Interrupting Sexism at Work

What Drives Men to Respond Directly or Do Nothing? (Report)

Negin Sattari, PhD, Emily Shaffer, PhD, Sarah DiMuccio, PhD, Dnika J. Travis, PhD

You and your colleagues are in a meeting to discuss internal applicants for a newly developed role that is critical to managing efficiency in remote team operations. When reviewing a woman’s qualifications, one of your colleagues makes a sexist comment.

What would you do? Would you say something to your colleague, or pull them aside later? Would you try to change the topic? Perhaps you would roll your eyes, or maybe even do nothing. What influences your choice?

“You need an organization that is open to challenge, is open to dissent, is not a ‘yes sir, yes ma’am’ type of organization. So, first of all, you have to value dissent and you have to value disagreement….That’s something here that we struggle with…dissent is seen as high heresy. You need an underlying culture that values critique and values conflict.”

— Mid-level director in education

“There might be an individual who…is working on…their identity as a male….But then they go to work, and [the] workplace is a male-dominated, potentially toxic culture, and it’s difficult to translate those things into that community organizational change, let alone any sort of systemic change.”

— Executive director in nonprofit

Men’s Responses to Sexist Events

The likelihood of engaging in different types of interrupting behaviour:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directly interrupt</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redirect</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unassertively react</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do nothing</td>
<td>46%</td>
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</tbody>
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Commitment

- Demonstrated commitment to fighting gender discrimination.
- Sense of obligation to interrupt someone or something that is sexist.

Confidence

- Feeling of skill at directly addressing people who act in biased ways.
- Belief in their own appearance of competence when interrupting a sexist behaviour.
Commitment

We found that 58% of men had high levels of commitment to interrupting sexism. Not surprisingly, our findings show that these men report a greater likelihood of directly interrupting a colleague who made a sexist remark. Specifically, 65% of highly committed men said they would directly interrupt a colleague, compared to 19% of men who were less committed.

65% of highly committed men would directly interrupt a colleague

19% of men who were less committed would directly interrupt a colleague

Confidence

Men’s level of confidence in their ability to interrupt sexism also plays a significant role in their willingness to directly interrupt sexist events. About a third (31%) of survey participants reported high levels of confidence in their ability to interrupt sexism. Of these, 72% said that they would directly do so, whereas just 34% of men who reported being less confident said they would interrupt directly.

Our interview participants frequently emphasized men’s lack of confidence—in some cases caused by fear or discomfort—as a barrier to their engagement.

72% of highly confident men said they would directly interrupt sexism

34% of less confident men said they would directly interrupt sexism

Awareness of the Personal Benefits

- Feeling of personal responsibility to interrupt gender discrimination.
- Belief that it is important to interrupt gender discrimination.
- Self-identification as someone who interrupts sexism.
- Effectiveness when informing others that a behaviour is inappropriate.
- Feeling of confidence when interrupting biased behaviours.

Impact on the Common Good

- Wishing to help others recognize their biases and change their behaviour.
- Conviction that by interrupting sexist behaviours they will help reduce workplace sexism and prejudice.
- Believing they can reduce the impact of sexism on women’s opportunities.
good open discussion that is a safe discussion for men to have, I will have men come up and say, ‘Thank you for saying that. I didn’t know how to say it.’
— Senior leader in professional services

59%
aware of the personal benefits would directly interrupt sexism

22%
less aware of these benefits would directly interrupt sexism

62%
who see an impact on the common good would directly interrupt sexism

20%
who see less of an impact would directly interrupt sexism

“I’m not trying to fix someone that’s broken. I’m trying to raise awareness…And it’s very rewarding when you have a conversation with someone and they say, ‘Okay, well I get it, I’m going to try to change that.’ So I think the motivation…really has to be around opening people’s eyes that we’re really better if we have a workplace that works for everybody.
— Senior director in energy

Actions Individuals Can Take

We asked our interviewees to share their learnings from their experiences with interrupting sexism. Here are a few insights that can help people successfully interrupt.

Silence is multifaceted; it is determined by both the estimated risk involved in speaking up, and how much time employees believe they have to decide whether to speak up or not. These decision points can be unconscious, automatic, deliberate, or purposeful.

On an individual level, employees don’t always make a calculated decision to remain silent. When they unexpectedly find themselves in a high-pressure situation, they may simply “freeze.” In other instances, they may consciously decide not to respond in the moment and take some time to consider what to do.

