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Open managers can change everyday workplace sexism

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Everyday sexism is still rife in the workplace. Research indicates organisational context has more impact than individual men's characteristics. Sandra Ondraschek-Norris shows that open managers who listen to employees make men almost twice as likely to directly interrupt sexism, providing health benefits for both women and men.

We define sexism as the result of assumptions, misconceptions and stereotypes that rationalise discrimination, mistreatment, and objectification of people based on their sex, gender or sexual orientation. Overt sexism is intentional, while covert sexism is more subtle and may be part of the social and cultural norms in a workplace.

Catalyst's global research series, **Interrupting Sexism at Work**, looks at the organisational conditions that encourage or discourage men from intervening when they see sexism in the workplace. Drawing on data from nearly 15 countries in three global regions, this research provides unique insights to help organisations improve their efforts of engaging men in promotion of gender equality.

Open Managers who listen

Catalyst's latest report examines the crucial role of the manager. The **When Managers Are Open, Men Feel Heard and Interrupt Sexism** report interviewed over 2,100 working men from six European countries: the UK, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden. Men were asked to rate the openness of their manager in hearing their ideas and suggestions, and how much **they feel their voice is heard in their workplace**.



Men who experience high levels of manager openness and feel heard are almost twice as likely to directly interrupt a sexist comment.



This research found that men who experience high levels of manager openness, like a manager being interested and acting upon employee thoughts, are almost **twice as likely** to directly interrupt a sexist comment at work, compared with those who experience low levels of manager openness (62 per cent v 35 per cent). Also, men with more open managers are twice as likely to feel heard at high levels, and this makes them almost twice as likely to directly interrupt a sexist comment.

Looking at the individual countries' results, there are variations, but the pattern is the same:

- **United Kingdom:** 62 per cent with high levels of manager openness, compared to 42 per cent with low levels of manager openness.
- **France:** 69 per cent with high levels of manager openness, compared to 34 per cent with low levels of manager openness.
- **Germany:** 59 per cent with high levels of manager openness, compared to 34 per cent with low levels of manager openness.
- **Italy:** 66 per cent with high levels of manager openness, compared to 28 per cent with low levels of manager openness.
- **Netherlands:** 56 per cent with high levels of manager openness, compared to 40 per cent with low levels of manager openness.
- **Sweden:** 59 per cent with high levels of manager openness, compared to 32 per cent with low levels of manager openness.

Organisational climate: masculine anxiety and silence

The Interrupting Sexism research series suggests that men's individual characteristics, such as their commitment to be part of the solution for combating sexism, is not enough and that organisational context can play a significant role in making conditions difficult for men to step in. For example, men operate in a complex system of power dynamics and leadership behaviours that have been shaped by masculine norms, and there are often costs to 'getting involved' or speaking up. Across countries, large percentages of men reported experiencing some level of masculine anxiety at work (e.g. 94 per cent in the U.S.) Masculine anxiety is the distress men feel when they do not think they are living up to society's rigid standards of masculinity. Masculine anxiety is often heightened by combative work cultures where value is attributed to quest for power and dominance. The data showed that masculine anxiety is linked to men's decisions not to interrupt sexism in the workplace.

Another factor hindering men's reactions to sexism is the extent to which an organisation has a **climate of silence**. The greater the climate of silence, where speaking up is not encouraged and can even be costly, the more likely it is that employees will stay quiet if they see sexism against women.

Everyday sexism

And while it's not just women who are affected by sexism, almost **two-thirds of women** report experiencing everyday sexism in the workplace.

Sometimes described as microaggressions, examples include women being asked to take the minutes, prepare the refreshments, or having to deal with sexist language, wrongly labelled as 'banter'. **The McKinsey study** also finds that women are twice as likely as men to be wrongly assumed to be more junior than they are. Black women suffer more microaggressions than white women, with their judgment and expertise frequently questioned.



[In a gender equal workplace] men report better health and mental health as well as greater freedom to be themselves.



It is a leadership imperative to create a culture where employees feel confident to call out sexism in the day-to-day workplace. A workplace free of gender inequality is beneficial for both men and women, with men reporting better health and mental health as well as greater freedom to be themselves.

Everyone should feel safe speaking up against exclusionary behaviours, bias and discrimination, and most importantly this behaviour needs to come from the dominant group who no longer wish to stand by and witness such behaviour.

While CEOs are said to set the tone of an organisation, it is managers that are key to the day-to-day culture of an organisation, tacitly indicating which behaviours and actions are tolerated and which are not. Managers who strive to ensure that employees feel seen, heard, understood, safe and supported will play a significant role in accelerating progress on equity and inclusion in the workplace. Their contribution, together with senior leadership commitment, will help to ensure that gender stereotypes are consigned to the 1950s where they belong.



Notes:

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