Sexism at work

How can I combat sexism? A ten-step programme for managers

This section will present a ten-step programme for management and leadership to start tackling sexism in their organisation. The following section will outline what action all staff can take to implement culture change in their organisation.

1. Check your own awareness on sexism

You can test your own biases to ensure your understanding of sexism and sexual harassment.

How did you do in the ‘Test yourself’ section? Ensure your own understanding of sexism and sexual harassment to ensure your credibility.
Remember that people who believe that they are not sexist are less objective and more likely to behave in a sexist way.

You can test your own biases with the Harvard Implicit Bias Test, developed by the University of Harvard: Take the test

2. **Be vocal about your commitment**
Managers should find out what training their organisation offers on sexism, harassment, bias and diversity. They should unambiguously and consistently state their commitment to eradicating sexist behaviour and practices in their organisation. Concerns about organisational inaction and repercussions can prevent those who are experiencing sexism from speaking up.

Organisations striving to uphold high ethical standards cannot rely on rules and enforcement mechanisms alone. Instead, they must support their ambitions by developing an appropriate culture of integrity.

Source: European Court of Auditors[1].

As the #MeToo movement and campaigns such as the Everyday Sexism Project have shown, just because sexism is not reported or spoken about does not mean people are not experiencing it. As you saw in the ‘Understand’ section, sexist behaviour and practices are prevalent across society and work contexts.

**Example: European Central Bank**
When the European Central Bank made a public commitment to diversity and took several measures to officially support gender balance, the promotion gap between women and men disappeared[2].

3. **Take the pulse of your organisation**
Your team may feel comfortable sharing their experiences of sexism, but often they will prefer anonymity. You can carry out an audit via an anonymous survey. Involving an external provider can also be helpful. Check with your human resources team for further advice.

Suggest to your team that they complete the ‘Test yourself’ section of this handbook.
“We strive for an environment where sexism has no place, where everyone can feel safe, properly respected, and treated with dignity. Such commitment must come not only from all levels of management, but from all staff, too.”

*William Shapcott, Director-General of Organisational Development and Services, Council of the European Union*

4. **Use bias interrupters to identify and eliminate sexism**

‘Bias Interrupters’ disrupt the transmission of bias in work interactions such as recruitment, performance appraisals, promotions and task allocation. The focus is on changing systems as opposed to changing people.

The first step is to **gather data to identify bias**, such as the following.

Do women or men employees receive lower performance evaluations after they have had children?

Are women disproportionately described using relationship-focused adjectives and men using task-oriented adjectives in performance appraisals?

Are meetings dominated by one gender? Do women who speak more receive lower performance evaluations? You can use an app to measure how much women and men talk in meetings.[3]

Are women employees disproportionately responsible for tasks that do not help career progression, such as the organisation of informal office events?

**Example: European Court of Auditors**

The European Court of Auditors carries out an annual evaluation of promotions for the year to make sure that parental leave and part-time working do not negatively impact promotion within their institution.

The second step is to **implement bias interrupters**. Here are some ways this can be done in performance appraisal and feedback:
Infographic included in the European Commission’s recommended online training ‘Unconscious bias: micro-learning for managers’.

*Stick with measurable criteria.* For example: ‘Cécile delivered all tasks within agreed
deadlines’ rather than ‘Cécile is a good time manager’.

**Back up with data.** For example: ‘Isabella held three induction meetings on the work of the unit for newcomers’ rather than ‘Isabella has supported newcomers to the unit’.

**Enable staff to accurately assess their performance with regular informal feedback.** The performance appraisal systems of the EU institutions and agencies require self-assessment. Research suggests women are just as likely to ask for feedback as men, but are less likely to get it\(^4\). When faced with self-evaluation, women have also been shown to evaluate their performance more negatively than men\(^5\).

**Provide unconscious bias training to ensure objective performance appraisal and informal feedback.** Managers have to watch out for unconscious bias when considering employees behaving in a non-gender stereotypical way (for example women behaving assertively – see p. 18).

**Encourage women to apply for more senior roles.** If certain selection criteria are optional, this should be made clear (see p. 13 on women considering selection criteria final).

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**Personal story**

“My experience is that line managers are promoting people who behave like them more than executing a fair decision-making process based on facts. If you work in a very ‘male’ sector like ICT, the impact on the appraisal procedure is quite significant.

The appraisal training makes evaluators aware of typical evaluator’s biases, but training is not sufficient. If there are no ex-ante controls, stereotyping can still happen.”

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**Rosemarie, EU agency**

5. **Eliminate sexism from your surroundings**

You only need to make small changes to make progress. Here are some ideas.

**Check your internal communication** to ensure you avoid language and images that include gender stereotypes (e.g. women serving coffee or taking notes).

**Tip!**
Have gender-balanced panels at your conferences.

Do not accept invitations to single-gender panels[6]. If you accept, make some noise about it once you are there.

