



LEAN IN

50 WAYS TO FIGHT BIAS

An activity that helps you combat bias against women at work

Bias in company cultures



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An activity that helps you combat the biases women face at work

TO GET STARTED:

Download our [Moderator Guide & Speaker Notes](#) to prepare for your session, find links to necessary handouts, and learn what to say.

Use “Slide Show” mode to click on links in this presentation or right click to access the hyperlink when not in “Slide Show” mode.

PRESENTATION STARTS
ON THE NEXT SLIDE

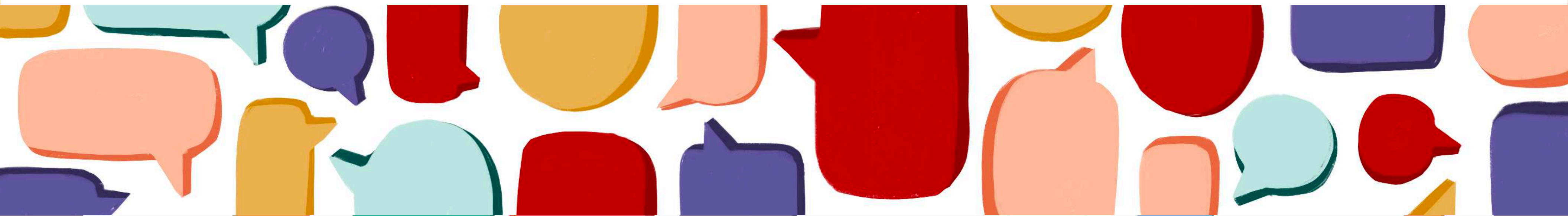


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An activity that helps you combat the biases women face at work

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Welcome

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LEAN IN

LeanIn.Org helps women achieve their ambitions
and works to create an equal world.

LeanIn.Org thanks our partners for their valuable contributions to this program:



WHY WE ARE HERE

- ▶ Bias—whether deliberate or unconscious—is holding women back in the workplace.
- ▶ It makes it harder for women to get hired and promoted and negatively impacts their day-to-day work experiences.
- ▶ This hurts women and makes it hard for companies to level the playing field.
- ▶ Today, we'll learn concrete steps to address the biases women face head-on.

TODAY'S AGENDA

- 1 Set the tone
- 2 Learn about biases women face at work
- 3 Dive into specific situations and solutions
- 4 Finish with a closing activity

Setting the tone

- 1 Women face biases due to their race, sexuality, and other aspects of their identity.
- 2 Intersectionality can be at play in any situation.
- 3 We all fall into bias traps.
- 4 Knowing that bias exists isn't enough—commit to take action.

GROUND RULES FOR TODAY

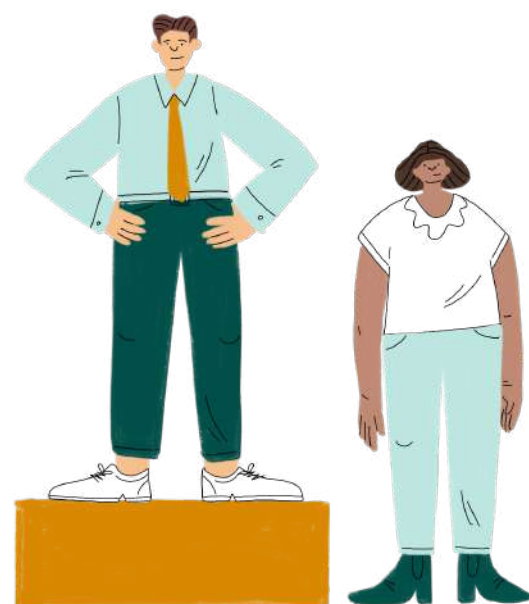
- ➊ Some situations may be difficult to hear.
- ➋ Stories should be anonymous.
- ➌ Give people the benefit of the doubt.

Overview: Common types of biases women face at work

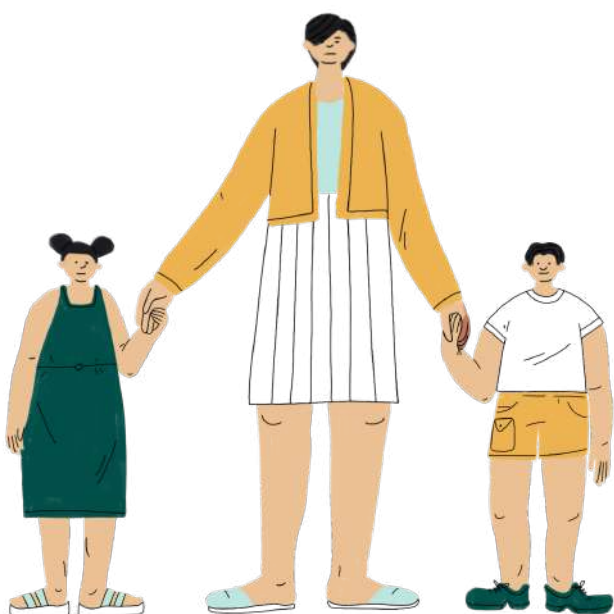
COMMON TYPES OF BIASES WOMEN FACE AT WORK



