feel, like, okay, like, where am I, like . . . How am I presenting myself? Am I presenting myself enough as myself?” (CA1) ● “I’m reluctant to take the lead or to speak up. . . which could hinder the fact that maybe they don’t see me in that role.” (CA1) ● “I dress more professional . . . If I dress or even put a little makeup on . . . I can make a better impression.” (SE) ● “Although they have exactly equal abilities, a lot of times women are just seen as emotional . . . just viewed as not being able to handle as much.” (CA1) |
| External | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I wish the people I work with could see that I am just as good as the guys . . . no actually better!” (UK2) ● “They were just saying that the only reason I was there was because I’m a woman . . . Nothing to do with work or performance from me.” (UK1) ● “I would end up questioning my own skills whenever people told me ‘oh you’re only here because you’re a girl rather than because you are capable of passing these interviews.’” (UK1) ● “They both stood in front of me and made a joke that I didn’t understand . . . they really enjoyed that I didn’t understand. I felt a bit foolish that I was looked down at, that you’re the pretty girl . . . we don’t really take you serious.” (CA2) |
| Risk aversion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “You cannot show any type of weakness when you talk to people because they will use this against you.” (UK1) |

Sense of autonomy

- | | |
|------------|---|
| Confidence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I feel insecure about my work in general, I feel it wouldn’t matter if I was here or not.” (CA2) ● “If I felt I was comfortable enough to be expressing my ideas in a safe environment where I’m being justified for what I’m saying . . . then I would be more willing to share what I have to say.” (CA2) ● “I just really didn’t have the confidence to be like ‘I’m working on this, can I get a bit of feedback . . . am I doing this right?’” (UK1) |
| Initiative | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I don’t think I necessarily advocate for myself . . . I’m like, they probably know better, or they have more experience and that’s why I will always take their opinion over mine.” (CA1) ● “If you’re not even looking at me, how am I supposed to have a conversation with you and tell you what I think?” (CA2) ● “I find that repeatedly knocking down [my] ideas . . . on the third or fourth time, I’m gonna be like, ‘ok, you guys do it, it’s fine, whatever.’” (CA2) ● “That you always need to ask for permission . . . sometimes, I would like to work more independently.” (SE) |

Note(s): AU – Australia, CA1 – Canada Institution 1, CA2 – Canada Institution 2, SE – Sweden, UK1 – United Kingdom Institution 1, UK2 – United Kingdom Institution 2

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 1.
Categories, sub-
categories, and
comments of
perceptions of self in
work placements

Intersections of identity. The category of intersections of identity represented perceptions and lived experiences regarding the different interdependent facets of participants’ identity, such as race, sexuality, as well as gender. The comments in support of this category focused predominantly on visible identities and how these impacted their experiences in the workplace. The one invisible identity that was mentioned was sexuality. See [Table 3](#) for comments.

Validation-value. This theme emerged as both prominent and complex intertwined with participants’ perceptions of self and belonging within their work placements. Validation can

 Category
 Sub-category

Perceived Allies

Undermining/hostile

- “[My boss] would come to my desk and she was like, what are you doing? You are doing it wrong. It just felt very overwhelming and negative.” (CA1)
- “There are . . . power dynamics in play. The boss, who is female, would belittle me . . . just to show that she wasn’t listening to the intern” (CA2)

Othering

- “It’s the women I’ve had the issues with, some people (and it really winds me up) refer to me as ‘well you’re not really staff” (UK1)
- “I would always try to explain things as best as I could . . . And she would get really mad, like, ‘oh, why are you trying to dumb it down for me, I understand, trust me.” (CA2)

Emotional Labour

Surface acting

- “I don’t want to create any animosity within the project . . . So rather just put the feelings aside, and let’s just get the job done.” (SE)
- “They attack you to make you feel little [in front of your team] because you cannot protect yourself.” (UK1)
- “The feedback he gives me, it’s stuff that he asked me to do, so I don’t know what to do. Should I just not listen to you and do something else or still follow what you’re doing but make it look not nice? . . . So, I stay silent.” (CA1)

Deep acting

- “I guess, we [the women’s team] notice it [unfair treatment between women’s team and men’s team], and we try to bring it to our coaches . . . otherwise, just accept it.” (SE)

