

TOOL 1.17

Reducing Implicit Bias in the Workplace

- » **GOAL:** Help HR teams understand implicit bias, implications for the workplace, and strategies to mitigate it
- » **TARGET UNITS:** Human Resources, Senior Management

While a number of tools in this toolkit provide guidance on policies and systems to put in place to reduce bias, this tool highlights some of the deep-seated biases that can disadvantage women in the workforce, how they can impact their ability to succeed and rise through an organization, and ways to address them. These biases are often called unconscious or implicit biases—biases that may be deep-seated and culturally ingrained, but of which we may not be entirely aware. Addressing these biases is critical for supporting women’s entry and progression on the corporate ladder. These biases are key aspects of the ‘broken rung’ theory—that women find it harder to climb the initial rungs of the corporate ladder, meaning they often remain concentrated in lower positions. For instance, only 72 women are promoted to manager for every 100 men who are made manager.¹²⁰ When few women rise to junior management, even fewer are able to rise to senior managers—which also then influences their ability to mentor and sponsor junior staff.¹²¹ Understanding, naming, and addressing these biases can help people to counteract them. As employers, being aware of these biases—and ensuring that staff are aware and understand that even implicit biases will not be tolerated—is an important step towards creating an environment in which all employees are able to work to the best of their abilities.

The tool outlines five main types of implicit gender bias. Some of these biases are not necessarily against women (such as affinity bias), but they are likely to benefit men and disadvantage women, especially in male-dominated sectors. Others are based on common perceptions of and about men’s and women’s roles, intelligence, and expected behavior in society. While these biases are present globally, they may be more or less pervasive in different cultures, so readers should consider the extent to which these biases ring true in their cultural contexts. And it should be noted that even where deep-rooted stereotypes and expectations about women and men seem to advantage men and disadvantage women, assumptions that feed into overly normative views of men (for instance, expecting women to take parental leave, but not allowing for men to do the same) can contribute to damaging cultures of toxic masculinity. Efforts to break up these biases will benefit both women and men.

¹²⁰ McKinsey and Lean In, [Women in The Workplace 2019](#), 2019.

¹²¹ Ibid.

TABLE 1H | Types of Bias¹²²

Implications for the Workplace	Mitigation Measures
<h3>Affinity Bias</h3> <p>Affinity bias is the tendency to favor people who are like us in some way, and dislike or avoid people who are different.¹²³</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Interviewers are more likely to positively evaluate candidates similar to them. Where two candidates are similar but differ in certain traits, interviewers are more likely to value characteristics that they shared with the applicant as more important than the characteristics of the candidate to whom they are less similar. » Mentors are more likely to support protegees who are like them in some way.¹²⁴ » Managers are more likely to give positive evaluations to employees who are similar.¹²⁵ » In male-dominated workplaces, or where men dominate management positions, affinity bias can mean that men are more likely to be mentored and/or get positive evaluations than women. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Require mentors to have a gender-equitable mix of mentees, either at a time or in sequence. » Track distribution of positive performance evaluations and the gender bias of managers and staff to determine if there are specific or widespread issues. » Make evaluation criteria specific and easily measure-able to reduce possibility of bias.

Likeability Bias

Likeability bias is the expectation of women to be agreeable and likeable, and a negative reaction to women who are ‘too pushy’ or ‘aggressive.’

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » As a result of the likeability bias, women are more likely to be described as ‘bossy’ or ‘aggressive,’ which can mean poorer evaluations and create challenges for advancement. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Implement standardized criteria for performance assessments to reduce the potential for bias. The more specific and standardized criteria are, and the less room there is for subjective evaluation, the less room there will be for bias. |
|---|--|

¹²² This tool was developed drawing in large part from Lean In’s ‘50 Ways to Fight Bias’ Gender Bias Cards, which are a customizable set of training materials specifically focused on addressing implicit gender bias.