Likeability bias



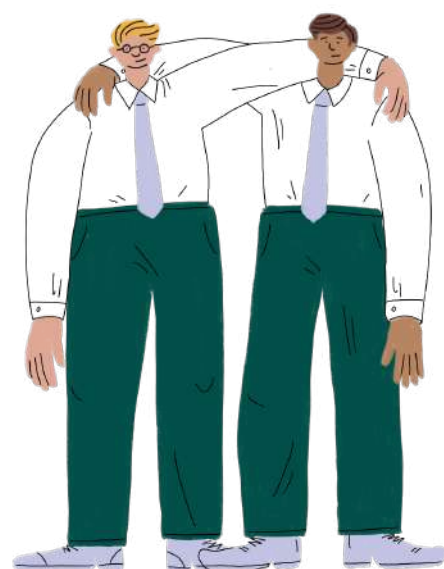
Performance bias



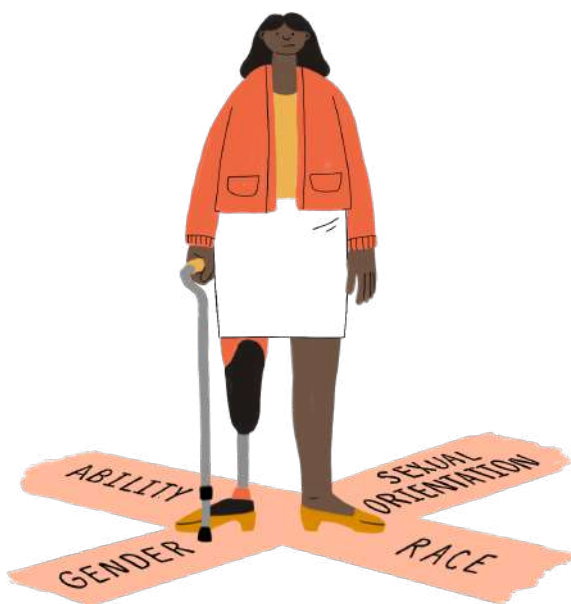
Maternal bias



Attribution bias



Affinity bias



Intersectionality



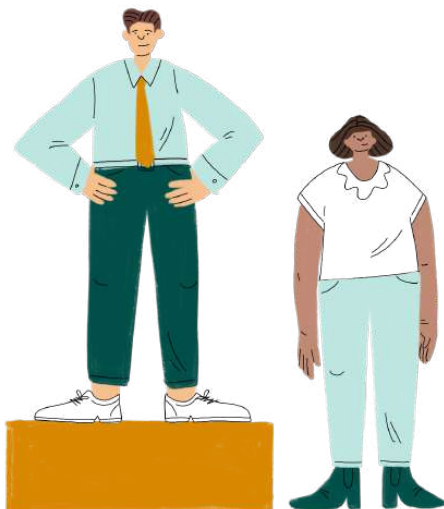
Watch the video:
"Introduction to the Common
Biases Women Experience"

COMMON TYPES OF BIASES WOMEN FACE AT WORK



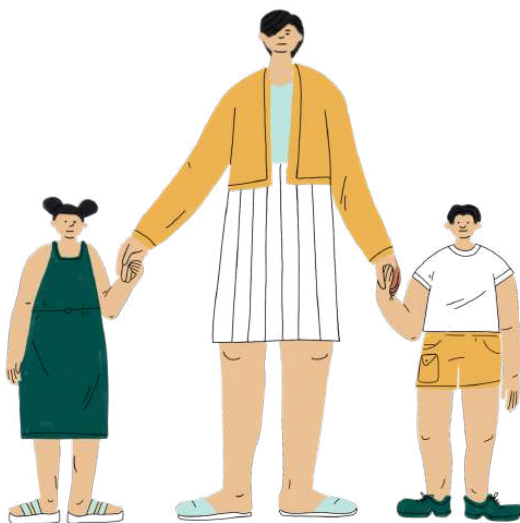
Likeability bias

Likeability bias is rooted in age-old expectations. We expect men to be assertive, so when they lead, it feels natural. We expect women to be kind and communal, so when they assert themselves, we like them less.¹¹



Performance bias

Performance bias is based on deep-rooted—and incorrect—assumptions about women’s and men’s abilities. We tend to underestimate women’s performance and overestimate men’s.⁹



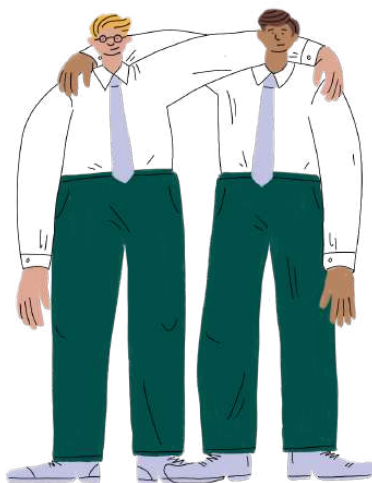
Maternal bias

Motherhood triggers false assumptions that women are less committed to their careers—and even less competent.¹²



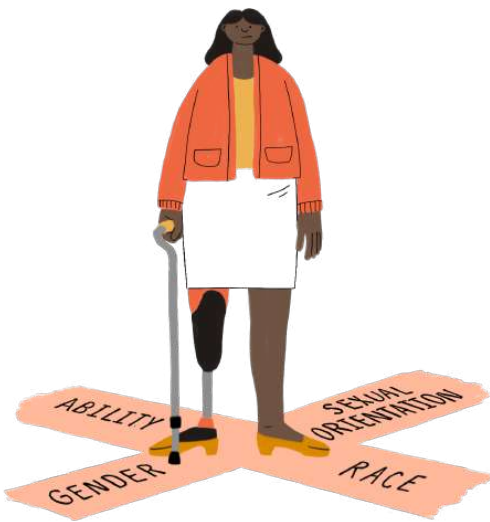
Attribution bias

Attribution bias is closely linked to performance bias. Because we see women as less competent than men, we tend to give them less credit for accomplishments and blame them more for mistakes.¹⁰



Affinity bias

Affinity bias is what it sounds like: we gravitate toward people like ourselves in appearance, beliefs, and background. And we may avoid or even dislike people who are different from us.¹³



Intersectionality

Bias isn’t limited to gender. Women can also experience biases due to their race, sexual orientation, a disability, or other aspects of their identity.

OVERVIEW: MICROAGGRESSIONS

Microaggressions are comments and actions that demean or dismiss someone based on their gender, race, or other aspects of their identity.

Some groups of women experience them even more often:

- ▶ Black women are nearly 2.5x more likely than white women to hear someone at work express surprise about their language skills or other abilities
- ▶ Lesbian and bisexual women and women with disabilities are far more likely than other women to hear demeaning remarks about themselves or others like them



Icebreakers

What % of women have experienced workplace microaggressions (everyday sexism like being mistaken for someone more junior or having their competence questioned)?

ICEBREAKER: DID YOU KNOW?

What % of women have experienced workplace microaggressions (everyday sexism like being mistaken for someone more junior or having their competence questioned)?

ANSWER

73%.⁶⁰⁴

What % of U.S. transgender employees have hidden their gender identity at work to avoid discrimination?

ICEBREAKER: DID YOU KNOW?

What % of U.S. transgender employees have hidden their gender identity at work to avoid discrimination?

ANSWER

Over half.⁶⁰⁵

In one study, how much more likely was a woman to get an interview if her resume pictured her without a hijab, compared to picturing her with a hijab?

ICEBREAKER: DID YOU KNOW?

In one study, how much more likely was a woman to get an interview if her resume pictured her without a hijab, compared to picturing her with a hijab?

ANSWER

Three times more likely.⁶⁰⁶

Compared to men without disabilities, how much more likely are women with disabilities to hear demeaning remarks at work about themselves or others like them?

ICEBREAKER: DID YOU KNOW?

Compared to men without disabilities, how much more likely are women with disabilities to hear demeaning remarks at work about themselves or others like them?