Encourage men to take parental leave.

Eliminate sexism from meetings by:

- asking all participants to contribute – be aware of a bias relating to women ‘who talk a lot’ and who can be perceived more negatively than men[7];
- rotating housekeeping tasks such as note taking among all participants, regardless of gender;
- acknowledging all contributors to any discussion or initiative, not just the most vocal.

"We are careful regarding what visuals we use in our internal communication. The level of sexism in stock photos is high (e.g. few photos of women above 50 in a business context) and many people don't realise until it is pointed out to them."

_Rebekka Wiemann, Equal Opportunities Officer, Council of the European Union_

**Good to know**

You can follow Commissioner Mariya Gabriel's #NoWomanNoPanel campaign on social media.

6. **Be clear that sexist behaviour will not be tolerated**
When announcing your position of zero tolerance regarding sexist behaviour and sexual harassment, be clear that **all complaints will be treated seriously**.
The EU institutions and agencies offer the services of confidential counsellors to oversee informal procedures aimed at mediation and conciliation. Make sure your team knows who the confidential counsellors are and how to contact them.

**Tip!**

EIGE has a policy of appointing a gender-balanced team of confidential counsellors. In order to protect the complainant, it may be deemed best to move someone to another part of the organisation.

**Consider carefully before deciding to move the complainant:**

‘Is this really the least harmful course of action …?’

‘… Or is it actually the easiest as they are the more junior party?’

When employees at EIGE faced allegations of sexual harassment, the Institute conducted investigations and took action against staff members, including dismissals.

EIGE subsequently led the adoption of a zero-tolerance policy towards sexual harassment in the workplace, signed by other EU agencies[^8].

7. **Manage passivity**

It is important to make sure your team understands what types of behaviour are considered sexist and unacceptable.

Your staff should also have received appropriate **training on unconscious bias**, how to stage a **bystander intervention** and how to **self-advocate**.

This does not mean escalating all incidents, but making people aware. It is an opportunity to set up measures to deal with future occurrences in a productive and non-conflictual fashion.
Good to know

The **Council of Europe** has a compilation of good practices to combat sexism in its 47 Member States[^9].

**Personal story**

“Senior leaders (both women and men) often either don’t notice or are not empowered or trained to act against sexist behaviour in their departments.”

Eleonora, European Commission, Brussels

8. **Monitor backlash**

Many managers fear resistance when they propose to launch initiatives to tackle sexism. **Resistance is information and any pushback provides excellent data.** Make a note of where the resistance is coming from and why. Check how it links to any previously reported behaviour.

**Tip!**

Individual coaching and group training can help tackle unconscious bias and sexism. Some individuals have been in a post for many years and are unaware of their unconscious biases and sexist behaviour. Workplace expectations may be different to when they first joined.

Allocating a **mentor or reverse mentoring** (assigning a younger and more junior person as a mentor) can also be helpful.

**Watch out**

Women and ethnic minority leaders who promote diversity can receive lower performance ratings.

It may seem logical to allocate initiatives to tackle sexism to women. However, **women may face a backlash when promoting diversity-related initiatives** as they highlight their status and trigger the associated negative stereotypes[^10][^11].

9. **Provide training on self-advocacy**
Many instances of sexism can be defused by training staff to deal with the issue themselves.

Self-advocacy is the ability to speak up for yourself in a non-conflictual way. Many situations involving sexism, particularly at the lower end of the spectrum, can be defused by training staff to deal with the issue themselves.

If any behaviour is part of an ongoing pattern, then that is clearly something that employees should be advised to report.

There will also be instances where self-advocacy is difficult – if the person behaving in a sexist manner is in a position of authority for example. Recommending employees make an official report could be appropriate in such cases.

**Example**
The European Court of Auditors has set up a working group on ‘dignity at work’ to provide guidance on how to deal with sexism.

10. **Provide incentives**
Managers can be held accountable by clearly outlining measurable expectations around specific areas of activity such as:
Tip!

Make sure networking events are held during core hours where all staff can build relationships for career progression.

**Example: European Commission**

To achieve 40% women in management, the European Commission assigned a target to each DG.

Measures included a career development programme to get women into management roles. This included personalised skills assessment, coaching, training, cross-DG mentorship and networking.

The European Commission also implemented **gender-balanced selection panels** and **gender-neutral vacancy notices**, as well as the possibility to **suspend the filling of management positions in case of insufficient progress** in the recruitment of women managers.

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**Footnotes**


[3] For example, Time to Talk (not tested by EIGE) (http://www.lookwhostalking.se/).


[6] Single-gender panels can be acceptable, for example if survivors of sexual violence are speaking. However, more often than not it is beneficial to have representatives of both genders. A panel on women in ICT, for example, would benefit from the presence of men so they can hear first-hand the challenges faced by their women colleagues.