Barriers to Opportunity

Stigma

- “I’m going to deal with people who . . . aren’t doing on purpose or maliciously, they’re definitely going to double guess my work or double guess my competence level because I am female.” (CA1)
- “I’ve had a lot of negative experiences with males . . . If you were to say something, they would just shut you up right away.” (CA1)
- “He actually said that maybe it’s because you’re a girl.” (UK1)
- “. . . you’ll get into the programme because they have quotas for women . . . or doubting your skills because you got an easier interview because you got ‘the girls interview.” (UK1)

Task assignment

- “I need to go to his (office) door, and turn on the lights. And for me that’s kind of irritating because yes, I’m an intern and I can do simple things. But something like opening a person’s door feels very belittling.” (CA1)
- “. . . but then I was given more a design element. Like, fix this, make this look pretty . . . But why can’t I work with the two other guys that are actually building something beneficial?” (CA1)
- “They try to use you for dirty work . . . the horrible little things . . . the repetitive tasks.” (UK1)

Learning-based opportunity

- “. . . at my last job there was like a coding aspect to it and I don’t know anything about that but I could’ve learned if the person wanted to give me some resources or the time in office to let me learn” (CA2)
- “. . . not having someone to be there – a mentor or someone to teach me . . . just not being able to contact someone or having to wait for them.” (AU)
- “Just communicate with me. Tell me what I did wrong so I can learn.” (CA1)

Note(s): AU – Australia, CA1 – Canada Institution 1, CA2 – Canada Institution 2, SE – Sweden, UK1 – United Kingdom Institution 1, UK2 – United Kingdom Institution 2

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 2.
 Categories, sub-
 categories, and
 participant comments
 of interactions with
 others in work
 placements

confirm perceptions of self in terms of competency, capability, and value to others and to the organization (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016). Participants’ descriptions of validation presented as the recognition of competencies received as positive feedback on tasks leading to inclusion within the workplace. The affirming nature of validation and the importance of having

Category
Sub-category

Sense of belonging
Valued competence

- “It’s very difficult to get (guidance) from someone who doesn’t respond in time when things need to be done, deadlines need to be met. . . . it makes you feel like you’re incompetent” (SE)

Social Acceptance

- “My position was recognized on the team; it wasn’t just (student’s name) is the intern, it was, (student)’s the social media manager” (AU)

- “. . . to feel accepted by your staff and included by the team, you feel more a part and included within the community”, (CA1)

- “The environment they create is not acknowledging me. Eye contact is a big one too, not looking my way or not interacting with me, using my name or anything”, (CA1)

- “I’d been told I was permanent staff . . . then the email was for the team then in brackets except for [my name] through a team email” (UK1)

Intersections of identity

- “I wish that whenever there was anything to do with gender and diversity that the team wouldn’t expect me to be the spokesperson for all women all of the time.” (UK1)

- “I was in a corporation where everyone was white and male . . . And then them not taking me seriously because I was 19 years old and this small, Asian woman . . . them not taking me seriously it really affected how then I couldn’t do my job that I was hired to do, so that was a struggle . . .” (CA2)

- “I think it’s fear of the backlash that I might receive. Fear of burning bridges, closing opportunities. Fear of being observed in a way that I’m probably an angry black woman . . . fear of my sexual identity or my gender being used against me. Or the fact that I’m a female. Oh, you’re hormonal. You’re always emotional.” (SE)

- “Everybody else was much older than me. I think because of that, and also because I am Muslim . . . and I wear a hijab, I think also that was intimidating for me because I felt that some teachers were like, okay looks like . . . someone you don’t see a lot in schools.” (CA1)

- “I’ve always been the young woman coming in. And I always felt like they question my competence, in a way.” (SE)

Validation/Value
Recognition of
competencies

- “She positively reacted to that and that was really reaffirming for me because it was a note that I did well in the organization. It just made me feel really good about that.” (CA1)

- “Feedback came in the form of an email and I was very happy . . . I felt reassured that I’m probably doing something that’s up to my capabilities” (AU)

- “It makes me feel a bit more competent in the field that I’m working within.” (SE)

- “. . . any kind of feedback – made me feel good and appreciated in my workplace.” (CA2)

Lack of validation

- “Either they don’t care enough to give me feedback or the tasks actually aren’t that important that they don’t feel like I can improve.” (CA1)

- “It makes you feel like you’re incompetent, and you don’t know what you’re doing . . . it’s also alienating.” (SE)

- “I was able to come up with my own strategy, which they were happy with at the end of the day; which is all that matters I suppose.” (AU)