ANSWER

Nearly three times more likely.⁶⁰⁷

Compared to straight men, how much more likely are lesbian and bisexual women to feel like they can't talk to colleagues about their lives outside of work?

ICEBREAKER: DID YOU KNOW?

Compared to straight men, how much more likely are lesbian and bisexual women to feel like they can't talk to colleagues about their lives outside of work?

ANSWER

Around four times more likely.⁶⁰⁸

How many times more often do men interrupt women than other men?

ICEBREAKER: DID YOU KNOW?

How many times more often
do men interrupt women
than other men?

ANSWER

Almost 3 times more often.⁶⁰⁹

What % of Black women have *never* had an informal interaction with a senior leader at their company?

ICEBREAKER: DID YOU KNOW?

What % of Black women have *never* had an informal interaction with a senior leader at their company?

ANSWER

59%.⁶¹⁰

Workplace situations

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1 Move into your small group or breakout room. Everyone should have a copy of the presentation you will use for discussion.
- 2 Select one person to read the situation and **WHY IT MATTERS**.
- 3 As a group, discuss what you would do in this situation.
- 4 After 3-5 minutes of discussion, read **WHAT TO DO** and **WHY IT HAPPENS**.
- 5 Continue through as many situations as you can in the time allotted.

REVIEWS & PROMOTIONS

You're on a team doing performance reviews and notice that a lot of women get feedback on their speaking style.

WHY IT MATTERS

Criticisms like this can prevent qualified women from advancing, which hurts both them and your company.

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You're on a team doing performance reviews and notice that a lot of women get feedback on their speaking style.

WHAT TO DO

When you notice this pattern, point it out. Explain this is a common bias against women and **WHY IT HAPPENS**. Suggest that the group focus on the substance of what people say, not their speaking style.

Longer term, recommend that your company use standardized criteria for performance reviews, which will reduce subjective opinions. Consider recommending anti-bias training for employees involved in the review process. When people understand how bias impacts their decision-making, they are able to make more objective decisions.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Studies show that women often get negative feedback on their speaking style, while men do not.⁵² If women are confident and assertive, they can be criticized for speaking too loudly or often. But if they are quieter, they are more likely to be told that they need to speak more confidently and assertively.⁵³ For some groups of women, no matter how they speak, people project stereotypes onto them: Asian women are more likely to be criticized for being too quiet, while Black women and Latinas are more often labeled angry or loud.⁵⁴

Rooted in likeability bias

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A coworker asks a woman of color where she is “really from.”

WHY IT MATTERS

People of color hear this far more often than white people do, and the net effect is to make them feel that they are foreigners who don't belong. Research shows that when heard repeatedly, this question can contribute to depression and anxiety for American-born people of color.⁶¹¹

A coworker asks a woman of color where she is “really from.”

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

You could address this comment in the moment: “You probably don’t realize this, but people of color get this question all the time, and it can make them feel like outsiders.” Or you could take your coworker aside privately to explain why the question might make the woman feel marginalized, even if their intention is to try to get to know them.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Your colleague may be genuinely interested in where the person is from and may not realize that the question can be offensive. They may also have a lack of awareness of the diversity of Americans, since the question implies that nonwhite Americans are not American.⁶¹² This assumption is known as “the perpetual foreigner stereotype.”⁶¹³

The day after a high-profile killing of a Black person by the police, coworkers are discussing the news but nobody brings up this story.

WHY IT MATTERS

The silence suggests that non-Black colleagues are not outraged at the injustice or that they aren't aware of the Black community's grief and trauma.⁶¹⁴ Left unaddressed, these perceptions—accurate or not—can contribute to a workplace where Black employees feel like they don't belong.⁶¹⁵ When a Black person is killed by the police, it reminds all Black people of the violence that threatens their lives. It can make it hard to focus on work, and depression and anxiety can follow.⁶¹⁶

The day after a high-profile killing of a Black person by the police, coworkers are discussing the news but nobody brings up this story.

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

In the moment, say something. Mention the incident and how awful it was. Depending on your relationships with Black coworkers, let them know you are there to talk if they need to.⁶¹⁷ Be understanding if Black coworkers seem distracted or not themselves. In the longer term, you can further educate yourself on the incident by reading about it in a Black news outlet, such as *Blavity* or *Essence*. If you're a manager, check in with Black members of your team to see how they're doing and if they need any additional support.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Non-Black coworkers may believe it's insensitive to mention incidents of police violence toward Black people. But in fact, doing so conveys that they care.⁶¹⁸ They also may not realize how traumatic these events are to the entire Black community,⁶¹⁹ perhaps seeing them as isolated one-offs instead of ongoing systemic abuse.

Your team holds regular happy hours after work for networking and bonding at a local bar. You realize that one colleague, a Muslim woman, has never come.

WHY IT MATTERS

Some Muslims avoid alcohol and may therefore feel uncomfortable in a bar.⁶²⁰ If most networking events are held in bars, it means they miss out on the team bonding that can lead to career opportunities.⁶²¹ It can also send a message that employees who don't drink—and other groups like caregivers who need to be home soon after work—are not considered when social events are planned.⁶²²

Your team holds regular happy hours after work for networking and bonding at a local bar. You realize that one colleague, a Muslim woman, has never come.

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

Talk to your team leader and explain **WHY IT MATTERS**. Encourage them to plan a wide range of events that leave out as few people as possible. For example, if your team goes out every week to a bar, consider moving it to a restaurant sometimes. Move a few evening events to lunchtime so working parents can join. And make the changes with sensitivity, so no one gets blamed. If happy hours are simply canceled, it may create bad feelings among some employees.⁶²³

WHY IT HAPPENS

Many teams—and companies—don't realize how much thoughtfulness is needed to ensure that work events are inclusive to as many employees as possible. This might happen because teams fall into the habit of replicating bonding events that have been offered for decades—many of which were designed for less diverse and inclusive workplaces.

During lunch a client asks your colleague, “What does your husband do?” Your colleague is a lesbian and has a wife.

WHY IT MATTERS

The question assumes your colleague is straight and married, which puts lesbians, bisexual women, and single women in an awkward situation. Your lesbian colleague now has to correct a client and come out to them at the same time. The question could also make your lesbian colleague feel at least somewhat uncomfortable or marginalized.

During lunch a client asks your colleague, “What does your husband do?” Your colleague is a lesbian and has a wife.

