



Andie Kramer & Al Harris

**THE RESURGENCE OF  
EXPLICIT GENDER BIAS  
(AND HOW TO COMBAT IT)**

# Since 2016, there has been an explosion of open, mean-spirited, misogynistic comments about successful, ambitious women.

These comments have been designed to disparage, intimidate, and silence the women to whom they are directed—and to warn other women not to be publicly visible and outspoken. The people using this misogynistic rhetoric—and those who approve and support its message—are unlikely to renounce their deep-seated sexism because of social disapproval, anti-bias training or moral suasion. There are, however, ways in which such vulgar, disparaging comments about women can be stopped, but before addressing them, let's look at some recent public expressions of overt sexism and then discuss the extent to which this sort of language (for many people) accurately represents the way they feel about prominent, outspoken women.

## MISOGYNY SINCE THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

The harsh verbal attacks on the suffragettes are perhaps the most striking examples in modern times of the public condemnation and disparagement of women who publicly advocate for social change. As Susan B. Anthony wrote in 1900,

***No advanced step taken by women have been so bitterly contested as that of speaking in public. For nothing which they have attempted, not even to secure the suffrage, have they been so abused, condemned and antagonized.***

The suffragettes were accused of seeking to destroy the very fabric of civil society. They were called “undesirable militants,” “unwomanly,” “shameless,” “pathological,” and “dangerous.” A well-known theologian at that time described them as seeking to perform “men’s functions,” and, therefore, being “monstrosities of nature.”

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After the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920, women's public activism declined and with it the prevalence of misogynistic verbal attacks against prominent women. Despite the many outspoken women leading second wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, sexist attacks against them were muted. Thus, although Andrea Dworkin in *Women Hating* (1974) and Susan Faludi in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991) wrote and spoke forcefully about the deep-seated misogyny at the heart of contemporary culture, they were never subjected to the sort of vitriolic public criticism that had been directed at the suffragists. Indeed, there were few openly misogynistic comments in 1981 about Sandra Day O'Connor when she was appointed to the Supreme Court, Shirley Chisholm in 1972 or Pat Schroeder in 1988 when they ran for their party's presidential nomination; or Geraldine Ferraro in 1984 or Sarah Palin in 2008 when they were selected as their party's vice presidential nominees.

For a period of almost 100 years (1920 to 2016), America enjoyed a relative absence of hostile, public misogynistic criticism of publicly active women. In 2016, this situation changed dramatically. The campaign and election of Donald Trump opened the flood gates for crude and unapologetically disparaging comments about women. As a result, virtually overnight, open, even proud, misogyny became acceptable to a broad segment of the American public.

During the campaign, Trump waged a relentless and ruthless attack against Hillary Clinton, calling her “unbalanced,” “unstable,” a “pathological liar,” “a nasty woman,” and “crooked.” And Clinton was hardly the only woman Trump targeted with sexist attacks.

## “HALO OF CRUDENESS”

As offensive as Trump’s language is, if he were simply one individual, however prominent, whose misogynistic outbursts were generally condemned, he might be seen as highly offensive but ultimately an aberration and irrelevant. But Trump is neither an aberration nor irrelevant. As Katy Tur, the NBC correspondent who covered Trump during the 2016 presidential campaign, writes, “Trump is crude, and in his halo of crudeness other people get to be crude as well.”

This crudeness was on full display at Trump’s rallies during the 2016 presidential campaign, where two of the milder T-shirt messages in evidence were “Trump That Bitch” and “Trump 2016: Finally Someone With Balls.” And this crudeness remains a prominent characteristic of Trump’s current rallies. Chants of “Lock her up” are still heard when Clinton’s name is mentioned. Reference to Congresswoman Ilhan Omar, a Somalian native, is met with shouts of “Send her back” (despite her being a naturalized US citizen). And Trump’s criticism of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi also draws chants of “lock her up.”

