

HOW TO TACKLE INVISIBLE SEXISM IN ORGANISATIONS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS



• Introduction	Page 3
• Withholding information	Page 4
• Making Invisible	Page 6
• Democracy & debate	Page 8
• Organisation's environment/atmosphere	Page 10
• Unsafe spaces & transparency	Page 12
• Words as a weapon	Page 14
• Stereotypes	Page 17
• The authors	Page 19

INTRODUCTION

The last decades womens' rights have improved massively. In a lot of countries, sexism seems to be not accepted anymore and women seem to have the same rights as men do. Sadly, women are still oppressed in a lot of ways.

In this toolkit, the invisible oppression of women in the workplace will be discussed. There are still a lot of mechanisms that hold women down.

Consciously, but also subconsciously, women are still treated differently just because of their gender, also in professional environments.

All of this prevents women from reaching their full potential. Without tackling these issues, equity between the genders will not be accomplished.

This toolkit was made to help organizations overcome invisible sexism in the workplace.

Different mechanisms that enforce the oppression of women will be introduced. After that, an explanation will be given on how to recognize these situations and in the end possible ways to tackle the issue will be discussed.

WITHHOLDING INFORMATION

The first way women can be oppressed without anyone noticing is by withholding information from them. This can be done intentionally, by not including them in the decision-making process or knowingly not forwarding information. A lot of times, however, this occurs unintentionally but still has harmful consequences.

Identify:

The best way to describe how one can recognize these situations is by giving an example, so let's start with that.

Example: Colleagues get some drinks after work. You're going home. A week later you find out they made plans for a new project. They have already started preparations. You can join, but you can't voice your opinion on the setup anymore.

This is a situation in which your colleagues were unintentionally withholding information from you. Let's look at a different example.

Example: You work on a project with two men. One day, during a meeting, the two men start talking about something you didn't know about. Turns out they have been discussing things over email with a possible client without including you.

Another situation that leaves the woman in an uninformed position.

Arguments:

The problem is that women cannot act in their best interest if they haven't had access to certain information. Decisions are made without them, their views aren't taken into account and they are hindered from doing their work in the best way possible. That's why it is crucial for organizations to prevent these situations from happening.

Solution:

There are certain things you can do as an individual to counteract in these situations, but it is also important to implement interventions as an organization.

WITHOLDING INFORMATION

As an individual

- Speak up, tell them it's not okay to exclude you. A lot of times this will help a lot. Especially because withholding information often occurs unintentionally.
- Ask to be involved/informed/included. When you realize you might be left out of something, prevent it from happening by asking to be included (or demand it!).
- Speak with colleagues, and make sure everyone learns from this. In the unfortunate event that this does happen to you, make sure everyone knows about it. This way not only the colleague doing it learns from it, but also the other people in your organization.

As an organization

- Set rules for including everyone. Make sure that there is a code of conduct for your organization. Making sure that transparency is preserved and that nobody is excluded by withholding information should be a part of this code.
- Have an open conversation. In case a situation like this does occur, make sure to plan a meeting with all the staff about this topic. Have an open conversation about it and prevent this from happening again.

➤ **RECAP** ◀

Identify

Information is kept from you intentionally or unintentionally

Arguments

Women cannot act in their own best interest, their views are not taken into account and they cannot perform optimally

Solution

Speak up, ask to be involved, inform others.

Set rules, have an open conversation

MAKING INVISIBLE

Identify:

Imagine this: a group of people is gathered for a meeting to talk about the financial situation in the organisation. Seated in the meeting are five men and one woman, and the woman is invited to make sure it is not solely men at the meeting. To make insure "inclusivity". However, at the meeting, the woman is not taken seriously, brushed over at every attempt and feels ignored or invisible. This is diversity, not inclusivity. Even though a woman is on paper represented in the meeting, she also needs to be treated as if they are not there for the statistics and she is there because of her skills and inputs. This applies to meetings and day-to-day work.

Arguments:

Having women at the table is being diverse: "the fact of there being people of many different groups in society, within an organization, etc.:" (definition from Cambridge Dictionary), however, this does not imply inclusivity. Per the definition, inclusivity means: "the fact of including all types of people, things or ideas and treating them all fairly and equally:" (Cambridge Dictionary). So is having a woman at the table enough to be inclusive? Not only that, why was it that we wanted to be inclusive in the first place? Was it because of what it gave to the organisation on paper? What is important to realize is the things that a woman can bring to the table:

1. Improved innovation

Research done by Boston Consulting Group (BCG) shows that companies with above-average diversity in their leadership teams report a greater payoff from innovation and higher EBIT (earnings before interests and taxes) margins.