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

If your colleague answers that she has a wife, not a husband, you can support her by responding warmly and asking questions, as you would when someone straight talks about their family. This signals your support, and it’s also helpful because people often experience distressing, awkward silences when they refer to their same-sex partners at work. However she responds, do your best to be a good listener, ask questions, and fill the silence.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Often straight people, even those who mean well, can assume that others around them are also straight. But the comment could have a darker motive and reflect prejudice against gay people. Either way, questions like this are far too common. More than 60% of LGBTQ+ people say they’ve had to correct colleagues’ assumptions about their personal lives, and nearly half say that in the past month, they’ve had to come out at work at least once a week.⁶²⁴

In a private conversation, a coworker expresses resentment about “special treatment” for a woman with a disability who is allowed to work flexible hours.

WHY IT MATTERS

People with disabilities may need flexibility for many reasons—for example, to manage pain or for medical treatment. When those needs are questioned, they may feel undermined, stigmatized, and unhappy at work.⁶²⁵ But when employees with disabilities are fully supported, they’re usually just as happy as their colleagues.⁶²⁶ This has a big impact, since 1 in 6 working-age Americans has a visible or invisible disability.⁶²⁷

In a private conversation, a coworker expresses resentment about “special treatment” for a woman with a disability who is allowed to work flexible hours.

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

Tell your coworker **WHY IT MATTERS**. You can also talk to HR and ask them to clarify your company’s general policies on flexible work, so that people are less likely to view specific situations as unfair.⁶²⁸

WHY IT HAPPENS

This can happen when people don’t understand that accommodations like flexibility aren’t “nice to have” for employees with disabilities—they’re essential. Additionally, because people with disabilities tend to be seen as less valuable and competent, coworkers may question whether they really need or deserve extra support.⁶²⁹ This is especially true for women with disabilities, who face more bias and disrespect at work than almost any other group.⁶³⁰

A coworker asks a Black woman on your team if they can touch her hair.

WHY IT MATTERS

Asking to touch a Black woman's hair is "othering"—that is, it treats her as different or as an outsider.⁶³¹ It can make the woman feel objectified and disempowered, as well as on guard and self-conscious.⁶³² And depending on the context, this request for unwanted physical interaction could also feel like sexual harassment.

A coworker asks a Black woman on your team if they can touch her hair.

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

You can jump in and say something like, “Hey, asking to touch a Black woman's hair is not OK!” or “Why do you need to touch it? It looks great from here!” To make sure it doesn’t keep happening, consider mentioning it to your manager as an example of why the company needs regular anti-racism training and a robust allyship program.

WHY IT HAPPENS

The request may be motivated by “hair bias”—the idea that there’s something exotic, wrong, or unprofessional about a Black woman’s natural hair.⁶³³ This bias began in the slavery era and has been reinforced by the beauty industry.⁶³⁴ It is also all too common: in fact, some U.S. companies still prohibit natural Black hairstyles.⁶³⁵ Plus, asking to touch a Black woman’s hair reveals a troubling power dynamic in which white people can cross the personal boundaries of Black people without facing any penalty.⁶³⁶

Before an event, your manager says to a Latina, "Don't forget there's a dress code." He does not give this reminder to others on your team.

WHY IT MATTERS

This comment could adversely impact how others view your Latina colleague, especially as it comes from her manager. It could also add to the pressure felt by many Latinas to present themselves with extreme care to fit a narrow definition of professional attire.⁶³⁷ Most Latinas in corporate America say that they style their hair and makeup conservatively (87%) and dress conservatively (84%) to fit in at work.⁶³⁸

Before an event, your manager says to a Latina, "Don't forget there's a dress code." He does not give this reminder to others on your team.

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

Push back on the comment. You can do it lightly: "I think [Name] always looks well put together." Or privately ask your manager to explain why they directed that comment at her, rather than everyone. You can also explain **WHY IT MATTERS**.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Your manager may believe common stereotypes about what Latinas like to wear, such as large earrings, bright colors, or tight clothes.⁶³⁹ They may be unaware that Latinas are a diverse group with a wide range of style preferences. Your manager is also probably influenced by corporate norms for dress in the U.S., which encourage us to think that certain styles typical of white businessmen, such as dark colors and button-down shirts, are the most tasteful and appropriate, even though they have no impact on the way someone does their job.⁶⁴⁰

In a debrief after a round of job interviews, someone says of a candidate, “She seemed a little OCD.”

WHY IT MATTERS

When people casually misuse terms for real mental health issues, like OCD, it trivializes the conditions and the difficulties faced by those who have them.⁶⁴¹ If others with mental health issues hear comments like this, they may feel belittled.⁶⁴² The comment could also unfairly harm this candidate’s chance of getting a job, as it’s a vague critique that’s not tied to a job requirement.

In a debrief after a round of job interviews, someone says of a candidate, “She seemed a little OCD.”

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

Ask the speaker to explain their comment: “How does that relate to the job requirements?”⁶⁴³ Or let them know the language is problematic: “You might not know this, but casually calling someone ‘OCD’ can be harmful to people with mental health conditions.” Then explain **WHY IT MATTERS**. You can also ask HR about training that raises awareness of mental health issues and encourages employees to use more inclusive language.⁶⁴⁴

WHY IT HAPPENS

Many people are in the habit of using terms like “OCD” casually and inaccurately, rather than in reference to the real conditions they're meant to describe. This can be because they don't realize how likely it is that someone around them has a mental health condition—nearly 1 in 5 U.S. workers does, but many don't disclose this at work.⁶⁴⁵ It could also be because they haven't learned much about mental health issues.⁶⁴⁶

Your coworker introduces a colleague who uses the pronouns “they” and “them” to a client by saying “This is Jamie. She’s going to walk you through the project.”

WHY IT MATTERS

This puts Jamie in a tough position. Either they start their relationship with the client by correcting a coworker or they accept being referred to with the wrong pronoun. This could make them feel nervous and awkward while interacting with the client, and it also conveys disrespect to any trans or nonbinary people present.⁶⁴⁷

Your coworker introduces a colleague who uses the pronouns “they” and “them” to a client by saying “This is Jamie. She’s going to walk you through the project.”

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

Wait a few seconds and see if your mistaken coworker corrects themselves. If they don't, jump in and say, “A quick but important correction before [Name] gets started—[Name] uses they/them pronouns.” Experts recommend doing this because it can be less confrontational and awkward for you to say this than for your misgendered colleague to correct the mistake themselves. By speaking up, you add legitimacy to their chosen pronouns. In addition, you could speak privately to your mistaken colleague later about **WHY IT MATTERS**.