¹²³ McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook, “Birds of a Feather.” Annual Review of Sociology, 2001; Hebl, Foster, Mannix, et al., “Formal and Interpersonal Discrimination: A Field Study of Bias Towards Homosexual Applicants,” Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 2002; Rivera, “Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms,” American Sociological Review, 2012.

¹²⁴ Tammy Allen et al., “The Mentor’s Perspective: A Qualitative Inquiry and Future Research Agenda,” Journal of Vocational Behavior 51 (August 1997): 70–89.

¹²⁵ C. M. Riordan, “Relational demography within groups: Past developments, contradictions, and new directions,” in G. R. Ferris, ed., Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management, vol. 19 (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 2000), 131–73.

Implications for the Workplace

- » Women are more often described as ‘too aggressive’ or ‘bossy’ in the workplace than men.¹²⁶ While being seen as aggressive and not well-liked can make it difficult for women to succeed at work, so can being seen as too nice and not-assertive enough.¹²⁷
- » This bias can be even more exaggerated for women of color, who often face specific racial stereotypes that further limit ‘acceptable’ presentations of themselves.¹²⁸

Mitigation Measures

- » Track gender and performance evaluations to identify patterns, and consider recommending staff for anti-bias training where there seems to be a pattern of bias.
- » HR should consider a collaborative process to identify key leadership traits which can help to support inclusivity.¹²⁹

Performance Bias

Performance bias is the tendency to overestimate men’s performance and underestimate women’s. Women therefore have to do more and better to be evaluated as equally competent as male counterparts.¹³⁰ As with the other biases listed here, this bias tends to particularly disadvantage women of color and those with disabilities, who are more likely to be underestimated and/or have their accomplishments met with surprise.¹³¹

- » Women have to work harder to be evaluated similarly to male counterparts. Women’s performance is often underestimated, which makes it harder for them to advance.
- » Make performance evaluation criteria as specific as possible to leave as little room as possible for bias and subjectivity.
- » Use specific criteria to ensure that both women and men are being equally evaluated in terms of their past accomplishments and future potential.

¹²⁶ McKinsey & Co and Lean In, [Women in the Workplace 2017](#) (October 2017); Madeline E. Heilman and Tyler G. Okimoto, “Why Are Women Penalized for Success at Male Tasks? The Implied Commonality Deficit,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 92, no. 1 (2007): 81–92; Madeline E. Heilman et al., “Penalties for Success: Reactions to Women Who Succeed at Male Gender-Typed Tasks,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 89, no. 3 (2004): 416–27.

¹²⁷ Lean In, [Welcome to the 50 Ways to Fight Bias Digital Program](#), cited June 2022.

¹²⁸ Negin Ghavami and Letitia Anne Peplau, “An Intersectional Analysis of Gender and Ethnic Stereotypes: Testing Three Hypotheses,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2012): 113–27; Justine Tinkler, Jun Zhao, Yan Li, et al., “Honorary Whites? Asian American Women and the Dominance Penalty,” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 5 (April 4, 2019).

¹²⁹ Eric Luis Uhlmann and Geoffrey L. Cohen, “Constructed Criteria: Redefining Merit to Justify Discrimination,” *Psychological Science* 16, no. 6 (2005): 474–80.

¹³⁰ Williams and Dempsey, *What Works for Women at Work*, New York, NYU Press, 2014; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Glick, and Phelan, “Reactions to Vanguards: Advances in Backlash Theory,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 2012.

¹³¹ McKinsey & Co and Lean In, [Women in The Workplace](#) 2019, 2019.

