

# Practical steps you can take to reduce sexism in economics

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[Rachel Glennerster](#) is Executive Director of the [Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab \(J-PAL\)](#). Her research includes randomized evaluations of governance, agricultural technologies, health, education, and women's empowerment in Sierra Leone, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. She tweets regularly [@RunningREs](#).

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*The Economist's* list of influential economists, and the lack of women on it, has sparked an interesting conversation about sexism in economics. Miles Kimball and an anonymous coauthor [listed a number of practical hurdles faced by women in academic economics](#). Just last month *The New Yorker* published an article on Samantha Power that [included descriptions of how she had to deal with sexist banter in the UN](#), something horribly familiar to many women working in economics policy jobs. If this was not depressing enough, [Sendhil Mullainathan's piece on racial discrimination](#) showed how unconscious bias creeps into our decisions even when we think we are not discriminating.

Long-term biases and stereotypes are not going to be easy to change, but here are a few practical things you can do to help combat sexism in economics both in the academic and policy world:

## **1. When writing recommendation letters, if you draw comparisons to others, do so across genders (and across race).**

It is common in recommendation letters and tenure letters to draw comparisons to other, more senior people in the same field. This PhD student reminds me of X, this junior colleague is the best in their field since Y, or has the breadth of interest of Z. In the policy world the comparisons are not as formal but it is still common to say, "This person reminds me of X" as shorthand to convey the type and the quality of the person being considered. But whether in academia or in the policy world, these comparisons are nearly always done within gender. A junior male academic is compared to a male senior academic, but not to a female one, and vice versa. I don't think this is a conscious decision but it has insidious results, especially if there are few senior women that a junior woman can be compared to. There are now, thankfully, some women stars in academic and policy economics, but not every woman can be the next Susan Athey, Esther Duflo, or Janet Yellen. By unconsciously drawing comparisons only within gender it is as if we are forcing ourselves to paint pictures of women in black and white while using the full-color palette to paint pictures of men. To do justice to female candidates we need to be able to use a full pallet of comparisons. So next time you write a recommendation letter, or want to describe someone with a quick shorthand by saying they are similar to someone else, make a conscious decision to dismantle this restrictive norm and choose a comparator of a different gender. If you want to say a junior male colleague is rigorous and thorough, compare them to a senior woman with those characteristics and vice versa. I don't have enough of a sample to say if there is a similar hesitancy to make comparisons across race and country of origin but I worry that there might be. It makes no sense that junior French economists are frequently compared to Tirole or Piketty when their research may be more like that of a US colleague.

## **2. Stop and ask yourself, "Would I say that if I were talking to a man?"**

Several years ago at Davos a woman from a large foundation came up to Esther Duflo and me and told us in a very matter of fact way that we couldn't possibly have founded J-PAL because we were too young. I wondered if she would have said that to us if we were two men in our mid-30s and early 40s. During a review of a research project, a committee discussed if the (female) researcher should be discouraged from proceeding with her study (which involved interviewing terrorists) given the danger. Fortunately these are rare examples of bizarre behavior. But how

common is it for the work of a female junior faculty who has coauthored with a senior faculty to have that work discounted based on the assumption that the senior author was the real brains behind the project? If you ever find yourself in that position, ask yourself—would I discount this work equally if the junior faculty were a man?

### **3. Don't draw attention to a woman's minority status.**

At my London comprehensive we had an old-fashioned physics department and the boys and girls had to line up on different sides of the classroom door: 28 boys on one side and two girls on the other. Throughout the lesson our teacher would constantly refer to the class as “gentlemen” and then add “and of course, our two ladies.” Despite loving science I dropped physics at 16. This is an extreme version of a pretty common phenomenon in which women who do science and economics are constantly reminded of the fact that they are unusual. At the UK Treasury the etiquette was that the most senior officials entered the Minister's office first. Yet several times the senior official would usher me in first as the only woman, even though I was the most junior official there. On mission at the IMF a colleague would make a big show of interrupting the waiter as he took our order and told him to take my order first, as the only woman. Trust me, when you are working 18-hour days for two weeks in close quarters with a small team, the last thing you want anyone to do is remind everyone of the fact that you are the only woman.

### **4. Try not to be jealous if a woman occasionally gets the spotlight.**

There has been a lot of discussion recently of biases in who the press quotes and pays attention to. Occasionally, as if struck by guilt for past mistakes, the press will suddenly do a feature on a particular woman. These splashy features can be a double-edged sword for the featured woman as they can create resentment amongst her colleagues. But it is worth remembering that the woman herself almost certainly did not seek or precipitate the feature. The erratic nature of the press is hardly her fault and neither male nor female academics could be expected to decline being featured because they thought someone else was more worthy. This resentment is not only precipitated by the erratic spotlight of the press. Someone may be searching for a woman to sit on a panel or look for a woman to fill a very visible policy job in an attempt to signal that the organization is not as male-dominated as it might appear. I know that occasionally IMF colleagues of mine thought it was unfair that I would be seated next to the Governor of the Central Bank as the only woman at the table, and Treasury colleagues resented the fact that women often got coveted jobs working closely with Ministers. (If they knew the banter we had to put up with in those positions they would probably have been less jealous.) But if you find yourself feeling annoyed or jealous on the occasions when the spotlight falls on a woman, try not to blame the woman.

[Rachel Glennerster](#)

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