WHY IT HAPPENS

It’s common for LGBTQ+ people to face the painful experience of being misgendered or referred to with words that don’t align with their gender identity.⁶⁴⁸ This often happens accidentally or thoughtlessly, but it can also happen due to prejudice.⁶⁴⁹

A colleague mentions her wife during lunch with coworkers. The group conversation, which had been flowing nicely, abruptly goes silent.

WHY IT MATTERS

Situations like this happen often to lesbian women, and they can create a barrier to connecting with coworkers.⁶⁵⁰ Regardless of intent, these silences signal discomfort with the fact that she's married to a woman. Such moments can feel awkward and lonely, and if repeated could make your colleague feel unwelcome at work.

A colleague mentions her wife during lunch with coworkers. The group conversation, which had been flowing nicely, abruptly goes silent.

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

The most important thing to do is revive the conversation and signal support. Express genuine interest in your colleague and her family. Ask her what her wife does for work, whether they have kids, how they met, what they like to do on weekends ... whatever you would ask a woman colleague married to a man.

WHY IT HAPPENS

There are several reasons why coworkers might fall silent at the news that a colleague is gay. Maybe they disapprove of marriage between two women. Or maybe their silence isn't ill intentioned. They may have been surprised or hesitated because they want to show support but worry about saying the wrong thing.

In a group email, your coworker introduces a transgender colleague named Beth by her former name, Brian.

WHY IT MATTERS

When someone calls a transgender person by a name they no longer use, this mistake is called “deadnaming.”⁶⁵¹ Being deadnamed puts Beth in an awkward position. Now she has to explain her real name to her colleagues, which could also mean revealing she is transgender—something she may have wanted to share differently or not at all. Deadnaming is disrespectful and may make Beth feel that her colleagues don’t accept her gender identity.

In a group email, your coworker introduces a transgender colleague named Beth by her former name, Brian.

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

Email Beth and say you're sorry this happened. Ask if she'd like you to send out a correction. For example, you could send a follow-up email to the group saying, "Our coworker made a mistake. She meant to introduce you to Beth." That way, Beth could be known by her true name without having to come out herself via email.⁶⁵² Then, speak privately to your other colleague. Explain **WHY IT MATTERS** and encourage them to apologize to Beth. This could help to repair any hurt she experienced from being deadnamed.⁶⁵³

WHY IT HAPPENS

Deadnaming can happen because someone is prejudiced and reluctant to accept a trans person's true identity.⁶⁵⁴ Or it may happen because someone reflexively uses a name or pronoun with which they have long been familiar. They may also be unaware of how hurtful deadnaming can be.

Your manager suggests having a
“powwow.”

WHY IT MATTERS

This is a misuse of the word “powwow,” a social gathering that often holds spiritual significance for Native American people. Misusing words and phrases like “powwow,” “spirit animal,” and “low man on the totem pole” may feel harmless to non–Native Americans. But to Native Americans, it can seem mocking and derogatory.

Your manager suggests having a “powwow.”

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

Speak up in the moment by saying, "I'm happy to have a meeting, but I want to mention one thing. You might not know this, but the word 'powwow' has real meaning to Native Americans. It doesn't simply mean a meeting." You can also explain **WHY IT MATTERS**. Or you could ask, "Are you trying to say you want to have a meeting?" This can prompt your manager to reflect on their language choice.

WHY IT HAPPENS

This type of cultural appropriation occurs when there is a power imbalance between cultures. People from a dominant culture feel able to use parts of a marginalized culture in any way they choose, including in ways that rob it of its original meaning.⁶⁵⁵

Your manager, who is a man, often meets the men on his team for dinner or drinks—but rarely meets with the women outside of work.

WHY IT MATTERS

Friendships at work are valuable. Important relationship building and information sharing can happen over coffee or pizza. When people are routinely excluded from outings like these, they can miss out. If it's a manager making arrangements, it's especially problematic—part of their responsibility is to make sure the whole team has equal access to networking opportunities.

Your manager, who is a man, often meets the men on his team for dinner or drinks—but rarely meets with the women outside of work.

WHAT TO DO

This is your manager, so you have standing to raise this with him. Say that you've noticed he goes for drinks with men on the team more than women. Explain **WHY IT MATTERS**. You can also offer solutions: if he's uncomfortable going to dinner with women, suggest that he meet everyone for breakfast or lunch.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Your manager may feel more comfortable with men because of affinity bias, which draws us toward people like ourselves.⁶⁵⁶ Or he may be nervous for other reasons: some men are wary of spending time with women colleagues outside of work for fear of seeming inappropriate.

Rooted in affinity bias

A coworker complains that their team is switching their video call software to accommodate a visually impaired woman on the team.

WHY IT MATTERS

If employees with disabilities hear this comment, they may feel as though they aren't valued and don't belong.⁶⁵⁷ That could affect more people than you realize, since 1 in 6 working-age Americans has a visible or invisible disability.⁶⁵⁸ And it has a big impact—employees with disabilities are often less happy at work than their colleagues, but that gap goes away when workplaces are accommodating and inclusive.⁶⁵⁹

A coworker complains that their team is switching their video call software to accommodate a visually impaired woman on the team.

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

Speak up on behalf of your visually impaired colleague. Say you think it's reasonable for all employees to have the software they need to do their job. Remind your coworkers that if this woman isn't able to fully participate in video calls, the team won't get the full benefit of her input. You could also ask your HR team to offer inclusion trainings that explicitly address disability, which can help employees build empathy.⁶⁶⁰

WHY IT HAPPENS

People with disabilities face particularly strong negative biases.⁶⁶¹ Compared to most other groups, including men with disabilities, women with disabilities are more likely to be underestimated and devalued in the workplace—and this sets the stage for them to be denied the support they need to do their jobs effectively.⁶⁶²

A Native American colleague says in a team meeting that she didn't celebrate Thanksgiving. Another colleague replies, "That's not very American of you."

WHY IT MATTERS

For many people, Thanksgiving represents joy, gratitude, and coming together as family. But for Native Americans, Thanksgiving can be a reminder that many of their ancestors were killed when Europeans arrived in North America.⁶⁶³ In light of this, your colleague's response could feel hurtful or judgmental. It also puts the burden on your Native American coworker to defend herself.

A Native American colleague says in a team meeting that she didn't celebrate Thanksgiving. Another colleague replies, "That's not very American of you."

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

You could jump in on your coworker's behalf. Say, "For some people, holidays like Thanksgiving are reminders of some of the worst parts of our history, rather than the best." You might also explain **WHY IT MATTERS**.