39%
of men working in organizations with high levels of silence report doing nothing

5%
of men in organizations with lower levels of silence report doing nothing

“The people may take their cues from the leader, but if you have a culture where there is fear of reprisal for speaking up or fear of reprisal for challenging the status quo, I think that creates that environment, I would say beyond just sexism, I mean choose an ism. And it creates an environment where those isms may be possible….I think it takes courage to shift a culture, and so if you don’t have a culture that encourages courage to challenge the status quo to speak up, then you normalize certain behaviours.
— Senior director in financial services

A Climate of Futility: When Men Believe They Can’t Make a Difference

In our survey, 45% of men indicated high levels of a climate of futility related to speaking up against sexism. Furthermore, we found a direct link between participants’ perception of futility and their likelihood of doing nothing to interrupt sexism: 36% of men who reported higher perceptions that their actions wouldn’t make a difference said they would do nothing, whereas only 7% of men who didn’t share that sense of futility reported doing nothing.

— Interrupting Sexism at Work
As noted in the Harvard Business Review, “The desire to speak up is fundamentally about the wish to change something and make a difference. But, if you continue to cement employees’ belief that speaking up is a waste of time, they’ll save their breath.”

**36%**

of men who perceived high levels of futility

said they would do nothing

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**7%**

of men who perceived less futility would do nothing

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“In that organization...I didn’t feel safe, and I didn’t feel like there was any point....It felt like no matter what I did, nothing was going to change.
— Senior leader in mining

“[I felt] you know, frustration, disappointment...in people and in...the organization sometimes that in the year 2020...people still think and talk that way. [And]...a little bit helpless where that individual being more senior, et cetera...[so] I didn’t do anything about it.
— Senior director in food manufacturing

“When new ideas come in, sometimes people will say, ‘Oh, we’ve tried that before.’ ...The other thing is that you have to dress up the proposal in such a way that the other person...sees a benefit to them. ...You need to be very careful not to put them on the defensive because in an environment where it’s hyper-conservative and not a lot changes, or change happens ridiculously slow, you have to slowly...lead them.
— Entry-level engineer in energy transmission

“It’s about finding yourself in situations where you know that you should say something, but there’s that little voice in your head that tells you not to rock the boat. It tells you to ignore it, to move on...[that] it’s easier just to get past this, let them finish what they’re doing and then keep moving on. And that I think comes from fear. Whether it’s fear of embarrassment, whether it’s fear of ostracization, fear of disrupting the status quo, fear of conflict, fear of not having the right words.
— Senior director in financial services

“I think the biggest thing that people fear is job security and whether they’re appearing to be too liberal or too annoying or...too righteous, if you will, by sticking our neck out and standing up for other people.
— Mid-level manager in energy

**Actions Organizations Can Take**

Our findings demonstrate the importance for organizations to cultivate an inclusive culture in which people feel safe and supported in interrupting sexism.

Here are four guidelines to encourage men to do so.

“I think the final piece is some broader understanding that everybody has got accountability in this. It’s not one versus the other, it’s everybody. And how do you make that a systematic piece that you understand the value of why we would do this work, the impact of
Endnotes

1 Twenty-five items relating to the ways that men may interrupt sexism were submitted to an exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring with promax rotation. KMO and Bartlett’s test indicated that the items were sufficiently related to proceed with the factor analysis. The analysis yielded four factors that explained 58.56% of the variance for the set of variables. Factor 1 was labeled “direct interrupting” with the following items loading strongly: I would report what happened, I would tell my colleague that what happened is a reportable offense, I would pursue a conversation with my colleague about what happened, I would try to educate my colleague about the implications of what happened, I would question my colleague about what happened, I would tell my colleague in the moment that what happened was inappropriate, I would make a note of what happened, I would tell my colleague later that I don’t think what happened was okay, I would give the candidate career advice later. Factor 2 was labeled “unassertively interrupt” with the following items loading strongly: I would use sarcasm to indicate my concern, I would try to express my concern non-verbally, I would use humor to express my concern, I would sigh and comment under my breath, I would show signs of disgust, I would show signs of surprise. Factor 3 was labeled “redirect” with the following items loading strongly: I would redirect the conversation to the candidate’s qualifications, I would keep the conversation focused on the task at hand, I would remind my colleague that the candidate is qualified. Factor 4 was labeled “do nothing” with the following items loading strongly: I wouldn’t say a thing, I would hide my emotions, I would consider it inappropriate for me to do or say something, I would ignore my colleague in the moment, I would expect someone else to take responsibility for doing something. One item did not load strongly on any factor and was dropped.

