

Gender Discrimination in the Classroom: The Politics of “Microinequities”

The Chilly Climate: Subtle Ways in Which Women Are Often Treated Differently at Work and in Classrooms

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The word "women" as used here includes all women. However, for women of color, disabled women, lesbians and older women these behaviors may be exacerbated and these women may experience other forms of differential behavior as well. Additionally, other "outsiders" such as men of color, persons for whom English is a second language, and those from working class backgrounds often experience many of the same behaviors described here.

Most of the behaviors are what has been described as "microinequities," a term coined by Mary Rowe of Massachusetts Institute of Technology. They describe the small everyday inequities through which individuals are often treated differently because of their gender, race, age, or other "outsider" status. Taken by itself, a microinequity may have a minuscule effect, if it has any at all, and is typically not noticed by the person it happens to or by the person who asserts it. Yet when these behaviors occur again and again, and especially if they are not noticed or understood, they often have a damaging cumulative effect, creating an environment that is indeed chilly - an environment that dampens women's self-esteem, confidence, aspirations and their participation.

Because overt behaviors are more easily recognized, they have generally been omitted from this article. Those that are included here are the types of behaviors that are typically minimized by the person engaging in the behavior. Some of the behaviors below may fit in more than one category.

Behaviors that communicate lower expectations for women

Asking women easier, more factual questions, men the harder, open-ended ones that require critical thinking.

Grouping women in ways which indicate they have less status or are less capable.

Doubting women's work and accomplishments: "Did you really do that without any help from someone else?"

Expecting less of women in the future.

Calling males "men" and women "girls" or "gals" which implies that women are not as serious or as capable as men.

Yielding to the influence of internalized stereotypes

Using examples that reflect stereotypes.

Addressing women in ways that reinforce stereotypes and social roles rather than intellectual ones, for instance, calling women "honey."

Focusing on a woman's appearance, personal qualities and relationships rather than on her accomplishments: "I'd like you to meet our new charming colleague" rather than "I'd like you to meet the new hot-shot we just hired."

Judging women by their physical appearance and downgrading those who are not "attractive."

Describing women by their physical characteristics, such as a "blonde."

Using a different vocabulary to describe similar behavior or accomplishments, such as "angry man" but "bitchy woman."

Expressing stereotypes that discourage women from pursuing professional careers, such as "Women are naturally more caring and men are naturally more aggressive."

Assigning classroom tasks according to stereotyped roles. Women are assigned to be the note-takers.

Falling back on disparaging stereotyped words when angry or annoyed with females: "Look here, *sweetie*," and "Don't talk back to me, *little girl*."

Excluding women from participation in meetings and conversations

Ignoring women while recognizing men, even when women clearly volunteer to participate by raising their hands.

Addressing a group as if there were no women present: "When you were a boy..."

Interrupting women more than men or allowing their peers to interrupt them. Women may be more vulnerable when interrupted -- they may not participate again for the rest of a meeting.

Treating men and women differently when their behavior or achievements are the same

Treating women who ask extensive questions as trouble-makers and men as interested and bright.

Believing that women who ask for information don't know the materials, but that men who ask are smart, inquisitive and involved.

Viewing marriage and parental status differently for men and women -- as disadvantages for women and advantages for men.

Attributing women's achievements to something other than their abilities, such as good luck, affirmative action, beauty, or having 'slept their way to the top."

Frowning when women speak (male and female students may also do this.) Men and women alike may be less reinforcing when women speak.

Judging women who speak tentatively as being less competent or knowledgeable.

Giving women less attention and intellectual encouragement

Making less eye contact with women.

Nodding and gesturing more and paying more attention in general to men than to women when they speak.

Responding more to men's comments by making additional comments, coaching, and asking questions, and responding more often to women with "uh-huh."

Calling on males more frequently in meetings and in conversations.

Calling males by name more frequently.

Coaching men but not women: "Tell me more about that."

Waiting longer for a man to respond to a question than a woman, before going on to another person.

Crediting men's comments to their owner or "author" ("As Bill said...") but not giving authorship or ownership to women. Sometimes a comment made by a woman is later credited to a male.

Giving men more detailed instructions for a task.

Giving women less feedback -- less criticism, less help and less praise. (This is one of the critical ways in which women and men are treated differently.)

Being more concerned about men's behavior than that of women's, such as worrying about a male who doesn't participate but not being concerned about women who do not.

Giving women less encouragement to take on harder tasks.

Engaging in more informal conversation with men than with women.

Discouraging women through politeness

Using some forms of politeness that shift the focus from intellectual activities to social behavior: "I like to see the girls' smiling faces."

Males may perform hands-on tasks for women (as when helping them with a computer task) under the guise of being helpful, thereby depriving women of the experience and communicating lower expectations for them.

Faculty members may be excessively kind and paternalistic or maternalistic in trying to be helpful and hold women to a lower standard.

Men may tell a group that they are refraining from telling certain jokes or using certain words because there are "ladies" present.

(True courtesy and respect does not patronize, trivialize or depersonalize another person's abilities and talents, nor do they disappear when a woman acts in a way that deviates from gender stereotypes.)

Singling out women

Singling out women and other groups such as people of color: "What do you women think about this?"

Males are more likely to touch women than other men. If touch is being used to reassure or indicate friendliness, males are being excluded. Touch is often associated with power; frequently the message transmitted by a touch conveys a "power play."

Defining women by their sexuality

Relating to women in a sexual manner -- sexual comments about or toward specific women or women in general, such as discussing appearance or physical attributes or using sexual humor.

Valuing and praising women for their physical appearance, not for their intellectual ability.

Devaluing or ignoring comments made by women perceived as "unfeminine" or believed to be lesbian or bisexual.

