

# How 'benevolent sexism' undermines Asian women with foreign accents in the workplace

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Immigrants are critical to the Canadian economy, but their talents are under-utilized due to language and accent discrimination, as immigrants often come from non-English or French speaking countries.

Workers with non-native or foreign accents [are often discriminated against at work](#), yet our understanding of this phenomenon is limited because [research on this topic has predominantly focused on men](#).

However, more than half of Canadian immigrants are [women](#)—a statistic that could rise because of [Canada's ambitious immigration target](#) of half a million permanent residents by 2025.

[Critically, 84 percent of women immigrants are racialized](#). To address barriers that racialized women with non-native accents experience in the Canadian workplace, we need to understand what kinds of bias they face. This will help organizations support women immigrants in fully utilizing their talents.

## **Accent bias at work**

[Our recent research](#) examined whether the experiences of women with accents differ from men in the workplace. We did this by exploring how women with non-native English accents—specifically Mandarin—fare in the Canadian job market.

Speaking with a non-native accent involves maintaining [speech sounds](#) of one's [native language](#) even after other aspects of speaking English are perfected. That is, speaking with a non-native accent is different from competency or fluency in English.

We used the stereotype content model to conduct our [research](#). This model suggests that all people are judged on two traits: warmth and competence. Warmth is linked to co-operation, while competence is associated with higher status.

Individuals in high-status roles are seen as competent, while those in low-status roles are perceived as less competent. Women are traditionally

stereotyped as warm, while men are seen as competent.

In three separate studies, participants were asked to decide whether they would consider hiring [potential candidates](#) for a job opening within their own organization or another organization. Participants were given audio recordings of the candidates in which some of the speakers had accents, while others did not.

Our research revealed that Asian women with a Mandarin accent were seen as more friendly, trustworthy and sincere than Asian women applicants with no accent. We found this bias present in both a volunteer student position and a paid marketing co-ordinator position. These amplified warmth perceptions translated into higher ratings of hireability.

There were no differences in warmth perceptions between Asian men applicants with and without accents. This is because men are not usually expected to show high levels of warmth.

## 'Benevolent sexism'

On the surface, warmth bias may appear advantageous for Asian women with accents. However, it's crucial to understand that gendered warmth stereotypes, despite *appearing* positive, are problematic.

These stereotypes are rooted in "[benevolent sexism](#)." These beliefs [pigeonhole women into socially acceptable roles](#) by offering women who conform to a sense of affection, idealization and protectiveness. Women who do not conform may face social costs that can negatively affect their career progression.

This kind of sexism is socially acceptable, endorsed by both men and women and rarely seen as problematic. Yet, past research consistently

shows that such attitudes undermine women at work. For instance, [managers with benevolent sexist tendencies do not assign challenging assignments to women](#) and [investors with similar beliefs are more likely to fund pitches from men](#).

In addition, we found these seemingly positive effects of amplified warmth evaluations are only observed in industries traditionally considered feminine, such as fashion and cosmetics. In contrast, there are no such positive effects in industries perceived as masculine, like oil and gas.

This warmth bias contributes to occupational gender segregation, funneling women towards lower-paying and lower-prestige industries and jobs. At the same time, women are being steered away from industries where they are already severely under-represented.

## **Addressing bias at work**

At the government level, non-native accents need to be explicitly recognized as a discriminatory factor affecting the job prospects and well-being of immigrants. Workers with accents are aware of and [negatively affected by accent discrimination](#).

Despite this awareness, accents are not an explicit protected category under the Canadian Human Rights Act, although they are related to the protected category of national or ethnic origin. This lack of protection undermines the legitimacy of accent discrimination.

At the corporate level, race and gender biases are commonly addressed in equity and diversity initiatives, [but accent bias is often overlooked](#). To fight accent bias, more awareness needs to be raised about accents and how they affect racialized women in the workforce. Recruitment and hiring processes also need to be more objective by focusing on assessing

job-relevant knowledge, skills and abilities.

Organizations and managers should foster positive employee attitudes toward accents by emphasizing the [benefits of a multicultural workforce](#). Equally important is ensuring there are racialized women with accents in visible and high-status roles.

This stands in contrast to a popular solution of "[accent](#) reduction." [Accent reduction programs stigmatize accents](#) by suggesting they need to be corrected. Instead of focusing on what workers with accents can do to "fit in," organizations need to focus on removing systemic barriers that workers with accents face.

Our research serves as a reminder to not evaluate workers based on stereotypes. Even purportedly positive stereotypes can undermine the careers of racialized women.

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