

Adecco

# Empowering women in the workplace



Celebrating Women's History Month in Canada



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# Too emotional. Too bossy. Too nice.

Gender bias is hard-wired into our psychology, society and systems. It creeps into development conversations, infiltrates interviews and steals its way into salary decisions. It's a big reason why many employers struggle to fill their open positions and promote their best talent into leadership roles.

The pandemic pushed us backward on the long road to gender equality, as women workers – disproportionately represented in the service sector and hourly jobs – fell out of the labour market at higher rates while taking on more caring and domestic responsibilities. According to the WEF, it'll now take over [136 years](#) to close the gender gap.

At Adecco, we're passionate about supporting all workers. And we won't accept that women should wait a moment longer for an equal place in the labour market. Now, more than ever, we need women back in the workforce, sitting at every board table, involved in designing every piece of software and bringing their fresh perspectives to challenge and refine every decision that impacts our lives.

That's why we're getting right behind She Did, So Now I Can, the theme of this year's [Women's History Month](#).

In this paper, we share:

- What gender bias is and how it shows up in the workplace.
- How gender bias can impact critical HR decision-making.
- What you can do about bias in your company.

We believe in the power of female talent, and we're committed to breaking down every barrier that holds women back at work. This Women's History Month, let's start harnessing the boundless potential of women workers.



# What is bias?

Bias is a prejudice for or against certain people or things. Bias can be conscious, like intentional prejudices around, say, openly preferring to work with people from one culture over another, or unconscious. Unconscious bias refers to stereotypes that we form subconsciously and are often at odds with our conscious values.

We all have biases – they're part of being human. Certain situations, like multi-tasking, rushing, or working under pressure, can make us more likely to succumb to our [unconscious attitudes](#). Why? Because our brains can process only around 40 to 50 pieces of information at any given time, but get bombarded with [11 million](#). So, we switch to autopilot, creating shortcuts based on previous experiences, assumptions and associations.

Often, acting on these 'gut feelings' prevents us from adequately assessing candidates. Baked-in gender bias can stop us from promoting the right people, and – ultimately – perpetuate the labour crisis by sidelining excellent talent.

Bias affects all levels of the workforce. Research shows that women are [30% less likely](#) than men to be promoted out of an entry-level job and there is [a 16.1% difference](#) between annual median earnings of women and men relative to the annual median earnings of men.



# What specific types of bias do women face at work?

## Performance bias

Performance bias is the tendency to overestimate men's performance and underestimate women's performance. When it comes to climbing the professional ladder, women are given fewer promotions compared to men of a similar level. Women are [76 percent as likely](#) as men to be promoted to manager and [even less likely \(64 percent\)](#) to be promoted to vice president.

## Likeability bias

For women, getting ahead at work often comes with a trade-off. If they assert themselves, they're deemed [too bossy](#) (a word rarely used to describe men), while their male colleagues win respect for the same traits. And while we expect women to be caring and collaborative, we undermine them for being just that.

## Maternal bias

When women become mothers, they can face the bias that they are less committed than other workers (including new fathers). In turn, this bias can lead to what's called, "The Motherhood Penalty", which is estimated to account for [80% of the gender pay gap](#).

## Affinity bias

The tendency to [gravitate toward people who are like us](#) (homophily) is part of being human, and over time, groups of like-minded individuals form a distinctive common identity. That's why mentors, managers and recruiters tend to favour people who remind them of themselves. This could disproportionately affect women if they don't have leaders who actively reach out to them due to gender differences.



# What can you do about gender bias in your workplace?

Decisions based on instinct are decisions based on bias. Just one biased decision can change the course of a woman's career and deprive you of the best worker you never had. Awareness is the best way to stop it from affecting your decision-making. But it's not enough; counteracting bias takes hard work, and requires us to slow down, be circumspect and incorporate data wherever possible. Here's what you can do:

## Offer unconscious bias training. Better yet, make it mandatory

Bias training helps everyone understand how biases impact decision-making. It gets people comfortable talking about biases and empowers them to develop solutions. Once and done is not enough, though. Training needs to be regular, consistent and ideally mandatory to have a real and lasting impact. Also, timing matters. Hold refresher courses before hiring or performance reviews for best results.

