Sexism at work

What is the impact of sexism at work?

Sexism is inefficient

Sexist assumptions and practices can hold employees back and channel them into the wrong roles. Women may be shut out of senior positions or diverted into roles seen to require stereotypically 'feminine' skills. Men have been found to rapidly leave jobs dominated by women due to social stigma, with some preferring unemployment[1]. This is a waste of human resources.

Sexism harms employees

Sexist expectations and behaviour have been shown to negatively affect employees' performance, sense of belonging, mental health and job satisfaction[2]. Sexist behaviour and practices, when frequent and normalised, have been shown to be as detrimental to employees' occupational well-being as sexual harassment[3][4].

> **Less than half of EU citizens believe gender equality has been achieved at work.**
>
> Source: Eurobarometer[5].

Sexism damages an organisation's image

> **94 % of EU citizens believe gender equality is a fundamental right**
>
> Source: Eurobarometer[6].

When employees feel that sexist behaviour and practices persist in spite of efforts to build an inclusive workplace, organisations can be accused of '**gender washing**', i.e. only making cosmetic changes.

Many organisations have made a commitment to 🇹 diversity **and inclusion** to increase the number of employees from under-represented groups and improve their experience in the organisation. The European Commission adopted a diversity and inclusion strategy in 2017 and the nine EU justice and home affairs agencies published a diversity and inclusion statement in 2019[7]. Yet without organisational change to combat deeply entrenched gender stereotypes and unconscious bias, these efforts can be undermined.

The Council of Europe recommendation on combating sexism states that sexism in the workplace includes:

> *… derogatory comments, objectification, sexist humour or jokes, overfamiliar remarks, silencing or ignoring people, gratuitous comments about dress and physical appearance, sexist body language, lack of respect and masculine practices which intimidate or exclude women and favour fellow men[8].*

In practice, **it can be difficult to agree on what constitutes sexism and to create an environment where everybody feels free to voice concerns**. This can be a particular challenge in multicultural and hierarchical environments.

This handbook will show you how gender stereotypes and unconscious bias manifest themselves in sexist organisational practices and individual behaviour; how this affects employees, organisations and wider society; and what action you can take to rid your organisation of sexism.

> *"Unconscious bias is not about 'bad people' who have it and 'good ones' who don't – it's about being aware, learning how to deal with it and creating structures and processes that are less prone to biases."*
>
> ***Rebekka Wiemann, Equal Opportunities Officer, Council of the European Union***

Footnotes

[1] Torre, M., 'The flip side of segregation: men in typically female jobs', London School of Economics and Political Science Business Review, 2019 (https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2019/01/29/the-flip-side-of-segregation-men-in-typically-female-jobs/).

[2] Rippon, G., The Gendered Brain, Bodley Head, London, 2019;
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[3] Sojo, V. E., Wood, R. E. and Genat, A. E., 'Harmful workplace experiences and women's occupational well-being: a meta-analysis', Psychology of Women Quarterly, Vol. 40, No 1, 2016, pp. 10–40 (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0361684315599346).

[4] https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs_428_en.pdf

[5] EU Open Data Portal, 'Special Eurobarometer 465: Gender equality 2017' (https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2154_87_4_465_ENG).

[6] EU Open Data Portal, 'Special Eurobarometer 465: Gender equality 2017' (https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2154_87_4_465_ENG).

[7] European Commission communication – A better workplace for all: from equal opportunities towards diversity and inclusion, COM(2017) 5300 final, 2017 (https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/communication-equal-opportunities-diversity-inclusion-2017.pdf);
EIGE, 'EU agencies focus on diversity and inclusion', 2019 (https://eige.europa.eu/news/eu-agencies-focus-diversity-and-inclusion). The nine agencies are: the European Asylum Support Office, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, EIGE, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training and the European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice.

[8] Council of Europe, Preventing and Combating Sexism – Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2019, p. 21 (https://rm.coe.int/prems-055519-gbr-2573-cmrec-2019-1-web-a5/168093e08c).