



WE SET THE TONE

ELIMINATING EVERYDAY SEXISM





Dear Colleagues,

The Champions of Change Coalition aims to achieve progress on gender equality issues in organisations and communities. We work together to identify approaches towards this end, put them into practice, and share those that are successful.

In dealing with the barriers to gender equality, we need to be open to all the forces at play. It's not all about policies and initiatives. Behaviour is also a big part of it. What are the norms and relationships that we would like to see in our organisations? Are some of the barriers to do with how we work together and interact every day? Most certainly they are.

We would all like to think that we have an environment that is respectful and inclusive, that gender is never a limiting factor, and when issues arise people feel at ease to talk about them. The reality is there is an undercurrent of behaviour that perceives and treats women differently. It often masquerades as a joke. So common in some organisations, this behaviour has become an accepted part of navigating workplace dynamics.

Everyday sexism affects everyone, but more frequently and to a greater extent, women. And gender is non binary. Gender expression and gender identity influence people's experiences of everyday sexism. Men also experience problems with outdated male norms and stereotypes.

With this in mind, we committed to understand more and take action to address the most prevalent forms of everyday sexism. Is everyday sexism just thoughtless banter? Is it real? Does it reflect views about the roles of women and men at home and at work? Does it matter? Some say it seems to be 'all about women these days'.

Unless we tackle everyday sexism, the best policies and initiatives aimed to achieve gender equality will not deliver the progress we require – there will be a limiting behavioural force holding people back.

We are not raising this because it is 'on trend'. We are raising it because it genuinely matters. It exists in every organisation, industry and sector. We care because our organisations are paying a price for everyday sexism and it is taking a personal toll on our people.

We need to lead on this because speaking out about everyday sexism can have consequences for reputations, relationships and careers. No-one wants to be the person who can't take a joke. Anyone who calls it out risks an accusation of 'political correctness gone mad'.

As leaders, we know that we set the tone in our organisations and we can take a stand to eliminate everyday sexism in our workplaces.

In this letter, we share some of our efforts to understand and tackle everyday sexism. We invite you to consider your leadership on this issue in your own organisation.

What is everyday sexism?

It occurs as the name suggests, in both the formal and casual interactions between people. It happens in daily life. It happens frequently in workplaces.

They are sometimes the little things, said or done in a moment, that play into stereotypes of gender. Perceived as too small to make a fuss about, we let it pass. At other times there is no question that it oversteps the mark.

In our contexts, everyday sexism also comes into play at critical decision points affecting the progress and careers of women and men, influencing who to appoint, develop, sponsor, reward or promote.

Everyday sexism is frequently invisible, and often accepted. Because it is hard to speak up when it occurs, it continues unchecked.

In examining this topic we have learned that context, culture, generational differences and norms are among some of the factors that underpin everyday sexism.

Most people do not want to be accused, let alone guilty of sexist behaviour. Yet often, well-intentioned words, actions and decisions are not received that way. Worse, they can be outright offensive.

We hope this report encourages an open and respectful conversation about everyday sexism, with the goal of creating fairer, more positive and inclusive organisational environments for all.

Building on the work of others, to understand everyday sexism in the workplace we undertook to learn more.

In conjunction with QUT Business School, we developed an everyday sexism survey. Piloted with 875 women and men in Toll and Incitec Pivot head office & remote sites, this surfaced the types and frequency of everyday sexism in our workplaces. The 2015 Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) Independent Review into sex discrimination and sexual harassment, including predatory behavior in Victoria Police, involving 4887 members, highlighted the cumulative harm of everyday sexism. Employee forums held with over 150 employees at Toll, Medibank and Incitec Pivot surfaced individual stories of everyday sexism and action we can take that would make a difference. Combined, this has informed our insights and recommendations.

Why should you care?

BECAUSE YOUR PEOPLE CARE:

Our employees have been very clear - both women and men experience everyday sexism in various forms in our workplaces and they think it is time we eliminated it.

“ I want to go to work, do my job and go home to my family. I don’t want to be reluctant to go to work and be made to feel uncomfortable while I am there.

– Survey respondent

BECAUSE IT CAUSES HARM:

We were told the impact of everyday sexism can be significant and lasting. By not tackling it you allow it to:

- Take a personal toll on your employees’ self esteem, personal relationships and general health
- Perpetuate unhelpful and outdated gender stereotypes
- Unnecessarily impede women’s career progression
- Prevent men from participating equally in raising their families

“ We typically think that harm comes in the shape of big things. And we expect the little things to be of no consequence. Yet the cumulative impact of ‘everyday’ experiences of workplace sexism can be as detrimental as incidents that are less frequent but more severe in nature.