## MISOGYNY IS NOW IN FULL FLOWER

As Republican operative Stuart Stevens has commented, “Trump is the worst within us, and he markets that worst as admirable. ... He appeals to our darkest angels, not our better angels.” These darkest angels were clearly evidenced among voters in the 2016 election. As three different studies of these voters’ attitudes make clear, “hostile sexism,” that is, misogyny, was a fundamental factor motivating voters’ support of Trump.

The first of these studies found that “in the late primary period of June 2016, sexism was strongly associated with support for Trump.” The second found that while economic considerations played an important role in Trump’s victory, hostile sexism was even more strongly correlated with voter support for Trump. And the third found that “female voters, like their male counterparts, were most powerfully influenced by the degree to which they hold racially resentful and sexist attitudes.”

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Indeed, this study found that women with “the highest levels of sexism were 50 percentage points (that is, 70 percent versus 20 percent) more likely to support Trump than those who expressed no sexist attitudes.”

The public’s tolerance for—even approval of—public expression of misogyny does not appear to have declined since the 2016 election. Thus, in October 2019, Donald Trump Jr., with considerable favorable comments, Tweeted that Kamala Harris was “the most disingenuous person in politics ... after Hillary.” And when Harris was selected as the Democratic Vice-Presidential candidate, Trump Senior called her “extraordinarily nasty” and a “madwoman.”

## **EXPLICIT GENDER BIAS IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR**

Explicit gender bias in the form of open misogyny is not limited to the public and political spheres. Studies show that such bias is a prominent feature of many of our workplaces as well. For example, researchers found that although between 2016 and 2018 sexual coercion of women (bribing or pressuring them to engage in sexual behavior) and subjecting them to unwanted sexual attention (making them the object of staring, leering, ogling, or unwanted sexual touching) had declined, there had been a significant increase in “gender harassment,” that is, intentionally disparaging treatment of women through incivility, exclusion, and crude comments. Indeed, the percentage of women reporting gender harassment grew from 76 percent in 2016 to 92 percent in 2018.

Based on this increase in gender harassment, the researchers concluded, “while blatant sexual harassment—experiences that drive many women out of their careers—might be declining, workplaces may be seeing a ‘backlash effect,’ or an increase in hostility toward women. ... Constant exposure to [such] gender harassment can be just as damaging to women as the most egregious forms of sexual harassment.”

The recent increase in workplace hostility toward women is confirmed by a 2018 Gallup survey that found that only 48 percent of US women believe women are treated with respect and dignity, a 14-point decline from 2017. Of all 21 industrialized countries across Western Europe, the US, and Canada, women rated the US the lowest with respect to the dignity and respect. The US also had the largest gap (22 percentage points) between the views of women and men about how women are treated. In the US, 70 percent of men—but only 48 percent of women—think women are treated with dignity and respect. Comparable figures for Canada are 90 percent of men and 87 percent of women, and for the United Kingdom the percentages are 86 and 83.

The increase in gender harassment, the low percentage of women who feel they are treated with dignity and respect, and the stark disconnect between the way in which women feel they are treated and the way in which men think women are treated reveal a highly troubling reality. As we noted in the *Harvard Business Review*, hostile verbal criticism and actual sexual assault are far more likely in workplaces in which women are

not treated with dignity and respect than in workplaces where they are. Even though reported sexual harassment declined between 2016 and 2018, it continues to thrive in workplaces where women feel unwelcome or disrespected. As Joanna Grossman, a law professor at Southern Methodist University, points out, workplaces where women are not viewed as having equal talent and leadership potential are rife with “opportunity structures” for sexual harassment, precisely the point we made in the Harvard Business Review. Gender bias, whether in the form of implicit bias, explicit bias, sexual harassment, or gender harassment, is of a piece, and while different aspects call for different methods to combat them, the elimination of gender bias in all its forms will require a comprehensive approach targeting all aspects of the phenomenon.