2 Multiple regression was carried out to investigate the impact of individual factors on men’s endorsement of directly interrupting in response to a sexist comment. Results indicated that the model explained 41% of the variance after controlling for race and organizational rank and that the model was a significant predictor of doing nothing, F(5, 1316) = 213.77, p < .001. Silencing (b = .40, t = 9.67, p < .001), combativeness (b = .19, t = 4.23, p < .001), and hostility (b = .23, t = 10.86, p < .001) significantly contributed to the model.


8 The quotes presented in this table come from a separate online survey conducted by Catalyst to learn about men’s and women’s on-the-ground encounters with sexist incidences in the workplace and their reactions to such situations. A sample of 150 men and women in the US, Canada, UK, and other countries completed the survey. The quotitions are specific to Canada and are only used to provide real examples for the four categories of behaviours that emerged from our analysis of survey data in Canada.

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10 Endnotes
Commitment significantly predicted doing nothing, b = -.16, (1491) = 22.84, p < .001. The main effect of a sense of futility was significant, t = .73, (1491) = 14.96, p < .001; but when work costs are low, b = .18, (1491) = 4.47, p < .001. The relationship between organizational silence and doing nothing was also moderated by work costs. The overall model was significant, R² = .44, (3, 1489) = 388.22, p < .001. The main effect of organizational silence was significant, b = .42, (1489) = 13.98, p < .001. The main effect of work costs on doing nothing was also significant, b = .29, (1491) = 11.51, p < .001. The main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, b = .12, (1489) = 7.04, p < .001. Tests of simple slopes indicated that where work costs are high, the link between organizational silence and doing nothing is exacerbated – when work costs are high, b = .57, (1489) = 14.37, p < .001; but when work costs are low, b = .19, (1489) = .64, p < .001. We also investigated whether work costs moderated the relationship between the perception of futility and doing nothing. The overall model was significant, R² = .41, (3, 1489) = 343.06, p < .001. The main effect of a sense of futility was significant, b = .23, (1489) = 11.19, p < .001. The main effect of work costs was also significant, b = .39, (1489) = 17.10, p < .001. The main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, b = .05, (1489) = 4.68, p < .001. Simple slopes tests revealed that in organizations where work costs are high, the link between a sense of futility and doing nothing is exacerbated – when work costs are high, b = .30, (1489) = 41.16, p < .001; but when work costs are low, b = .16, (1489) = 6.46, p < .001.

A moderation analysis was performed to examine the impact of a combative culture, work costs, and their interaction on doing nothing. The overall model was significantF = .43, (3, 1489) = 375.24, p < .001. The main effect of combative culture was significant, b = .38, (1489) = 11.65, p < .001. The main effect of work costs was also significant, b = .32, (1489) = 13.22, p < .001. These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, b = .16, (1489) = 8.69, p < .001. Simple slopes indicated that where work costs are high, the link between organizational silence and doing nothing is strengthened – when work costs are high, b = .59, (1489) = 14.37, p < .001; but when work costs are low, b = .18, (1489) = 4.47, p < .001. The relationship between organizational silence and doing nothing was also moderated by work costs. The overall model was significant, R² = .44, (3, 1489) = 388.22, p < .001. The main effect of organizational silence was significant, b = .42, (1489) = 13.98, p < .001. The main effect of work costs on doing nothing was also significant, b = .29, (1491) = 11.51, p < .001. The main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, b = .12, (1489) = 7.04, p < .001. Tests of simple slopes indicated that where work costs are high, the link between organizational silence and doing nothing is exacerbated – when work costs are high, b = .57, (1489) = 14.37, p < .001; but when work costs are low, b = .19, (1489) = .64, p < .001. We also investigated whether work costs moderated the relationship between the perception of futility and doing nothing. The overall model was significant, R² = .41, (3, 1489) = 343.06, p < .001. The main effect of a sense of futility was significant, b = .23, (1489) = 11.19, p < .001. The main effect of work costs was also significant, b = .39, (1489) = 17.10, p < .001. The main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, b = .05, (1489) = 4.68, p < .001. Simple slopes tests revealed that in organizations where work costs are high, the link between a sense of futility and doing nothing is exacerbated – when work costs are high, b = .30, (1489) = 41.16, p < .001; but when work costs are low, b = .16, (1489) = 6.46, p < .001.

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