2. Lost potential

Every word point not given to a person no matter what gender or even race is a loss of potential. An issue which may lead to a crucial or significant central point for the organization.

3. Inclusive teams make better decisions

Great Place to Work found that teams who include both men and women together make improved decisions and that the outcome of ideas is less conventional. They also found that these teams are more effective at making the ideas happen.

MAKING INVISIBLE

Solution:

As an individual:

- Make sure to always have an ally that you can rely on, man or woman
- Speak up, even when your voice is shaking. Not speaking up gives the ones at the table the think that it is acceptable.

As an organisation:

- Examine whether this is a problem, ask the women what they think.
- Make sure to practise speaking in social settings. This can make situations more comfortable for the person and make it easier to speak up if needed.
- Ensure awareness. Perhaps, people do not see this as a problem or maybe do not know. The best way to solve this is to make people aware of it.

> RECAP <

Identify

Arguments

Solution

Being brushed over or ignored intentionally or unintentionally

Improved Innovation
Lost potential
Better decisions

Make sure to have an ally
Speak up - even when your voice is shaking

Research the internal situation
Practice public speaking
Spread awareness

DEMOCRACY, DEBATE AND REPRESENTATION

A big part of organizational work is the culture of democracy, participation and decision-making through various forms of dialogue.

The question is; if a group is being underrepresented in a democratic structure—is it actually democratic? Is there enough space for all to speak up in debates and discussions? Why do we still face discrimination and underrepresentation? For a world that indeed is 50% female, should they not be represented in 50% of all structures?

Identify:

Alongside with a healthy democratic culture, comes an equal playing field for all to participate. This is not the case.

One of the ways this is shown is when women are interrupted during debates, and therefore not able to speak their case, and later not elected for positions because of the lack of knowledge and (representation) about the person.

Other examples include:

- Women have no incentive to run for positions, because of the lack of representation and role models in similar positions—and therefore also possessing the mindset that they most likely will not be elected; solely because of their gender.
- Not feeling the confidence or entitlement to participate in debates, because they will either not be taken seriously or interrupted. When they finally get to grab the microphone, they try to make their statement “as short as possible” and “to the point” to not take up too much space.
- Feeling invalidated when achieving an elected position, due to comments that they got it through other means than hard work and democracy. These comments are often sexually charged or said with a demeaning and ridiculing tone.

Arguments:

Taking this to a grander scale, essentially it means that democracy is not a level playing field—which in the end, makes it non-representative and therefore *undemocratic*.

All of these factors play into making our organizations, and society in general, biased to elect women.

This is an enormous problem. Women and men live very different lives because of both their gender and sex. They are treated differently, they experience the world differently and therefore bring different needs and priorities to the table.

An organization that is dominated by one gender, will lead to treating the other gender inadequately. For most organizations, this happens to be the case with male domination. We need women in organizational structures—and we need them in leadership positions.

DEMOCRACY, DEBATE AND REPRESENTATION

Solution:

as an individual:

- Try to look for role models. There are people who represent you, you just have to search for them. Let them inspire you.
- Take up space! Call them out if you're interrupted, demand time to speak.

as an organization:

- Do not accept comments which are oppressing women in any way. Have a code of conduct with a zero tolerance policy on demeaning and ridiculing comments.
- Implement a gender quatum for different positions. make sure that women are elected for leadership positions.

> RECAP <

Identify

Arguments

Solution

Lack of incentive, lack of confidence, invalidation

Undemocratic and unequal

Role models
Take up space

Code of conduct
Gender quatum

ORGANISATIONS' ENVIRONMENT & ATMOSPHERE

Identify:

An organization's environment plays a big part in ensuring the safety of employees, particularly female employees. There should be an all-round approach to making people feel safe in the workplace and instilling a welcoming atmosphere throughout the organization. Women shouldn't be made to feel tokenistic or undervalued in their work. It is the responsibility of everyone involved to empower female workers and appreciate them and the work they carry out.

Arguments:

We see many different theories at play which result in women feeling unsafe in their workplace. An example of one of these would be the power dynamic that can often be seen between a young female part time worker and the male general manager. He has had the opportunity to, from the very beginning, judge her attributes, get to know her, view both her personality and looks during an interview process, before hiring her. There are a number of workplaces where we unfortunately see women being hired only for how they look or act rather than for their actual experience or education. This can result in the person of power taking advantage of the female worker whenever they wish. The questions we need to be asking is how do we use our tools to ensure that a workplace like this is safe for young women to work in? Oftentimes these women are students who are just trying to make enough money for university or to afford their accommodation, yet they end up in positions of vulnerability, working in a fear based environment that results in resentment towards both the workplace and themselves. Why do we allow this to happen so frequently? What can we do to intervene and to stop this from happening?

