

Research finds women 'turn inward' when they experience ambiguous workplace incidents

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That gender discrimination is wrong is beyond argument. But identifying which incidents are cases of it is not always so clear cut. That's why researchers are recommending that organizations develop processes that encourage workers to share their concerns when they suspect but aren't sure that they have experienced discriminatory treatment based on their gender.

While employees may want to keep suspicions to themselves for fear of reprisal if they're mistaken, the consequences of doing so carry risks to workplace culture and performance, the researchers say.

"Not every ambiguous incident is discriminatory—some are simply misunderstandings," says researcher Laura Doering, an associate professor of strategic management at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management.

"In order to adjudicate between discrimination and misunderstandings, we suggest that organizations look for patterns. Are people repeatedly sharing concerns about the same person or situation? If so, it's worth investigating as possible cases of discrimination."

More than 2,000 [women](#) working in professional roles participated in the research through personal interviews, a survey, and a study where respondents were asked what they would do when faced with scenarios involving different levels of certainty. Prof. Doering and two co-researchers found that women were likelier to speak up when they experienced what felt like overt discrimination, such as a supervisor assigning male workers a more challenging project while giving their female peer a less valued administrative task.

But when women weren't so sure—for example, when a supervisor might have overlooked a woman's contribution because a phone rang while she spoke and he couldn't hear her idea—the researchers found that they "turned inward," doubling down on their own work habits and keeping the incident to themselves.

The study appears in [Sociological Science](#).

"They plan to change things about themselves like speaking louder, working harder, and calling more attention to their efforts at work," says Prof. Doering. Ambiguous incidents happened more frequently than overt ones, the researchers found, becoming a ruminating distraction for the women and even interfering with their confidence to advance through their organization.

Organizations can reduce uncertainty, the researchers suggest, by making internal processes more transparent such as widely advertising job opportunities and spelling out their criteria, and clearly explaining the process and rationale for particular hiring and promotion decisions.

Cultivating an environment where employees feel comfortable to share their concerns informally, such as through an equity and diversity officer or ombudsman's office, and where colleagues and leaders can serve as supportive allies if they witness potential [gender discrimination](#) can also help, says Prof. Doering. Employees unsure whether they've experienced gender discrimination might also seek out a trusted colleague as a sounding board if they don't have other places to go.

When women stay silent about ambiguous incidents, it limits not only their careers but the potential for change that benefits everyone. "If organizations don't know about experiences that are discriminatory—and, if these things are happening to multiple women suffering in isolation—then there's no capacity for leaders to take action

to address these problems," says Prof. Doering.

The research was co-authored by András Tilcsik, the Canada Research Chair in Strategy, Organizations, and Society and a professor of strategic management at the Rotman School, and Jan Doering, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Toronto.

More information: Laura Doering et al, "Was It Me or Was It Gender Discrimination?" How Women Respond to Ambiguous Incidents at Work, *Sociological Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.15195/v10.a18](https://doi.org/10.15195/v10.a18)

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