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The scarcity of women in leadership roles highlights the absence of mentors in STEM, resulting in many lacking the necessary guidance or inspiration

Women and the STEM Bias

EMPOWERING WOMEN IN STEM WILL NOT ONLY BENEFIT INDIVIDUALS, BUT ALSO STRENGTHEN THE ENTIRE INDUSTRY, DRIVING INNOVATION AND PROGRESS

▶ **THE LANDSCAPE OF** women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) in India presents a clear paradox. On one hand, we celebrate a significant achievement with 42.7% of female graduates in STEM, a statistic that surpasses that of many developed nations. On the other hand, the transition from education to employment in these fields is fraught with numerous challenges that persistently stigmatise progress. As we progress in a tech-driven future, the question of whether women are truly represented in these essential sectors looms large. However, if that's not the case, then what is causing this leakage in the talent funnel?

From a young age, societal norms dictate traditional gender roles, subtly steering girls away from pursuing careers in STEM. This conditioning influences their interests and aspirations, fostering a mindset in which STEM is viewed as a male domain. The impact of these stereotypes is immense; they form the very foundation of the barriers women encounter.

Many women also experience imposter syndrome, doubting their abilities despite their qualifications. This psychological barrier impedes their confidence and career advancement.

Although we can proudly point to an increasing number of female graduates due to various government policies aimed at promoting women's participation in STEM education, the fact remains that access to quality education is still uneven. In many rural and economically disadvantaged areas, girls continue to face challenges in accessing the same educational opportunities as boys. Even in urban settings, disparities in school resources hinder their STEM education, limiting their potential to succeed.

Women entering the STEM workforce often encounter hurdles that may contribute to high attrition rates. Biases in workplace evaluations and a lack of mentorship foster an environment in which women feel undervalued and unsupported. The repercussions of this demeaning environment are clear: skilled and talented women exit the field, taking with them the innovation and diversity they could have brought to the table. Many STEM workplaces still reflect a 'men's club' mentality, which poses challenges for women seeking to thrive. This culture not only alienates women but also propagates discriminatory practices that affect their career progression. The undervaluation of women's contributions leads to lower job satisfaction and a higher probability of turnover.

The importance of networking in career advancement is known to all. Yet, women often find themselves excluded from informal networks that can lead to job opportunities and promotions. The scarcity of women in leadership positions highlights the absence of mentors

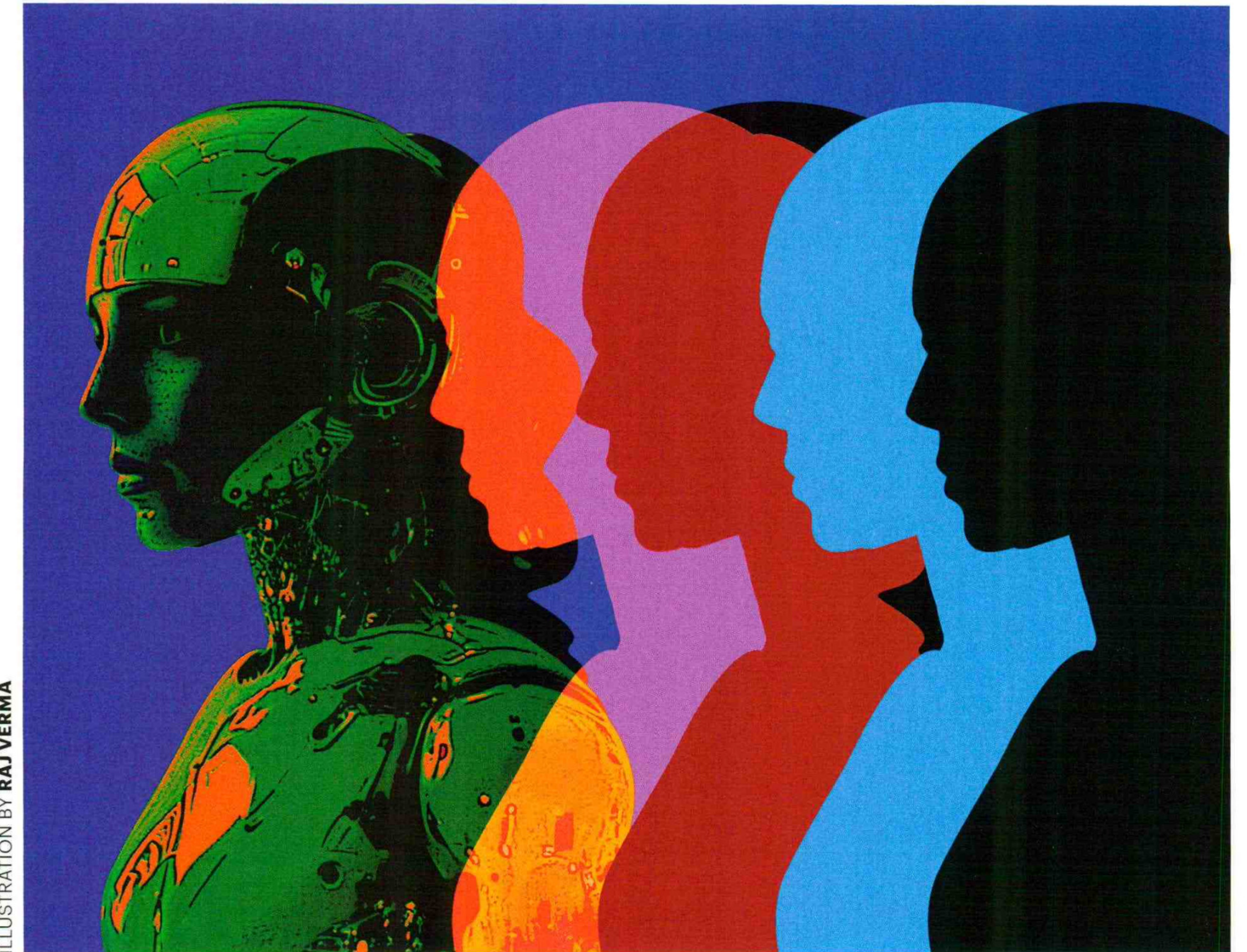


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and sponsors in STEM, resulting in many lacking the necessary guidance or inspiration. For many women, balancing work and family responsibilities poses yet another significant challenge—one that is common to women across all career trajectories. Traditional workplace structures often lack the flexibility needed to accommodate these dual roles. Without supportive policies, women are left navigating an uphill battle, hindering their ability to thrive in their careers.

The gender pay gap remains a reality in STEM fields. Women often receive lower pay than their male counterparts for similar roles, underscoring the systemic inequalities that need to be addressed. This disparity impacts financial independence and perpetuates the subtle notion that women's contributions in STEM are less valuable.

To tackle these ongoing issues, we must adopt a comprehensive strategy. Initiatives aimed at changing societal perceptions about gender roles can encourage girls to pursue STEM from a young age.

At workplaces, companies can have specialised recruitment programmes that are unbiased and give women an equal opportunity to become a part of the STEM workforce. Structured mentorship can provide women with the support and role models they need to navigate their careers and advance professionally. By addressing these issues with focussed initiatives and inclusive policies, we can create a more equitable environment. Empowering women in these fields not only benefits individuals but also strengthens the entire industry, driving innovation and progress for all.

As we stand on the brink of a new era, it is imperative that we transform potential into reality, ensuring that every woman has the opportunity to thrive in STEM. The future of our industries—and indeed, our society—depends on our collective commitment to bridging the gender gap. **BT**

Views are personal