Implications for the Workplace

Mitigation Measures

MATERNAL BIAS

Maternal bias is the assumption that mothers—or women who are assumed to want to be mothers—are less committed to their work than non-parents.¹³²

- » The maternal bias means that women who are, or might become, mothers are viewed as less committed, and even less competent than non-mothers. These women are given fewer opportunities—either because it is assumed they can not handle them or would not want them.
 - » Because mothers are seen as less committed, when they make mistakes, these mistakes are seen as a result of distraction and lack of commitment, and are viewed more harshly than other people’s mistakes.¹³³
 - » Fathers who take time off for family reasons actually get lower performance ratings than mothers, indicating that the maternal bias cuts both ways: women are penalized for being mothers, but this is a role that is somehow more ‘acceptable’ than a man prioritizing family over work.¹³⁴
 - » In the workplace, maternal bias can also mean that coworkers assume women are not interested in travel, projects that require extra commitment, or evening events. Failure to give parents the opportunity to make these choices for themselves can damage women’s advancement opportunities and mean that the company misses out on committed staff.
- » Ensure that hiring and promotions criteria focus on necessary skills and experience, rather than years on the job—criteria that prioritize years in a given role can unfairly penalize parents who took time off to raise children and may miss out on qualified candidates.
 - » Ensure that opportunities for travel and projects are fairly offered to all staff, rather than assuming parents of young children are not interested.
 - » Encourage all parents to take parental leave; the more parents who take it, at all levels, the more normalized and de-stigmatized it will be.

¹³² Williams and Dempsey, *What Works for Women at Work*, New York: NYU Press, 2014; Correll et al., [“Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?”](#) *American Journal of Sociology*, 2007; Weisshaar, [“From Opt Out to Blocked Out.”](#) American Sociological Association, 2018.

¹³³ Williams and Dempsey, *What Works for Women at Work*, New York: NYU Press, 2014; Correll et al., [“Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?”](#) *American Journal of Sociology*, 2007; Weisshaar, [“From Opt Out to Blocked Out.”](#) American Sociological Association, 2018.

¹³⁴ Scott Coltrane et al., [“Fathers and Flexibility Stigma,”](#) *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 2 (2013): 279–302; Laurie A. Rudman and Kris Mescher, [“Penalizing Men Who Request a Family Leave: Is Flexibility Stigma a Femininity Stigma?”](#) *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 2 (2013): 32–40; Jennifer L. Berdahl and Sue H. Moon, [“Workplace Mistreatment of Middle Class Workers Based on Sex, Parenthood, and Caregiving.”](#) *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 2 (2013): 341–66; Adam B. Butler and Amie Skattebo, [“What Is Acceptable for Women May Not Be for Men: The Effect of Family Conflicts with Work on Job-Performance Ratings.”](#) *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 77, no. 4 (2004): 553–64.

Implications for the Workplace

Mitigation Measures

ATTRIBUTION BIAS

Attribution bias means that we give women less credit for the good things they do and blame them more for mistakes.¹³⁵

- » As a result of attribution bias, we don't value women's contributions as much—women are much more likely to be interrupted, both by men and other women. Women are also judged more harshly for mistakes and given less credit in collaborative projects.
- » Attribution bias can impact women's self-esteem in a vicious cycle. Women often predict they'll do worse on a task than men do, and research shows that women are more likely to apply to a job only when they possess 100% of the qualifications, while men are more likely to apply when they possess 60%.¹³⁶
- » As with many of the mitigation measures listed above, ensure that performance evaluations and promotion/upgrade evaluations are done against as standardized criteria as possible, including criteria for collaborative projects.
- » Ensure that criteria for hiring and upgrades are only functionally necessary ones, cutting out criteria that speak more to duration of employment than quality of experience.

¹³⁵ Egan, Matvos, and Seru, "When Harry Fired Sally," NBER, 2017; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Glick, and Phelan, "Reactions to Vanguard: Advances in Backlash Theory" *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 2012; Heilman and Hayes, "No Credit Where Credit Is Due" *American Psychological Association*, 2005; Victoria L. Brescoll, Erica Dawson, and Eric Luis Uhlmann, "Hard Won and Easily Lost: The Fragile Status of Leaders in Gender-Stereotype-Incongruent Occupations," *Psychological Science* 21, no. 11 (2010): 1640–42.

¹³⁶ Georges Desvaux, Sandrine Devillard-Hoellinger, and Mary C. Meaney, "A Business Case for Women," *The McKinsey Quarterly*, September 2008, 4.