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## COMBATTING EXPLICIT GENDER BIAS

As should now be apparent, explicit gender bias is manifested in, at least, two separate sectors of our society: our public and political arenas and our workplaces. The sectors, while interrelated, need to be addressed quite differently.

At the public/political level, ways must be found to immediately counter any suggestion that crude disparagement of women is acceptable. As Kate Mann, author of *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, comments, “[Trump has] made America the locker room where there are implicit permissions to engage in the kind of talk that would and should get you in trouble in more egalitarian settings. He radically extended the field of permission.” It is both the locker room language itself and the permission for it to be used that must be attacked.

The traditional tools and techniques that are effective in preventing implicit gender bias from having a discriminatory impact on women’s career advancement are of little use in combatting explicit gender bias. There must be far more active, vigorous, and open condemnation of each and every public misogynistic attack on women. Whenever explicit gender bias occurs, it must be labeled as reprehensible, unacceptable, and evidence of ignorance and a fundamental maliciousness. This is not always easy to do, but it must be done if we are ever to find our way back to a time of civil, respectful discourse about women, men, power, gender roles, and equality.



At the workplace level, however, open condemnation of misogynistic comments is not nearly enough to prevent women from being treated disrespectfully. Although a great deal can be done to ensure that workplaces are not characterized by discriminatory employment practices, the changes in policies and procedures needed to accomplish this can only go so far to assure that workplaces welcome women as the equals of men in all relevant respects. Workplace cultures need more than just fairer, less discriminatory employment policies if they are to fundamentally change.

Perhaps the most effective way to bring about such change is to significantly increase the number of women in senior leadership positions. The presence of a critical mass of female leaders not only results in the advancement of individual women but also benefits the organization as a whole by fostering an environment of inclusion, innovation, and mutual respect.

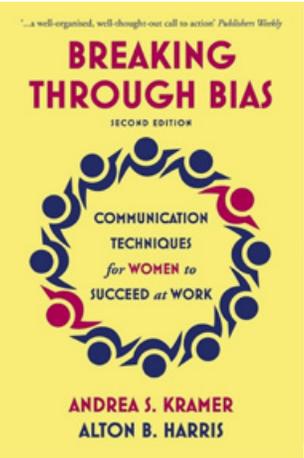
The transformative power of a critical mass of senior women leaders is borne out by a qualitative study of 255 senior executives at 19 Australian organizations where women made up about 30 percent of the top three executive leadership levels. Researchers found that “both women and men clearly agreed that the presence of women in senior roles had changed management cultures and influenced methods of decision-making.” As one male executive commented, women’s presence in senior leadership “has broken down the male clubbing. So that’s so much less a feature of business in this organization than it used to be.”

The researchers also found that both women and men welcomed what they considered to be more friendly and collegial work environments brought about by women in senior leadership. Overall, the researchers concluded, “the consequences for managerial culture arising from the presence of women in a critical mass is a closer alignment with the ideals of contemporary leadership [that] should be seen as desirable. The women ... actively sought to create work environments that sustained them, simultaneously enacting a range of [changes to] cultural norms, [that were] accepted by their male colleagues.”

We don't want to minimize the challenge posed by achieving a critical mass of women in an organization's senior leadership. In the second edition of our book, *Breaking Through Bias: Communication Techniques for Women to Succeed at Work*, we lay out clear, practical, effective steps that individual women can take—and men can assist them in taking—to advance in their careers and become senior leaders. With a sufficient number of ambitious, committed women—and male allies—willing to take the necessary steps, a critical mass of women in an organization's senior leadership can become a realistic possibility. **Once that is achieved, explicit gender bias in the workplace should become a thing of the past.** 📖



# Info



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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Communication and gender bias experts, Andie Kramer and Al Harris (Andie & Al) are the authors of *Breaking Through Bias (Second Edition): Communication Techniques for Women to Succeed at Work* (2020) and *It's Not You, It's the Workplace: Women's Conflict at Work and the Bias That Built It* (2019). They've spent more than 30 years helping women advance in their careers through writing, speaking and mentoring.

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