Individual Solution:

As an individual it is your job to notice these behaviors and step in when it gets uncomfortable. It can be all too easy for us to watch as a bystander, especially in the case where it does not directly affect us. We need to be strong, not just for ourselves, but for the thousands of women who are taken into work, whether it be a simple part time job that is ruled by an unfair power dynamic, or a sex worker who has nowhere else to turn other than an organization that literally sells their body at a dangerous cost. We need to speak up when we see this and call out the behavior for what it is.

ORGANISATIONS' ENVIRONMENT & ATMOSPHERE

Solutions:

The issue needs to be tackled from the root. If not, it can grow and build up into a bigger conflict where someone's life may be at risk. This is especially true when dealing with someone of authority who has tendencies to become violent upon rejection. It is the responsibility of the organization itself to have regular check in with both executive officers, and other employees. Frequent one-on-one meetings allows for employees to voice their opinions and flag any recurring issues they see arising. It also hands the power back to the organization at a higher level rather than just a managerial level. The organization has the opportunity to investigate any allegations or unfair dynamics used for one's personal gain, and put a stop to these issues at the root of the problem.

➤ RECAP ◀

Identify

Arguments

Solution

Every woman has the right to feel safe at work in her organisation.
Employees/volunteers should feel empowered and valued at work.

Males personal gains
Women are vulnerable and less likely to raise conflict.

Call it out
Stand up for yourself
Don't be afraid to raise issues

Hold regular meetings
Listen
Be prepared to implement change.

UNSAFE SPACES & TRANSPARANCY

Identifying:

A workplace without discrimination against women would look like a place where women feel safe, respected and celebrated as individuals and professionals. It is a place where women do not have to tolerate inappropriate, sexual or discriminatory remarks. Rather, women know that they can confidently report and seek help if they ever feel unsafe or uncomfortable with a colleague or a work partner.

Imagine a woman has to attend an in-person meeting with the members of the organisation, but her school starts at that time and she has a test that she must take. But the head of the organisation says that the meeting is mandatory too. You'll get double punishment and whatever you now choose won't be the right choice. Neither your colleagues nor school friends don't have understanding or support.

Arguments:

The reason why there is no encouragement, support or even basic understanding is because there is no mutual respect neither or there is no knowledge that these types of behaviours are wrong. A safe workspace is a space where a responsibility of a wife a mother or a student are not used as excuses to take away her professional responsibilities and limit her progress. In fact, it is a place where women, like men, can decide to have families (or not) without facing repercussions at work. It is a place where women can hold multiple identities- professional, mother, girlfriend and daughter.

Solution:

When a situation like this happens to you, you shouldn't feel bad about it and overthink it. It is not shameful to be involved in so many places, quite the opposite actually- it's inspiring. Really try to talk it through and try to make them see where you're coming from. Get them to understand your obligations. Even if it turns out that they don't accept it- you should. Planning ahead and organizing your weekly working hours is the key, so if you can't work those last 2 hours on a Monday in an organisation, you could move them to Tuesday (if that's applicable of course).

UNSAFE SPACES & TRANSPARENCY

> RECAP <

Identify

Arguments

Solution

Not being able to communicate because of lacking respect or safe space

Double punishment
Not efficient in the long run
Uncomfortable environment

Express your obligations, role and situation
Develop good planning skills

Implement internal governing systems that protect and promote women's equity and rights.

WORDS AS A WEAPON

There are many ways that somebody can use their words to put you down or make you feel inferior. Often it is difficult to respond in the moment, but becoming familiar with common verbal techniques can help you spot them in the moment and respond accordingly. This is also particularly relevant when you are a bystander to a situation. We have outlined some examples, arguments and solutions below.

Identify:

Example 1: A coworker announced to everyone in the vicinity how “sexy” a client was after she left a meeting.

Example 2: Interrupting or cutting a woman off while speaking.

Example 3: A male reframing / passing off a woman’s contribution as their own.

Commentary: This demonstrates that there had not been proper engagement with the woman’s idea or contribution earlier in the meeting. It’s dismissive and can make women feel small.

Example 4: Question a woman’s judgement in their own area of expertise – someone outside your area thinking they know best.

Arguments:

It is important to combat verbal jabs in the workplace as they create a negative organisational culture. Subtle jabs whether conscious or unconscious are not just jokes, or friendly “banter”. They are offensive, harmful and negatively impact the well-being and productivity of employees. Misogynistic, undermining language creates a culture where everyday sexism is acceptable as long as it's indirect.

