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## Gender bias at workplace and the remedial measures

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### ABSTRACT

*Despite substantial rise in the number of women joining workforce, gender parity continues to suffer, specially at higher positions. In India, 85% of working women claim to have missed out on a promotion or hike because of their gender. About two-thirds of working women (63%) and working mothers (69%) say they faced discrimination at work due to familial and household responsibilities. It is the need of the hour for organizations to reimagine their diversity practices and offer greater flexibility to caregivers, to increase female participation in the workforce. Reduced and flexible schedules, more sabbaticals, and new opportunities to upskill and learn are critical offerings that can help organizations attract, hire, and retain more female talent. Gender bias is the tendency to prefer one gender over another. It is a form of unconscious bias, or implicit bias, which occurs when one individual unconsciously attributes certain attitudes and stereotypes to another person or group of people.*

**Keywords:** Gender Bias, Work Place, Discrimination, Remedies

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Bias is prevalent in every aspect of our lives. Our brains are hardwired to categorize things we encounter in order to make sense of the complicated world around us. However, biases can cause us to form prejudices against others, which allows for egregious inequalities to form between different demographics. Gender bias is the tendency to prefer one gender over another. It is a form of unconscious bias, or implicit bias, which occurs when one individual unconsciously attributes certain attitudes and stereotypes to another person or group of people. These ascribed behaviours affect how the individual understands and engages with others. In today's society, gender bias is often used to refer to the preferential treatment men receive — specifically white, heterosexual males. It's often labelled as "sexism" and describes the prejudice against women solely on the basis of their sex. Gender bias is most prominently visible within professional settings. Gender inequality in organizations is a complex phenomenon that can be seen in organizational structures, processes, and practices.

Globally, women are underrepresented in corporations, and the share of women decreases with each step up the corporate hierarchy. Women encounter many barriers to advancement into corporate leadership positions, and these barriers include gender-based discrimination as well as unconscious gender bias. Some examples of how workplace discrimination negatively affects women's earnings and opportunities are the gender wage gap, the dearth of women in leadership, and the longer time required for women (vs. men) to advance in their careers. In other words, workplace discrimination contributes to women's lower socio-economic status. Importantly, such discrimination against women largely can be attributed to human resources (HR) policies and HR-related decision-making. The HR practices (i.e., policies, decision-making, and their enactment) affect the hiring, training, pay, and promotion of women. Both the objective disadvantages of lower pay, status, and opportunities at work, and the subjective experiences of being stigmatized, affect women's psychological and physical stress, mental and physical health, job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and ultimately, their performance.

A major result of these biases has contributed to the creation of the glass ceiling. The glass ceiling is a metaphor for the evident but intangible hierarchical impediment that prevents minorities and women from achieving elevated professional success. Due to contributing factors, like the aforementioned types of bias, women and minorities experience a barrier that prevents them from reaching upper-level roles in leadership and the C-Suite.

### 2. UNCONSCIOUS GENDER BIAS IN THE WORKPLACE

Unconscious gender bias is defined as unintentional and automatic mental associations based on gender, stemming from traditions, norms, values, culture and/or experience. Automatic associations feed into decision-making, enabling a quick assessment of an individual according to gender and gender stereotypes. Organizations can take steps to counteract gender biases and other types of biases, thus the presence of unconscious gender bias in an individual does not automatically translate into biases in the workplace. Gender biases in the mindsets of managers can prevent women from advancing into leadership positions. Many companies have taken steps to facilitate women's networking and career growth, but more can be done to identify and overcome unconscious gender bias to truly give women and men an equal chance to advance into leadership positions.

Processes and programmes that reflect stereotypically masculine criteria naturally place women in worse positions and negatively impact their opportunities. Talent management documents may have pro-male definitions of leadership, and some talent management criteria and competencies included in performance review documents have a masculine bias. For instance, a corporate company may fix the performance indicator "unfailing availability and total geographical mobility" as a leadership criterion. In general, the reduced domestic obligations of men make it easier for them to be available and geographically mobile. Thus, this criterion has a pro-male, pro-childless bias, and thus penalizes women, particularly working mothers. Moreover, men and women rarely have equal access to participation in leadership development programmes, even though this is critical for progression up the corporate hierarchy. At the senior management level, only 51 per cent of women compared to 62 per cent of men reported that they interacted with a company leader at least once a week.