– Graham Ashton, Former Chief Commissioner, Victoria Police

BECAUSE IT MAKES SENSE:

We know everyday sexism impacts people, culture and performance. Eliminating everyday sexism will enable your organisation to:

- Break down the barriers to different career pathways and opportunities for leadership for women
- Tap into the full pool of talent available
- Include diverse voices, thinking, perspectives and experience in your workplaces

“ We’ve seen incredible progress from welcoming women into traditionally male roles – 240 tonne truck drivers, shift superintendents, site managers and chief engineers. By tackling role stereotyping, good commercial results eventuate.

– James Fazzino, Non-Executive Director

BECAUSE YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE:

As leaders, what we say and do sets the tone in our organisations. Our action, or inaction, can be perceived as explicit or implicit approval of everyday sexism. There can be far greater impact when leaders, and in particular men, call it out because it is unexpected and it raises standards for all.

“ While everyday sexism remains prevalent in our community it will be prevalent in our workplaces. As leaders we have an obligation to role model, listen, observe and act decisively to drive everyday sexism from our workplace.

– Craig Drummond, Managing Director and CEO, Medibank

Isn't this just 'political correctness gone mad'?

We've all heard this said. Often. This common response to calling out everyday sexism has become one of the most significant barriers to tackling it. Particularly when 'getting the joke' or 'not rocking the boat' is an important part of fitting in and job success.

There are consequences for relationships, reputations and careers, for those who speak up, so people stay silent, laugh it off or pretend it doesn't bother them.

We recognise that perhaps the intent is not malicious. But we have to get better at responding to behaviour that is unhelpful and excludes people. And we need to own what we say and take full responsibility for the consequences of our words and conduct. The same goes for our silence and inaction.

The excuses we make for everyday sexism



I think we just accept it and don't want to "ruffle feathers" by actually doing something about it. I worry I will be perceived as a troublemaker for raising it.
– Survey respondent

The impact of deflecting

- Minimises the seriousness of the comment and the effect it has
- Puts people in the uncomfortable social position of 'not being able to handle it', in addition to the original putdown
- Perpetuates self-fulfilling myths about gender and stereotypical gender roles

The consequences of silence and inaction

- Gives consent to what is said and done – that it is ok
- Lends support to the transgressor and leaves the individual on the receiving end to deal with it alone
- Becomes an accepted part of workplace culture
- Discourages people from raising it as an issue

What does everyday sexism look like?

We talked to women and men in our organisations about their experiences of everyday sexism. This is what they told us.

Insults masquerading as jokes

The most frequently encountered form of everyday sexism, experienced by women and men, consists of sexist remarks or jokes, and insulting terms based on gender.

“ Make sure you wear your low-cut top to meet with that client!

You won't want to work on that machine... you might break a fingernail!

You've got to let her know who wears the pants around here!

**You are such a media whore!
#joke #funny**

Devaluing women's views or voice

Many women experience:

- men interrupting or talking over them
- men explaining things to them as if they have no prior skills or knowledge, when they do
- their views not listened to or supported until re-stated by a man

“ The supplier said ‘Can I speak to the manager, love?’ referring to the man behind me. I was in fact the manager.

If I really want to get an idea up I brief my male colleague to propose it in the meeting – I don't like it but it's a means to an end.

Role stereotyping

Assumptions are made about suitability for roles and tasks on the basis of gender.

“ As the only female at the lunch meeting, I watched the men wait for me to take the plastic wrap off the sandwiches. And take the minutes.

We'll get you to smile sweetly as guests arrive and hand out the name tags.

We won't rotate you to that part of the site...there is too much heavy lifting for a woman.

What does everyday sexism look like?



Preoccupation with physical appearance

Comments about body shape, size, physical characteristics or dress over skill and competence are frequent. This is amplified for women with a public profile or in the media.

“ I couldn’t take her seriously in that presentation – did you see what she was wearing? She’s mutton dressed up as lamb.

Do not comment as I walk down the hallway about the colour of my top, my shoes, or my hairstyle. My choice of style is not for others to comment on or rate.

Assumptions that caring & careers don't mix

Both women and men encounter gendered assumptions about parenting roles, with women being:

- subjected to comments that infer poor parenting for prioritising work equally with family
- questioned about their commitment to work because they work flexibly
- expected to explain why they don't have children

Men can be discouraged from or denied access to flexible work because everyday sexism assumes caring is not a man's role.

“ When I fell pregnant with my second child I was told that was the end of my career. When I said I wanted to leave to pick up my kids I was asked why my wife couldn't do it.

It was assumed that because I had children I wouldn't want a role that involved travel. The man who got the role instead of me also has kids.

I was asked why I had kids, only to have a nanny raise them.

Unwarranted gender labelling

Women are often described as being too bossy or not assertive enough – or the flip side – too ‘emotional’ or ‘nice’.

Men can be told they are too soft and not competitive enough.

“ I was told I needed to be less aggressive... to be more feminine.

**Why do I need to ‘man up’?
I am a man.**

What can we do about it?

Achieving gender balance will go a long way to reducing everyday sexism, but generational change and more women in leadership is only part of the solution. As leaders we know there is more we can do to eliminate everyday sexism.