WHY IT HAPPENS

The comment may also reflect an assumption that Native Americans should try to fit in with mainstream U.S. culture.⁶⁶⁴ It also likely reflects a lack of knowledge. Most Americans learn history from the viewpoint of Americans with European ancestry, not from a Native American perspective. For example, many learn in school that Plymouth settlers and Wampanoag Indians held the first Thanksgiving in 1621. But few learn that just 16 years later, Plymouth settlers massacred hundreds of Native Americans.⁶⁶⁵

A coworker asks an openly bisexual colleague why she's participating in the company's LGBTQ+ resource group when she's dating a man.

WHY IT MATTERS

This question could make your bisexual colleague feel like she isn't welcome in LGBTQ+ spaces. It may imply that she's actually heterosexual, undermining her identity and suggesting she isn't being truthful about herself.

A coworker asks an openly bisexual colleague why she's participating in the company's LGBTQ+ resource group when she's dating a man.

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

Show your support by saying you're glad that she's attending the meeting. You may want to ask the offending coworker, "Why wouldn't she attend, given that she's bisexual?" You could also refer to

WHY IT MATTERS.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Research shows that bisexual people often have their sexuality cast into doubt. This happens in part because people tend to feel comfortable placing others into more clearly defined categories, like "straight" or "gay." Sometimes people dismiss bisexual people as simply confused.⁶⁶⁶ Today, as more millennial and Gen Z women come out as bisexual at work, biphobia is also on the rise.⁶⁶⁷

A meeting is starting soon and you notice that it's mostly men seated front and center and women seated to the side.

WHY IT MATTERS

If women are sidelined in meetings, it's less likely that they'll speak up, which means the group won't benefit from everyone's best thinking. Plus, it's not beneficial to sit in the low-status seats in the room—and women have to fight for status as it is.⁶⁶⁸

A meeting is starting soon and you notice that it's mostly men seated front and center and women seated to the side.

WHAT TO DO

If there are empty chairs at the table, urge women sitting to the side to fill them. If there's no room, acknowledge the problem—for example, ask if anyone else sees that it's mostly men at the table. If it happens often, consider saying to the person who runs the meeting, "I've noticed that it's mostly men at the table and women on the sidelines. Maybe you can encourage a better mix."

WHY IT HAPPENS

Women typically get less time to speak in meetings. They're more likely than men to be spoken over and interrupted.⁶⁶⁹ As a result of signals like these, women sometimes feel less valued, so they sit off to the side.

Rooted in performance bias

You overhear a coworker confuse the names of the only two Black women in your company.⁶⁷⁰

WHY IT MATTERS

This mistake could diminish the women's value in the eyes of those who hear it. It can also signal disrespect for Black women at the company more broadly because, consciously or unconsciously, it is a form of stereotyping. And it can make the women feel that their names are not considered worth learning or that they are viewed as interchangeable.

You overhear a coworker confuse the names of the only two Black women in your company.⁶⁷⁰

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

You can correct the mistake in the moment: “You’re confusing Maya with Alicia. They’re very different! You should get to know them.”⁶⁷¹ If that doesn’t work and your coworker continues to confuse them, you might need to talk to your manager. Explain **WHY IT MATTERS** and suggest that someone speak to them about trying harder to get this right.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Decades of research show that people often find it harder to differentiate between people of another race than people of their own race.⁶⁷² This is called “own-race bias.”⁶⁷³ Research also suggests that people are less likely to remember employees with less power—and Black women (and people of color generally) are less likely to be viewed as powerful in their organizations.⁶⁷⁴

Situation adapted from *The Memo: What Women of Color Need to Know to Secure a Seat at the Table*, by Minda Harts

A newly hired trans woman asks where the restroom is and a colleague says, “They’re over there—I’m not sure which one you want to use.”

WHY IT MATTERS

The second part of the comment is disrespectful. It implies that a trans woman’s restroom choice is OK to comment on publicly and that her gender is somehow in question. Unfortunately, trans women often face complaints or comments about their choice of bathroom, which can make them feel uncomfortable and judged.⁶⁷⁵

A newly hired trans woman asks where the restroom is and a colleague says, “They’re over there—I’m not sure which one you want to use.”

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

Some microaggressions are best addressed in the moment. In this case, it may be more respectful to say something supportive to your new colleague in private, such as, “Please feel free to use any restroom you want, and if you ever feel uncomfortable, I’m here to help.” Later, explain to your colleague who made the comment that it’s best not to speculate on which restroom someone uses, because you may be wrong. Experts say that the best approach is to tell everyone where every restroom is—women’s, men’s, and all-gender.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Your colleague may have made this comment to intentionally cause discomfort because they are prejudiced against trans women.⁶⁷⁶ But more likely, they were expressing an unconscious bias that trans women are different and that this is somehow OK to comment on.⁶⁷⁷ In addition, they may have been genuinely confused because they are not informed about these issues.

You are in a staffing meeting, and a coworker recommends you put one woman on each team for better diversity.

WHY IT MATTERS

One in five women report they are often the only woman or one of the only women in the room at work.⁶⁷⁸ These “Onlys” have a worse experience than other women. They are more likely to have their abilities challenged and be subjected to unprofessional remarks.⁶⁷⁹ They may also experience extra pressure and scrutiny, and they can feel that their actions reflect on others like them.⁶⁸⁰ This takes a toll: women who are Onlys are 1.5 times more likely to think about leaving their jobs than women who aren’t.⁶⁸¹

You are in a staffing meeting, and a coworker recommends you put one woman on each team for better diversity.

WHAT TO DO

Applaud the spirit of the idea, but explain the downside of inadvertently isolating women on separate teams. Instead of adding one woman to many teams, recommend putting groups of a few women on teams together. If you're in a position to do so, suggest that your company create opportunities for women Onlys to connect with other women, such as networking groups. Also, surface that this is a symptom of a larger problem: your company likely needs to hire more women.

WHY IT HAPPENS

When women are underrepresented in organizations—as they often are—they tend to be spread thinly across teams, which means they stand out. Women of color are even more likely to be “Onlys,” since there are fewer of them in corporate America.⁶⁸² This underrepresentation can make the biases women face especially pronounced. With everyone's eyes on them, they can often be heavily scrutinized and held to higher standards. As a result, they feel pressure to perform, on guard, and left out—and may be less likely to speak up and contribute fully.⁶⁸³

You overhear a coworker complaining that your company's gender diversity efforts are a waste of time.

WHY IT MATTERS

This comment may signal your coworker's lack of commitment to gender diversity. Research shows that only 56% of employees are personally committed to gender diversity.⁶⁸⁴ To drive change, it's critical to raise awareness so more employees are on board.⁶⁸⁵

You overhear a coworker complaining that your company's gender diversity efforts are a waste of time.