### **3. BREAKING THE PROTOTYPES**

The stubbornness of this problem lies in the fact that it is rooted in our societal beliefs about men, women and leadership. We believe men should be 'agentic' (assertive, decisive, strong) and women should be 'communal' (warm, caring, sympathetic). These gender stereotypes clash with the leadership prototype, i.e. the societal view of what a prototypical leader should be. The leader prototype shares characteristics with the male stereotype: self-reliant, assertive, dominant and competitive. The problem arises when women are considered for leadership positions. Leaders are expected to behave in an agentic manner, which means women in leadership positions must behave counter-stereotypically. Behaving counter-stereotypically runs the risk of backlash because people who behave counter to gender stereotypes are deemed less likeable and therefore less hireable.

One solution is for women to display both agentic and communal traits, a balancing act that helps female leaders garner the respect of their colleagues. Successful senior women are demanding and caring; for example, setting high standards while also providing support to achieve those standards. They are authoritative and participative, showing that they are in charge while also encouraging others to have a voice. But this is a difficult tightrope to walk and we cannot expect individual women to solve a problem that is a societal issue.

### **4. MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM**

Given the statistics that 80% of jobs are communicated to people informally, and coupled with our finding that these communications may be riddled with gender bias, it is important for companies to rethink about how they communicate with candidates at that stage. One good strategy can be to make the process more formalized to allow for less gender bias and less human error. The persistence of a gender wage gap indicates that while discrimination is ending, bias lingers. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2020 found "there is still a 31.4% average gender gap that remains to be closed globally. In the private sector, women occupy only 29% of senior-level executive positions despite comprising 48% of the entire private sector workforce.

### **5. REMEDIAL MEASURES**

Some key actions you can take to remove biases from your organizational processes are as follows:

#### **5.1 Reducing Organizational Decision Makers' Sexism**

An effective mean to reduce gender discrimination in HR-related decision-making and enactment is to focus directly on reducing the hostile and benevolent sexist beliefs of organizational decision makers. Interventions aimed at reducing these beliefs typically involve diversity training, such as a seminar, course, or workshop. Such training involves one or more sessions that involve interactive discussions, lectures, and practical assignments. During the training men and women are taught about sexism and how gender roles in society are socially constructed. Investigations have shown these workshop-based interventions are effective at reducing levels of hostile sexism but have inconsistent effects on benevolent sexism. The subtle, and in some ways positive nature of benevolent sexism makes it difficult to confront and reduce using such interventions. However, levels of benevolent sexism are reduced when individuals are explicitly informed about the harmful implications of benevolent sexism.

#### **5.2 Formalize and standardize your processes**

The goal should be to remove as much subjectivity and emotion as possible from people processes. All interviews should be structured, meaning that the same questions are asked of all candidates, with no time allocated for small talk. Assign a numerical rating to each response using pre-determined, standardized criteria. This allows you to fairly compare candidates. The same principles apply to performance management. Clearly define the threshold for each of the performance ratings and reinforce consistent application through manager training and oversight.

#### **5.3 Fact-based decision-making and transparency**

It may require a big culture change, especially in hierarchical companies. A very effective way to remove subjectivity and bias is to require that all people decisions – whether it's hiring, promotions or performance management – be justified with evidence and explained to others. Aids such as checklists can inject transparency into a process, i.e., helping others to understand how decisions were made, and also remind the manager of the evidence required to justify a decision. For example, task-based assessments are an effective way of assessing someone's capability and can serve as evidence that they are ready for promotion. A personal endorsement, on the other hand should not qualify as evidence.

#### **5.4 Change of Attitude.**

We need to accept both men and women in counter-stereotypical roles. The expectation that women should be communal makes it difficult for them to ascend to leadership roles. The expectation that men should be agentic makes it difficult for them to choose care-giving roles. Breaking gender stereotypes means that we need to allow all members of society the freedom to choose the roles most suited to them.