Lack of authenticity

- “I feel like they are sometimes being nice to me and I don’t really know what they really think of me, like my work.” (UK2)

- “I feel like they give it [feedback] straight to the guys but are more careful with us [women] . . . because we are girls and stuff.” (UK2)

- “I finished a project and the guy was just like, “nice.” . . . I was more impressed with myself, so I didn’t really put that much feeling into his words.” (CA2)

- “This is what I’m good at . . . they can say whatever they want, but I know that I know my things.” (SE)

Note(s): AU – Australia, CA1 – Canada Institution 1, CA2 – Canada Institution 2, SE – Sweden, UK1 – United Kingdom Institution 1, UK2 – United Kingdom Institution 2

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 3.
Categories, sub-
categories, and
participant comments
of overlapping
interactions of self and
others in work
placements

coworkers and supervisors confirm skills, competencies, and contributions within the workplace were mentioned. Participants used external validation by supervisors and co-workers as a barometer of *how well* they were doing. Lack of validation impacted participants' understanding of their competencies and how others saw them as capable of doing the job. In addition, some participants seemed doubtful as to the authenticity of the validation they received and wondered if the individual offering what appeared to be positive feedback was genuine. [Table 3](#) highlights relevant comments.

Discussion

One of the aims of WIL is to provide an environment in which students can gain work experience and develop their professional identity. The women in this study raised many concerns about the workplaces they encountered and experiences that might discourage them from seeking employment in the same industry sector. The findings and comments highlight two overarching themes, each of which included at least two related categories. In relation to perceptions of self in work placements, comments spoke to awareness of self presentation (internal and external awareness, risk aversion) and sense of autonomy (confidence, initiative). Women discussed perceived allies (undermining/hostile interactions, othering); emotional labour (surface and deep acting); and barriers to opportunity (stigma, task assignment, learning-based opportunities) in relation to interactions with others in their work placements. The final theme touched upon the overlap that existed between the perceptions of self and others in work placements, including sense of belonging (valued competence, social acceptance), intersections of identity, and validation-value (recognition of competencies, lack of validation, lack of authenticity).

The following discussion centres around four overlapping areas: Women's attempts to "fit in" through the agency of self-presentation; interactions with others that influenced perceptions of fitting in; intersections of identity; and concerns about the disparities within different WIL experiences.

Perceptions of self: putting in the work to belong

Belonging, as defined by [Baumeister and Leary \(1995\)](#), is a fundamental human need found across all cultures and contexts, including in work environments. A lack of belongingness can have negative consequences on an individual's well-being, performance, and identity ([Baumeister and Leary, 1995](#)). Women in this study were eager to belong in their WIL workplaces, evidenced by their efforts to comply with their workplace cultures. They demonstrated agency by trying to fit in via repression of emotion (seen as a feminine characteristic, i.e. "women are just seen as emotional"). This phenomenon was observed within the comments, such as the one woman who described engaging in surface acting when they were being belittled by co-workers but could not defend themselves without making the situation worse. Women voiced being afraid that "[they] don't really take you serious[ly]." They also showed care in the way they dressed and presented themselves: "[if I] put a little makeup on, then I'll look a little bit more put together . . . make a better impression". Through a desire for social acceptance, they tried to manage others' perceptions so their presentation of self aligned with the existing culture and expectations, or the consequences could be "they will use this against you". That is to say, the women sought social acceptance, a key aspect of belonging ([Knehta et al., 2020](#)). Those women who achieved a sense of belonging within their WIL placements exhibited thriving – they felt valued and were highly motivated to succeed. In comparison, those who did not feel belongingness struggled to the extent that they experienced self-doubt about their competency and identity, and some lost all motivation, or they left emotionally, rendering themselves invisible, like the woman who said "I stay silent".

Ibarra and Petriglieri (2016) identified acquisitive and protective strategies relating to women transitioning to new roles. They suggested that women in new roles were less likely to imagine a future self when they protected an existing sense of self, instead of seeking to acquire social acceptance through adapting their self-presentation, a process they called *acquisition*. Women in this study were conscious of adapting their self-presentation in order to construct a new sense of self in their role, with the aim of being accepted culturally and socially evidenced by “Am I presenting myself enough as myself?”. Where workplace practice or culture was at odds to acquiring social acceptance, women in this study did not experience a sense of belonging. This suggests that women undertaking work experiences are having to adapt to workplaces, rather than joining inclusive teams where diversity is celebrated, confirming that Acker’s (2012) findings about the impact of gendered organizations are still relevant.