## Set up review panels around major HR decisions

Review panels play a crucial role in challenging subjective, bias-ridden HR decisions. Avoid 'groupthink,' (the tendency for homogeneous groups to reach consensus by avoiding argumentation and evaluation) by including a diverse group of reviewers. Include people from various backgrounds, departments and disciplines. Ask them to make judgments based on pre-established and standardized criteria.

## Hiring

### Make informal shortlists longer:

**Informal shortlists** may be prone to systemic bias (informal, network-based recruitment). By consciously adding a few more candidates to your shortlist, you can vastly improve the fairness of your final decisions.

### Write inclusive job descriptions:

These should include a detailed guideline and job description rather than an intimidating list of concrete requirements and must-have qualifications. Writing job descriptions with a large talent pool in mind means purposefully avoiding language that might only be commonly used by certain demographics.

### Make sure your managers are (genuinely) supported:

A leader who's already got two of her team members out on maternity leave might worry about taking on another woman of child-bearing age. Make sure managers are supported. Probe whether your internal targets penalize women workers – and, consequently, their managers and teams, and do something about it.

### Conduct 'blind hiring':

Remove any names or gender-specific details on resumes before passing them on to management or recruitment teams. Further, minimize subjectivity by setting clear criteria around required skills and experience.

# Promotions

## Make sure women get the performance feedback they need:

[Research shows](#) that women receive vague or subjective feedback centred around their communication styles, while men get specific feedback around business and technical skills. Educate managers on the importance of direct, detailed assessments and feedback linked to concrete business goals and outcomes.

## Review performance appraisals for gendered language:

Are women getting skewed feedback focused on their communication style? Are they being judged more harshly – or just differently – than their male peers? Limiting open-ended questions in the review process can limit gender-biased language creeping into promotion decisions. Also, consider licensing anti-bias software to analyze draft performance reviews and flag any potential issues.

## Beware of bias in self-ratings, too:

A study found that men rate their performance [33% higher](#) than equally performing women. Make sure decision-makers are mindful that women are more likely to undersell their work. Some companies are dropping the entire practice of self-ratings for this reason.

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## Mentoring, networking, and allyship

Facing bias on your own can be overwhelming and make someone feel isolated at work. Mentoring programs can be an effective tool to let women know that they're not alone and someone cares enough to listen, support and advocate for them.

# Pay

## Avoid making pay decisions based on salary history:

The gender wage gap is a direct function of the gender promotion gap. In Canada, women earn [around 89 cents for every dollar a man earns](#). Setting transparent salary bands can promote fairness – and eliminate historical bias – in pay decisions.

## Conduct regular pay reviews and analyze pay gap data:

Explore whether certain departments have wider gaps than others. Digging into the data helps to uncover blind spots and pinpoint potential improvements. Some companies go one step further and publish anonymized gender pay gap metadata as part of their regular external reporting, a compelling incentive for making pay decisions fair.

## Train managers on fair negotiation across all genders:

Women negotiate as much as men but may get more backlash or get labelled as 'too pushy' or 'difficult' when asking for more. Again, training, effective forward planning and diverse review panels can go a long way to eliminating subjectivity in negotiations.

## Track outcomes, not words

Focusing on headline numbers like hiring and promotions is not enough. Consider distributing an anonymous employee feedback survey to dig deeper and uncover any blind spots. For example, good representation on a management team might mean good optics, but that doesn't necessarily mean women are getting an equal stab at the meatiest projects or the most strategic roles.

At Adecco, we believe in making the future work for everyone. We see the Great Resignation as a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rewrite a labour market rulebook that's been holding women back for too long.

From seismic labour market shifts to digital disruption, green transformation, mass migration and geopolitical turmoil, we believe that gender equality is part of the solution to some of the world's toughest challenges. Not something that's just 'nice to have'.

Let's work together this Women's History Month – and beyond – to reset the balance. The time to act on gender diversity is as urgent as it is overdue.



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Happy Women's History  
Month, Canada!