	Ask yourself	Take action
Know what you are dealing with	<p>Do I know what everyday sexism looks like in my organisation and the experiences of our people?</p> <p>Do I understand the impact it is having, especially on the women in my organisation?</p> <p>Do I have the facts about how this is affecting my business?</p> <p>Can I articulate why it is important for us to address it?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Inform yourself about what everyday sexism looks like in your organisationBe specific about why it matters in your organisation e.g. for customer service, safety, recruitment, moraleFind ways to measure your progress and impact, for example through surveys or forums.
Find ways to get everyone to see it and acknowledge it	<p>Is everyday sexism readily recognised by everyone when it occurs?</p> <p>Do we all understand it exists and matters?</p> <p>How do we challenge people's thinking about how women and men should be?</p> <p>Can we play a role beyond our own organisation?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Involve your people in identifying the problems and solutionsDisrupt traditional ways of operating to change views about women's and men's workReview how the organisation systems reinforce everyday sexismLeverage your organisational influence with customers, suppliers and the community
Set the tone	<p>How good am I at calling out everyday sexism when it occurs?</p> <p>What do I say when I witness it?</p> <p>How do I respond if I get it wrong and cause offence?</p> <p>How do I respond when I experience it myself?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Role model acceptable language and behaviourDon't personally consent by silenceTalk about it, and keep the conversation goingMake it legitimate to call it out and not let it passTake everyday action to eliminate it

Everyday actions for leaders

Below are some things our employees told us will make a difference - practical everyday actions we can take to eliminate everyday sexism in the workplace.

How we lead – through action or inaction – will set the tone for our organisation. And everyone is watching.

Respond to ‘jokes’



- Do not validate humour that is explicitly or implicitly sexist or offensive by laughing, staying silent, or making excuses.
- Call out the joke, for example, say: “What did you mean by that comment?”
- If you miss the moment to call it out, don’t let it pass - ensure both the joker and those who heard it are aware of your stance.

Value women’s voices



- Ensure equal share of voice at meetings you lead or attend.
- Before closing a meeting or agenda item, ensure everyone has been provided the opportunity to comment or contribute.
- Ensure all contributions/contributors to a discussion or initiative are acknowledged – beyond the most senior and/or vocal.
- Adopt the [Panel Pledge](#) to ensure high profile discussions and forums include the voices and experiences of women.

Make role stereotyping a thing of the past



- Ensure critical and ancillary roles at functions, meetings and in your workplace are shared equally amongst men and women, for example rotate meeting note taker and chair.
- Question assumptions about the type of work, especially physical, that men and women can and cannot do.

Keep the focus on capability, not appearance



- Keep conversations focused on content and capabilities, rather than physical appearance.
- Be vigilant when introducing women for example, as speakers or at meetings where comments about appearance can undermine credibility.

Support personal choices about caring and careers



- Check whether you are making assumptions about, or choices for women or men regarding how they value or prioritise their career.
- Ensure equal access to [flexible work](#) arrangements for women and men within your organisation.

Challenge gender labelling



- Recognise where gender stereotypes are being applied to assess performance or leadership capability.
- Reframe a discussion anytime an employee or candidate is assessed as ‘too’ anything – ‘too bossy’, ‘too soft’, ‘too emotional’.
- Use the [In the Eye of the Beholder report](#) to reflect on your use of merit in your decisions about people.



Our Approach

The Champions of Change Coalition approach is to Listen, Learn and Lead through Action.

This involves listening to women peers, gender experts, and our own employees – both women and men. It means learning about existing thinking and what has and hasn't worked.

Our approach to eliminating everyday sexism is no different. We don't claim to have all the answers but we share where we have found some helpful resources.

To deepen our understanding of the experiences of everyday sexism in our community

The Everyday Sexism Project everydaysexism.com

Our Watch: Change the Story <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLUVWZvVZXw> -

UN Women Australia: When will she be right? unwomen.org.au/when-will-she-be-right-the-question-aussies-should-be-asking

To draw on existing resources developed by the Champions of Change Coalition

- [It starts with us: The Leadership Shadow](#)
- [Gender Balance at Every Forum: The Panel Pledge](#)
- [In the Eye of the beholder – Avoiding the merit trap](#)
- [A Gender Equal Future of Work](#)
- [Backlash and Buy-in Responding to the Challenges in Achieving Gender Equality](#)
- [Accelerating Change on Flexible Ways of Working](#)
- [Disrupting the System: Preventing and Responding to Sexual Harassment in the Workplace](#)

About the Champions of Change Coalition

The Champions of Change Coalition includes CEOs, secretaries of government departments, non-executive directors and community leaders who believe gender equality is a major business, economic, societal and human rights issue.

Established in 2010, by Elizabeth Broderick AO, our mission is to step up beside women to help achieve gender equality and a significant and sustainable increase in the representation of women in leadership.

championsofchangecoalition.org