Interactions with others and lost opportunities for feedback

In addition to social acceptance, valued competence influences a sense of belonging (Knehta *et al.*, 2020). Many women shrugged off positive feedback about their work, believing themselves to having been treated more generously than their men counterparts out of some sort of misguided chivalry such as with this comment, “they are more careful with us . . . because we are girls”. Studies have shown that women can be treated more benignly, for example where women were under-performing (Jampol and Zayas, 2021). There is no evidence that women in this study were considered to be under-performing, instead this was a phenomenon of unconscious bias, hampering women’s efforts to be taken seriously in the workplace evidenced by the comment “I don’t really know what they really think of me”. Inauthentic validation can be perceived as condescending and patronizing which only perpetuates attitudes such as “I feel like they are sometimes being nice to me” or “they can say whatever they want” which can also signal a sense of giving up. One way of breaking that cycle when educating future employers (men and women) would be by critically analyzing work culture and an individual’s potential for growth, for example through a widespread increase in mentoring for students and graduates rather than a situation where “it’s very difficult to get (guidance) from someone who doesn’t respond in time.” or “not having someone to be there – a mentor or someone to teach me.”

Feedback was also sought but not received at times, and in rare cases women thought they had been harshly judged as one commented, “they don’t feel like I can improve”. Failing to identify competence is a lost opportunity for WIL programmes, where an early sense of belonging could sustain motivation towards a future graduate role. Feedback on competence can also be a resource of identity affirmation as a professional (Holmes, 2013) confirmed by comments such as “I felt reassured that I’m probably doing something that’s up to my capabilities” and “feel a bit more competent in the field that I’m working within.” Evidence of valued competence leading to belonging depends on authentic and genuine validation both given and received as a confirmation of self as contributor. As such, efforts need to be made by both feedback-givers and receivers to ensure learning and development is achieved (Fulham *et al.*, 2022). Skepticism about the authenticity of feedback disavows validation and can compromise sense of belonging and, potentially, the value of WIL programs as a learning advantage leading to success. So, while a sense of belonging was being sought by the women, they did not feel like they belonged in their WIL workplaces, without considerable effort expended to fit in.

Intersections of identity

Developmental networks supporting discussion of work issues and career options have been found to be useful in identity construction (Sweitzer, 2009), but were not routinely

encountered during work experience among women in this study. In particular, there were lost opportunities to be mentored by perceived allies at work, for example, women in more senior positions evidenced by one woman's comment, "The boss, who is female, would belittle me . . . just to show that she wasn't listening to the intern". We posit this is due to previous episodes of undermining, as experienced by the women in work, which in turn can perpetuate lack of capability myths and hostility among co-workers.

Stereotype threat, first coined by [Steele and Aronson \(1995\)](#), was observed related to both gender and ethnic identities, preventing development of a sense of belonging and construction of an organizational identity. Stereotype threat means being at risk of conforming to a stereotype in a way that undermines individuality. Instead of being recognized and valued individuals, women mentioned the risk of being the "angry Black woman", "hormonal" or the "small Asian woman" with subsequent stereotype connotations and associated responses from others.

Striving for equity in WIL

Our findings and narratives were context dependent and may not be generalizable to all work placements and organizations. However, several common threads appear across accounts and geographical locations raising questions about the overall experiences of women in WIL programs. In some cases, the women questioned how valued they were seen by their supervisors and other co workers, including other women. Some expressed feelings that they were perceived as filling an obligation by the organization to hire women. As one UK woman stated, "there's talk of getting more women into technology [and technology-based jobs] but to actually put it into action. . . don't just hire her because she's a woman."

While not all women experienced the exact same disparities or challenges in all aspects of their workplace, and some even expressed they felt part of the work community, the majority expressed frustration with their experiences in a program that was intended to help them grow professionally and further develop their skills. Although students are expected to become self-directed and learn professional standards within their field, comments expressed by women students such as "*I felt overwhelmed. I didn't know what to do*" (AUS) are problematic, particularly if they are a response to a student's attempt to do a good job and be seen as capable and competent. Lack of validation (sometimes presented as silence from the placement supervisor) impacted the women's sense of belonging, sense of autonomy, motivation, and awareness of their own competencies. Authentic supervisor assessment must include both formative and summative factors tied to defined learning outcomes ([Jackson, 2018](#)).