WHAT TO DO

Make a case for gender diversity. Explain that diverse teams often produce better results⁶⁸⁶ and that diversity efforts can make hiring and promotions fairer for everyone by weeding out bias. You can also share that diversity is good for morale: when companies are highly committed to gender diversity, employees are happier and less likely to leave.⁶⁸⁷

WHY IT HAPPENS

Many people think that their workplace is a meritocracy—so they assume diversity efforts unfairly favor women and other minorities. This is not true. Diversity efforts simply aim to counter the bias demonstrated by decades of social science research—for example, that stereotypes often bias evaluations in ways that disadvantage women.⁶⁸⁸ Moreover, when people think of themselves as fair and objective, they don't scrutinize their decisions, which opens the door to bias. This is why organizations that believe they're meritocratic can actually be more prone to bias.⁶⁸⁹

In a meeting, a client only looks at and speaks to the men on your team.

WHY IT MATTERS

This slight might seem trivial, but it sends a signal about who matters—in this case, the men. It can also create a dynamic where women miss out on valuable chances to join the conversation and shape outcomes. When this happens, your team isn't able to put their best foot forward.

In a meeting, a client only looks at and speaks to the men on your team.

WHAT TO DO

Do your part to make eye contact with everyone and try to find ways to bring more women into the conversation. When possible, you can pass the baton to a woman in a way that highlights her expertise: “[Name] would be great to answer this. She’s actually our resident expert on the topic.”

WHY IT HAPPENS

This may happen because of performance bias: your client may assume—consciously or unconsciously—that the women at the meeting are less competent and lower in status than the men.⁶⁹⁰ If your client is a man, this behavior could also be the result of affinity bias: people often gravitate toward others like them.⁶⁹¹

Rooted in performance bias & affinity bias

In a lunchtime conversation about politics, a white coworker asks, “I know slavery was horrible, but what does it have to do with what’s happening today?”

WHY IT MATTERS

The impact of 400 years of slavery in the United States is still powerfully felt by many Black Americans, and non-Black people continue to benefit from its legacy. It is not a distant historical fact; it continues to shape Black people’s lives in tangible, painful ways.⁶⁹² Hearing someone dismiss that can be jarring, even traumatic, especially in a work setting.

In a lunchtime conversation about politics, a white coworker asks, “I know slavery was horrible, but what does it have to do with what’s happening today?”

Intersectional card

WHAT TO DO

You might point out that the question minimizes the history of Black Americans. You can share concrete ways that slavery still shapes America today; we mention a few in **WHY IT HAPPENS**. If they want to know more, consider recommending some sources—for example, the documentary 13th and the essay “The Case for Reparations” by Ta-Nehisi Coates.⁶⁹³

WHY IT HAPPENS

Slavery’s legacy is not widely taught in schools, which means that many white Americans never learn about it in depth.⁶⁹⁴ In contrast, Black Americans live with the legacy of slavery every day. For example, voter suppression still limits Black political power. Rules that denied loans to Black Americans, known as “redlining,” still hurt Black homeowners.⁶⁹⁵ And generations of unpaid labor fueled the wealth gap between Black and white Americans—even today, Black women own less than 1% of the wealth of white men.⁶⁹⁶

A woman suggests an idea in a meeting and it falls flat. A few minutes later, a man suggests the same idea and gets an enthusiastic reaction.

WHY IT MATTERS

Getting credit for ideas is important—it's often how employees get noticed. When people don't feel heard, they may also stop speaking up and sharing their views. Over time, if their contributions go unseen, it can slow their advancement.⁶⁹⁷ In both cases, companies end up missing out.

A woman suggests an idea in a meeting and it falls flat. A few minutes later, a man suggests the same idea and gets an enthusiastic reaction.

WHAT TO DO

You can remind everyone that the idea originated with your woman colleague: “I think [Name] made that point a few moments ago. I like this direction.” Advocating for women coworkers in this way can help them get noticed for their contributions—and it can also position you as a leader.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Because we tend to underestimate women’s performance and overestimate men’s, we often don’t give women as much credit for their ideas. This can play out in meetings. The team doesn’t “hear” an idea when a woman raises it, but when a man says the same thing, they pay attention.⁶⁹⁸

Rooted in attribution bias

You impulsively reach out and touch a coworker's tattoo.

WHY IT MATTERS

For some people, being touched isn't a big deal. For others, it understandably is. Depending on the situation, it can feel anywhere from uncomfortable to violating. In some cases, it can even constitute harassment.

You impulsively reach out and touch a coworker's tattoo.

WHAT TO DO

Say, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have touched you without asking" and commit to being more thoughtful moving forward. Never enter someone's personal space without knowing they're OK with it. Even if they say they are, be aware that they may feel pressure to agree, especially if you're in a position of power. Ideally, your company also has guidelines for respectful behavior that you can use to inform your thinking.⁶⁹⁹ And when in doubt, keep your hands to yourself.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Sometimes, we touch people in celebration or friendship, like a high five or a quick hug. This can be perfectly fine, and even welcomed. But some touches suggest we see another person as a novelty—like when we touch a Black woman's hair, a pregnant woman's belly, or a disabled person's wheelchair—and this is demeaning and disrespectful. Some touches are also sexual in nature, and that is never OK at work.

You often see biased behavior on your team, and your manager lets it go unchallenged.

WHY IT MATTERS

When employees have a manager who regularly challenges bias, they are more likely to think that everyone has an equal chance to advance—and women are almost twice as likely to think they have the same opportunities as their peers.⁷⁰⁰ Yet less than a third of employees say that managers at their company often challenge biased language and behavior when they hear or see it.⁷⁰¹

You often see biased behavior on your team, and your manager lets it go unchallenged.

WHAT TO DO

Talk to your manager about what you're seeing and the important role they play in setting workplace norms. You might say, "The team really respects you. If you step in when you hear these comments, it will push everyone to be more thoughtful." You can also talk to senior leadership at your company and explain **WHY IT MATTERS**.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Your manager may not realize that certain comments and actions are biased. Less than half of managers have received anti-bias training.⁷⁰² When people understand how bias works, they are able to make fairer decisions and more clearly see bias when it crops up.⁷⁰³ There are other possible reasons, too. Managers may not realize the critical role they can play in creating an inclusive workplace—or may not be bought into your company's diversity efforts.

A colleague doesn't invite a woman on your team to an evening work event, explaining that they assume the woman prefers to be home for dinner with her family.

WHY IT MATTERS

When women with kids are excluded from activities, it can limit their career growth. It can also make them feel isolated from the rest of their team. For companies that care about retaining women, that's a problem.