#### **5.5. Periodic Analysis.**

Collect data on your organization to reveal the true picture. Find out the gender balance among all applicants compared to successful applicants. Look at the gender balance in your short lists. Examine performance reviews by gender and role to see if there is gender bias occurring at that level (e.g. a finance company found that women were receiving systematically lower performance reviews in male-dominated roles). The data will help you figure out where to concentrate your efforts.

#### **5.6 Systemic change.**

The only way we will create meaningful change is to create systems designed to eliminate bias. For example, ensuring there is gender balance when short listing candidates. Or assessing candidates in a gender-blind way (assuming, of course, that the pool of applicants is gender-balanced – if it is not, then removing gender from CVs might only exacerbate the existing imbalance). Governmental policy is one of the most powerful systemic ways of creating change. Canada's Quebec province instituted a paternity leave policy that gave men five weeks of 'use it or lose it' paid leave after their baby was born. The percentage of fathers taking paternity leave more than doubled, from 32% before the policy change to 76% afterwards. Those men became more involved fathers and equal partners, thus challenging gender stereotypes. Change will only happen with a combination of systemic change and individual behavioural and attitudinal change.

#### **5.7 Offer perks & benefits for equal opportunities**

When you review the perks and benefits you offer, bring your entire team in on the conversation. Provide them an opportunity to share honest feedback on the benefits they wish your team had and the benefits that would draw them to another company. If you have a young company, employees may value parental leave benefits, whereas if your employees are later in their careers, they may care more about retirement benefits. Having these conversations will help you invest in benefits that will actually support your employee's work-life balance. Additionally, parental leave brings a wealth of benefits beyond supporting working mothers' work-life balance, including boosting retention rates and improved morale at work.

#### **5.8 Miscellaneous steps**

Collect & analyze employee demographic data to rule out disparities between men and women by department, seniority and retention. Collect & analyze employee compensation data by conducting regular pay audits to identify how men and women are paid and promoted differently. Conduct employee engagement surveys to gather more data about your team and identify trends in how your employees engage in their work. Implement perception surveys and anonymous surveys for employees to share experiences they've encountered like sexual harassment or gender bias that may not have been addressed in standard employee engagement surveys. Identify gender bias in your recruiting process by implementing blind applications and interviews to improve female candidates' chances of being hired. Another simple way to reduce gender bias in your recruiting process is to invest in recruitment tools that utilize automation or artificial intelligence to make decisions. Implement regular gender bias training to reduce unconscious gender bias and then look for diversity and inclusion professionals or unconscious bias programs.

To provide all of your employees with equal opportunities, create a standardized mentoring process. Provide leadership training opportunities for everyone growing in their careers to ensure they know how to manage and lead teams, which is often a skill set that needs to be learned. Fill the pay gap and break the glass ceiling; companies need to proactively provide women with leadership and professional development opportunities. Give everyone a seat at the table for implementing a new project to ensure a diverse team with a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences to tackle it. Create an office space for everyone with special emphasis on comfort of lactating mothers. Regular bias training, adjusting office spaces, and opening up more leadership opportunities are all a great step in the right direction when overcoming gender bias in the workplace. Review your non-discrimination and anti-harassment policies periodically to ensure that this information is included in job descriptions, employee handbooks and your career page. Provide employees with information and resources on who to reach out to in different situations.

### **6. CONCLUSION**

To conclude, gender equality is a moral and a business imperative. But unconscious bias holds us back, and de-biasing people's minds has proven to be difficult and expensive. Diversity training programs have had limited success, and individual effort alone often invites backlash. Behavioural design offers a new solution. By de-biasing organizations instead of individuals, we can make smart changes that have big impacts." Battling workplace bias requires deliberate strategies, including learning to say no, getting comfortable talking about uncomfortable topics, and helping others behind you. It's certainly a complex and dynamic topic that is ever evolving, so make sure to keep learning and discovering new and improved ways to reduce gender bias in the workplace.

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