Using the words "lesbian" and "bisexual" as pejorative terms, especially when women raise women's issues.

Engaging in sexually harassing behaviors or allowing others to do so.

Overt hostile behavior toward women

Ridiculing or making denigrating remarks about women's issues, or making light of issues such as sexual harassment and sexual assault.

Discouraging women from conducting research on women's issues.

Calling women names if they are interested in women's issues or protest sexism.

Making sexist remarks about women in general or about specific women.

Using humor in a hostile manner.

Engaging in negative body language or behavior (for example, men rolling their eyeballs) when women speak.

Hissing or ridiculing women who raise women's issues.

Denigrating or ridiculing women or engaging in other rude behaviors that express hostility to women.

Telling sexist or sexual jokes which denigrate women.

Not taking women's comments or their work seriously.

MALE AND FEMALE BEHAVIORS

Generalizations

Men are generally more concerned with autonomy and often relate to each other through competition and power. Women are more likely to be concerned about connecting to other people and relationships, and more likely to interact by cooperating and synthesizing. (Autonomy and intimacy needs -- everyone has both but in most people one or the other predominates in their behavior.)

Men may interrupt to control and show dominance, and change the topic or trivialize it. Women more like to interrupt as a way of continuing the flow of conversation as in 'so what you're saying is...."

Women more likely to raise their hands before asking a question; men more likely to call out.

Men are more likely to answer a question quickly, sometimes before the questions is finished and to organize their response as they are talking. Women are more likely to think before they participate; they organize their response first, and then raise their hands to respond.

Men are more likely to validate themselves by verbal sparring, "affirmation by opposition" (wrote Robby Henes); women more likely to validate themselves by gaining consensus among the group, often inviting others' viewpoints rather than defending their own as the only correct answer.

Women may take others comments more seriously. Praise (in part because it is rare) may have a strong impact; criticism may be viewed as more negative than intended.

Men and women talk differently: the differential use of speech and language by gender

Women generally use speech for developing and maintaining relationships.

Women are more likely to start conversations and keep them going, men are more likely to interrupt.

Women's speech is typically more tentative, polite and deferential.

Women's speech is often hesitant.

Women's speech is generally more apologetic.

Women's voices are more likely to rise at the end of a sentence.

Women are more likely to use questions to maintain a conversation, even if they know the answer. Men are more likely to use questions to obtain information. Women may also use questions as a way to make a point and to avoid making a definitive statement.

Men are more likely to listen to the first part of a statement and then almost immediately develop a response in preparation for competition in the conversation. They often do not respond to statements made by others but instead bring in extraneous topics that are important to themselves-- topics that show them as experts, as smarter than others. Men are often more critical of others while women are more likely to "add a thought."

Men are more likely to control the topic of conversations in mixed gender groups.

Women's verbal comments are often accompanied by nonverbal behaviors such as smiling, or averting their eyes, especially when dealing with men or any person in authority.

Men speak more often than females in mixed gender interactions.

Women and men may respond differently to disagreement. Men are more likely to see it as positive, except when women engage in it. Men are more likely to view a competitive and controversial classroom as invigorating, energizing and interesting; women may perceive the same classroom as negative, unappealing, and even distressing and inhospitable.

Men are more likely to use sports and military analogies.

Even when men and women speak in the same manner, they may be perceived differently. Women speaking assertively may be viewed as arrogant and bitchy.

The value of women's speech is that it encourages participation by others, but this is often devalued.

Gender-related speech replicates the relationships between men and women in general.

Men and women alike respond to and may be more comfortable with behaviors that are consistent with their expectations as to how men and women are 'supposed to behave.' Gender-related speech often replicates these expectations.

Behavior of some males may directly discourage women's participation in meetings, particularly when men dominate and control discussion.

Devaluation

Devaluation is often used as a partial explanation or rationale for differential treatment.

Gender affects our view of someone's competence. What is viewed as male is usually seen as more important than that is associated with women.

Perceptual bias is not uncommon. For instance, a woman's success, such as getting into a prestigious program, is said to result from "luck" or "affirmative action" while a man's similar success will be attributed to talent.

Women's issues may be devalued, as well as women's ways of speaking.

Devaluation and power

It is the power difference between men and women that gives value to or devalues whatever differences exist.

Stereotypes which reinforce differences are maintained precisely because they reinforce power and privilege. Behaviors which are valued such as competitive, status-seeking behavior, are behaviors that reinforce privilege.

Males may assert power and expect to be treated more favorably than females.

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This article appeared in the Summer 1999 issue of the now defunct newsletter, [About Women on Campus](#), Vol. 8, Number 3. Much of the material was primarily drawn from [The Chilly Classroom Climate: A Guide to Improve the Education of Women](#), by Bernice R. Sandler, Lisa A Silverberg and Roberta M. Hall, published by the National Association for Women in Education, Washington, D.C. The book describes and documents more than 50 ways in which male and female students are treated differently in the classroom, and examines issues such as teaching style and pedagogy, intersections of race and gender, the importance of including women in the

curriculum, and how gender affects faculty evaluation. The book also contains over 270 specific recommendations for action that administrators, department chairs, faculty, and individual students can take to improve the classroom climate for women and other groups.

The Women Behind "Title IX" and Gender Equity

Dr. Bernice R. Sandler

Rep. Edith S. Green

Rep. Patsy T. Mink

Title IX

"No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under **any education program or activity** receiving federal financial assistance...."

(Title IX of the **Education Amendments of 1972**, renamed in 2002 as **Patsy Takemoto Mink Equal Opportunity Education Act of 1972** in honor, following her death, of one of its co-sponsors and co-author: Patsy Takemoto Mink.)

About the author:
Dr. Bernice R. Sandler is one of the progenitors of "Title IX"

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