A colleague doesn't invite a woman on your team to an evening work event, explaining that they assume the woman prefers to be home for dinner with her family

WHAT TO DO

Say, "We don't actually know what [Name] wants. How about we offer her the opportunity and let her decide for herself?" Consider pointing out the difference in how mothers and fathers are often treated: "Do we assume fathers aren't interested in evening events?" You can also remind them of the bigger picture: "Let's make sure we give the moms on our team the same chances as everyone else—sometimes they get sidelined."

WHY IT HAPPENS

People often assume that once a woman starts a family, she stops being as committed to her job and career.⁷⁰⁴ This can lead to generalizations—for example, that moms will say no to stretch assignments, business travel, or invitations to work events after hours.

Rooted in maternal bias

Your manager calls out a team member during a virtual meeting for not turning on her video when she seems reluctant to do so.

WHY IT MATTERS

Being put on the spot like this can trigger anxiety and stress. If the employee has her children with her, she may fear being judged as unprofessional—a bias that can affect all parents but impacts women more than men, as women are more likely to be interrupted by their children.⁷⁰⁵ Women are also penalized more than men for not looking well-groomed or put together.⁷⁰⁶ This creates a particular burden for Black women, who have to spend a lot more time than other women on their hair to avoid negative judgments. This is because of biased beliefs that their natural hair is “unprofessional.”⁷⁰⁷

Your manager calls out a team member during a virtual meeting for not turning on her video when she seems reluctant to do so.

WHAT TO DO

In the moment, you can speak up and point out that she's present and participating, even if the team can't see her. If you, too, like to leave your video off from time to time, perhaps point this out. That sends the message that she isn't an outlier. Later, you could talk to your manager about it and explain

WHY IT HAPPENS.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Managers may insist on video because they want their team members to feel connected, especially if they cannot be together in person. Or they may ask employees to turn on video to ensure that everyone is productive and engaged. But this doesn't take into account everything an employee may be balancing while working from home, including childcare and housework. And it doesn't make allowances for the anxiety employees may feel about how they look or their home looks on a busy or chaotic day.

A coworker asks a woman to pick up food for an office party, even though that's not her job.

WHY IT MATTERS

Women are expected to do more “office housework” than men, or work that's not part of their core job.⁷⁰⁸ Doing office housework takes women away from their core responsibilities and suggests their time isn't as valuable, which can be demeaning.⁷⁰⁹

A coworker asks a woman to pick up food for an office party, even though that's not her job.

WHAT TO DO

Say something like, "That's not really [Name's] job." Then suggest a solution that distributes the work more fairly: "Let's make this party a potluck" or "Let's switch things up and choose someone else this time." If your coworker pushes back, explain how women are more likely to be asked to do these tasks and why it's unfair.

As a longer-term solution, take note of who does the office housework on your team. If there are gender, racial, or other disparities, talk to your manager about rotating these tasks so they don't fall heavily on any one group.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Tasks like taking notes, planning events, and onboarding new hires tend to be seen as "women's work" due to stereotypes that women are more communal and giving than men.⁷¹⁰ When women decline requests for help, they are often penalized for it, while men can say no with less pushback.⁷¹¹

Rooted in performance bias & likeability bias

You see a colleague introduce a senior woman as “the nicest person in the office” without mentioning her job title or accomplishments.

WHY IT MATTERS

When women are described only as “nice,” it can downplay their capabilities and reinforce the stereotype that women are nurturers—as opposed to leaders.⁷¹² This can be particularly undermining to senior-level women.

You see a colleague introduce a senior woman as “the nicest person in the office” without mentioning her job title or accomplishments.

WHAT TO DO

Try to round out the compliment with a reference to the woman’s overall performance. If she recently led a project or is known to be a strong manager, say so. If you believe the woman’s personality is an asset to the company, you can make that point, too. For example, you might say, “Because of her way with clients, we’ve really expanded our customer base.” Just make sure to link it to a positive business outcome.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Because of traditional stereotypes that women are nurturing and communal, colleagues often pay more attention to their personality traits. This means that women’s hard skills, accomplishments, and leadership capabilities often go overlooked, which can slow their advancement.⁷¹³

Rooted in attribution bias & likeability bias

A coworker confides in you, “I honestly just find it easier to work with men.”

WHY IT MATTERS

Your colleague’s preference for working with men could lead them—consciously or unconsciously—to overlook talented women. When this happens, women can miss career opportunities, and your coworker can miss the chance to work with women from whom they might learn something.

A coworker confides in you, “I honestly just find it easier to work with men.”

WHAT TO DO

A comment like this may signal that your coworker thinks women are less talented or less likeable than men. You can ask, “What makes you say that?” When people are asked to explain themselves, it sometimes leads them to rethink their position. You can also explain **WHY IT HAPPENS**—it can be eye-opening to understand how bias works—or share your own perspective: “I’ve had great experiences working with women.” Even if you can’t convince them to think differently, you can push back on their point of view.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Your colleague may say this because of performance bias, which can lead them to incorrectly assume that men are more competent than women.⁷¹⁴ Likeability bias can lead them to feel that competent women are less likeable and therefore harder to work with.⁷¹⁵ And if your colleague is a man, his comment may be rooted in affinity bias—he may prefer to work with people like himself.⁷¹⁶

Rooted in performance bias, likeability bias, affinity bias

A coworker asks, “Who’s the new girl?”

WHY IT MATTERS

Calling an adult woman a girl in a professional context can make her seem junior and inexperienced—and implies that she doesn’t need to be taken seriously. Comments like this are disrespectful to women.

A coworker asks, “Who’s the new girl?”

WHAT TO DO

You can reply, “The new woman we’ve hired is ...” That might be enough to make your colleague rethink their language. Or be more direct: “I’m sure it wasn’t your goal, but calling her a girl can undermine her standing here at work.”

WHY IT HAPPENS

People tend to think that women are less competent than men,⁷¹⁷ which leads them to take women less seriously—and to assume they have lower status and less power.⁷¹⁸ That can make it seem acceptable to refer to a woman as a girl, when they would not call a man a boy.

Rooted in performance bias

Closing activity

SUMMARY: STRATEGIES TO COMBAT BIAS

When bias occurs, there are a number of ways to respond, some of which you discussed today. Below is a summary of the strategies you can use to combat bias.

- ▶ Speak up for someone in the moment
- ▶ Ask a probing question
- ▶ Stick to the facts
- ▶ Explain how bias is in play
- ▶ Advocate for policy or process change

“My One Action to address bias against women in the workplace is...”