

# Hidden in plain sight: Women face subtle forms of discrimination and bias in the workplace, say researchers

September 28 2023, by Laura Doering, András Tilcsik and Jan Doering

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Gender discrimination remains a [pervasive issue](#) in [the workplace](#). While obvious cases of discrimination against women—like [sexist comments](#) or [the systematic underpayment of women](#)—dominate headlines, there are subtler, more insidious forms of discrimination that often go unnoticed.

Take Kelly, for example, a seasoned marketing manager we recently interviewed as part of a workplace discrimination project. Kelly had diligently worked towards a promotion, only to witness her junior colleague, Mark, receive it instead. This led her to wonder if Mark genuinely outperformed her, or if there was something more nefarious at play.

Kelly's quandary isn't unique. It reflects a pervasive, subtle challenge faced by women in many fields: incidents tinged with potential gender bias, yet ambiguous enough to defy clear categorization as discrimination.

It's easy to condemn blatant discrimination because of how obvious it is. But discrimination doesn't always reveal itself so openly; instead, [it can be a specter](#) looming uncertainly in the background.

## **Examining ambiguous incidents**

[Our recent research](#) aimed to investigate [women's experiences](#) of ambiguous incidents in the workplace. Seeking to understand the issue from multiple angles, we conducted interviews, a survey and an experiment.

The project uncovered myriad tales of women grappling with incidents that might have been driven by bias, but were cloaked in uncertainty. Their stories encompassed a wide spectrum of experiences, ranging from daily microaggressions, such as being ignored during meetings, to significant career milestones, like missing out on promotions.

Most of the women we interviewed wrestled more with ambiguous incidents than with overt discrimination. As Kelly put it:

"I think I would feel better if it was overtly [gender discrimination](#),

because at least you would feel somewhat validated in your perception, whereas you always question, like, maybe I'm not seeing things right, maybe I'm biased."

Like Kelly, 74% of the women we surveyed reported that they had struggled with such ambiguities in the past year. Only 64% said they had faced clear-cut discrimination. These aren't just numbers; they represent the silent battles and moments of self-doubt that many women experience.

## **Responding to possible discrimination**

Following ambiguous incidents, many women reported feeling confused or frustrated, often ruminating over their experiences and struggling to make sense of them. But, as we found, ambiguous incidents had more than just emotional impacts.

We designed an experiment in which participants were exposed to the same discrimination incident, but at different levels of ambiguity. Some participants experienced the incident as clear-cut discrimination, whereas others experienced it as ambiguous.

The experiment revealed that when a situation is clearly discriminatory, women are more likely to turn outwards by speaking to human resources, consulting with supervisors or seeking advice from diversity and inclusion groups. This sort of action not only addresses the issue at hand, but also sets the stage for [organizational change](#).

But when an incident is ambiguous, women tend to turn inwards. They try to adopt a more formal communication style, work harder or draw more attention to their achievements. While this may help them navigate discrimination in the short term, it does little to catalyze the kind of systemic change necessary to foster gender equality.

## A call to leaders and allies

What can leaders and allies do to help?

First, we all need to shatter the silence that surrounds these incidents. Ambiguity thrives when communication is stifled. Creating an environment where whispers of concern are welcomed, not shunned, is paramount. This goes beyond just having an [open-door policy](#); it's about building trust so that people know those doors lead to empathetic listeners.

[Allies can also play a powerful role](#). When someone stands up and acknowledges these subtle biases, it doesn't just validate feelings, but also builds bridges. When colleagues and managers notice ambiguous [discrimination](#), they should take the initiative to engage in private discussions with the affected women. A simple acknowledgement or private conversation can shift the narrative from doubt to trust.

However, it's essential to exercise caution. While it's important to listen, it's equally critical to distinguish between unintentional missteps and genuine bias. Colleagues and managers must take concerns seriously without unfairly penalizing people whose actions were ambiguous, but not biased.

To navigate this fine line, we must adopt a prudent approach. This involves seeking multiple perspectives, conducting thorough investigations and thoughtfully considering the context in which incidents occurred.

Lastly, as [women](#) start sharing their ambiguous experiences, their managers and colleagues should look for recurring themes. A single event may be an aberration, but a pattern is a cause for alarm. It signals systemic problems that require attention.

It's vital to recognize that, in the journey towards diversity and inclusion, it's not just the visible mountains we need to climb. Often, it's the foggy valleys of ambiguity that prove the most challenging to traverse.

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