Women who described positive WIL experiences also appeared to connect that positivity to validation of their competencies and feelings of belonging. They explicitly demonstrated self efficacy. [Bandura \(1997\)](#) described self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their capabilities to plan and carry out specific and necessary processes to lead to a desired result. Students with high levels of self efficacy may be able to work through and overcome the challenges they face, while those with low self efficacy may give up or assume they need to lower their expectations ([Bandura, 1997](#)). Those women who felt a sense of belonging, accepted as contributing team members felt "more a part and included within the community." Those who felt visible, felt included. WIL program educators need to both be aware of, and bring awareness to, a positive relationship between validation, visibility, and self-efficacy as essential for successful WIL experiences. In addition, open discussions about how gendered organizations and the reinforcement of gendered competencies creates disparities for women in WIL programs must become a priority for thinking about work readiness for both women and men. Men must be part of the conversation to affect this change.

Implications

WIL programs aim to provide opportunity and context for students to develop professional agency and self-efficacy as they transition to the world of work (Zegwaard *et al.*, 2017). However, the experiences of several women potentially create barriers for that development and may cause some women to wonder what value WIL programs hold for them especially when they feel like they are being used “for dirty work”. This is particularly highlighted when the workplace lacks vehicles for mentorship, is not perceived as a place to belong, and does not provide validation. Some of the women participating in this study demonstrated persistence and hence were determined to be seen and valued.

The findings have implications for considering how the structure, including industry partnerships and supervisor training, impact the value of WIL programs for all students, and in the case of this study, for women in the international contexts. While standardized assessment may address the attainment of specific graduate attributes related to skills and communications (Jackson, 2018), providing formative feedback, mentorship, and developmental scaffolding that can help to increase autonomy and agency are lacking for many WIL students, particularly women. The findings prompt several recommendations.

- (1) Build awareness within workplaces and HE institutions about the disparities inherent in WIL experiences and the impact of indifference, bias, and supervisor apathy on both the students' perceptions of the value of WIL and self-awareness.
- (2) Focus on the development of competencies based on consistent and authentic feedback through clear, fluid, and transparent communication, possibly through mentoring.
- (3) Establish clearer parameters of the role of WIL students within workplaces that encompass expectations about work culture(s) and share widely within the host teams.
- (4) Provide students with more training on how to elicit feedback that is specific to their learning outcomes. The need to develop clear objectives and outcomes for students is not new, however as educators, we need to be cognizant that not all work placements prioritize student learning outcomes beyond skills-based competencies. The need to mentor and validate student contributions as part of their professional development needs to be explicitly highlighted.
- (5) HE institutions that offer WIL programs need to provide a safe space for WIL students, and especially women, to share their experiences within the workplace, seek guidance, be valued, and be heard.

Limitations and further research

The main limitation of this study is self-selection bias. Participants were volunteers and therefore the findings cannot be generalized to all women. The focus group format can downplay quieter or dissenting voices, and participants can influence each other's responses, and so a wider survey is recommended to explore further the resulting themes. Additionally, the participation of the men in the focus groups could have impacted what the women participants felt comfortable disclosing in those groups. However, in the analysis of transcripts, the coders did not detect any differences in the responses of women between focus groups with and without men. Of note, the themes that emerged in all focus groups were consistent and captured similar comments. A future study examining men's perceptions is planned.

Additionally, all institutions included in this study were from Western contexts. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all countries and cultures around the world.

Future research would benefit from including other institutions from outside of Western contexts.

The findings highlight directions for further research, not only on the impact of gender disparity on WIL experiences and opportunities, but also the unknown challenges faced by trans students and students who experience challenges at the intersections of gender and race. Additionally, research could focus on the experiences of line managers and mentors to better understand the challenges of validation from their perspectives and any gendered differentials visible to them both with respect to their line management role and their own lived experiences.

Notes

1. See also WACE (n.d.), “Advancing cooperative and work-integrated education”, available at: <https://waceinc.org/> (accessed 20 July 2023).
2. Three institutions had no men participate in the focus groups. Also, the comments from the men who did attend were limited and non-descriptive (e.g. “Ya, maybe.”). A future study is planned and will include a larger sample of men. See limitations for comments related to the exclusion of men in the data analysis.

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