Sexist comments are inappropriate and reductive, and often show the individuals involved were paying attention to a woman’s appearance over the content of what she is saying. Sexualised comments in the workplace can manifest as; uncomfortable sexualised comments about women; ripping into their looks; or the fact that they don’t fit into a feminine stereotype. If they do fit into a feminine stereotype, then portraying them as very sexual or seeing them in a sexualised manner in the workplace. This is undermining behaviour designed to silence women, push them out of the conversation, and forces the conversation on from any viable points the woman was making.

WORDS AS A WEAPON

Solutions:

Example 1:

You can question them / get them to explain their comment.

Why do you think that / why did you say that?

Highlight that this is inappropriate and not what they should have been focusing on.

"Well, I think the content of the meeting was more important than how she looked / I was paying more attention to what she was saying than what she was wearing".

I find this comment inappropriate for the workplace"

Another solution is creating an organisational culture from the get-go where these comments are understood to be unacceptable. This is addressed in the "Organisation's environment/atmosphere" section.

Example 2:

If a woman has been interrupted in a meeting, and you witness this, you can provide them with the opportunity to finish their contribution by saying, "xx, can we just return to what you were saying..."

If you have been interrupted, you can bring the conversation back to your point "As I was saying", "To finish my point on X", "I want to go back to X for a minute as I don't feel like we finished discussing it"

Example 3:

When you see someone else's suggestions have been reframed and appropriated by men in the room, you should acknowledge the originator: Eg. "building on Jenny's idea..."

Actively countering this exclusive environment:

Using micro-inclusions to combat micro-aggressions.

Acknowledging women's contributions to discussion and ensuring they have been acknowledged for the work they have contributed to, such as papers and policies

Example 4:

Highlighting your experience and why you are qualified to answer this question. If you are a bystander to this, highlighting your colleague's experience or competence is important. If you are having trouble understanding why a colleague came to a particular judgement, asking from a place of curiosity and humility rather than assuming you know best is a good approach to take, particularly when they are more experienced in that area.

WORDS AS A WEAPON

> RECAP <

Identify

Sexualised comments
Interrupting
Passing off another's contribution as your own
Questioning a woman's judgement in her area of expertise.

Arguments

Undermining
Designed to sideline women from the conversation, silence them and make them feel inferior.

Solution

Question the comment & highlight that it is inappropriate.
Return to the person's point, & reference at a later date.

The meeting chairperson can use timers, ask to hear other points of view, call out interruptions and highlight people's qualifications.

STEREOTYPES

Identify:

Examples: Stereotypes are presumptions that try to fit people into a small, specific box of being. Examples of some stereotypes set on women by society are: having an hourglass body shape, having long hair, being submissive, not expressing their opinions, being caregivers, being compliant and so forth. Stereotypes include presumptions about women's looks, behaviours, roles in society, personality, occupation and interests for example. In organizations and politics, women are expected to be passive listener who doesn't get to express their opinions. They are expected to sit in some corner and be disregarded because women aren't expected to be powerful.

Arguments:

Why are women expected to be a certain way? Why are they supposed to look a specific way and why shouldn't women have a say in for example politics? Why are women seen as lesser than men? Women have just as many opinions as other genders. Women are oppressed and seen as emotional and crazy if they express an inconvenience or a proposal. Why wouldn't women be able to succeed and make a turning point in society and the world in general? Why are women frowned upon for trying to make a change? These misogynist ideas stem from the patriarchal and capitalist structures of society. The patriarchy is embedded in social, political and economic systems that construct inequality between genders. "Feminine" attributes are underestimated while "masculine" attributes are privileged and affluent.

Solution:

We need to eradicate these misogynist ideas and societal structures to get rid of the underestimation of women. On a personal level developing empathy for others is very important. It's very important to educate oneself on topics related to the oppression of women to understand the disadvantages and impacts of stereotypes. Also educating others on these matters is very important. Ignorance and unawareness are big contributors to judgment and the emergence of stereotypes. It's vital in different organizations and other settings to have honest conversations. It's important to create an atmosphere where discussions are safe to have. It's important to identify biases and stereotypes because identification comes a long way in eradicating stereotypes and changing people's attitudes regarding stereotyping. We need to expose people to different points of view and create inclusive environments. We need to be open-minded in order to challenge stereotypes in society.

STEREOTYPES

> RECAP <

Identify

Arguments

Solution

Expectations and presumptions about how a person should act, look like and roles in society etc.

Different societal structures look down on women, "feminine" attributes are underestimated

Hold your head up high, your stereotype does not define who you really are

Create inclusive environments with honest conversations

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