

2.3 How to Overcome Biases and Stereotypes



6 MIN READ

It might be surprising to know that biases and stereotypes continue to be significant barriers for women entrepreneurs. Despite all the progress made by women and their allies, there is still a lot of work to be done to overcome these obstacles.

What are biases?



Biases are individual preferences in relation to a person, group or thing.

They may prevent us from being impartial or objective. We may be aware of them (conscious biases) or unaware (unconscious biases). Interestingly, biases may be positive or negative depending on the context. For example, biases may help us forge relationships more easily with certain people because we share similar interests. On the other hand, we might have a harder time connecting with someone whose personal preferences are completely different from our own.¹

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What factors influence personal biases?

Biases result from multiple factors, such as: geographic location, job, salary, religion, race, sexual orientation, gender, friends, family, education, personality, media and much more.

Examples of biases

- During a party, you mostly speak with people of your gender because you feel like you have more in common with them.
- Hiring an employee whose personality is similar to yours.

Did you know?

- The brain plays an essential role in the way people deal with biases. Relying on biases allows people to save time with decision-making, to identify outside threats more easily or simply to make predictions.²

Don't worry, everyone has biases. But the trick is to become more aware, reflect on them and challenge those biases.

What are stereotypes?



Stereotypes are generalizations made about categories or groups of people.

They may have to do with people's age, culture, skills, gender, etc. Like biases, stereotypes are used to save time and energy. Unlike biases, stereotypes go beyond a given individual's preferences and are spread widely in our societies and cultures. Stereotypes can also be positive or negative. Like biases, they may be shaped by multiple factors.

Examples of stereotypes

- Women are more emotional than men.
- The younger generations are less resourceful.

Bias or stereotype?

Biases indicate a person's ideas or preferences. Stereotypes are more generalized and widespread. Sometimes, our biases may stem from one or more stereotypes.

How are biases and stereotypes disadvantageous to women entrepreneurs?

Biases and stereotypes are especially detrimental to women entrepreneurs' personal development and success. The following two examples illustrate how biases and stereotypes can have a negative impact on women entrepreneurs and lenders:

- **Missing out on a great business opportunity:** Biases or stereotypes can make the difference between a potential entrepreneur and an actual entrepreneur.
- **Limiting a business's potential for growth:** A women entrepreneur might believe certain biases and stereotypes, which could limit or prevent her from pursuing her business goals.

When does it become discrimination?

Making choices based on personal biases does not always constitute discrimination. It is only when these choices prevent certain people from enjoying the same opportunities as others and when we refuse to look beyond our personal preferences, that biases or stereotypes become discrimination.

Examples of discrimination

- You refuse to serve a customer from a different racial group.
- After an interview, you do not hire a woman candidate because she is pregnant.

Importance of critical thinking

Critical thinking may provide a broader perspective when making decisions. The purpose of critical thinking is to form an opinion that is as objective as possible, so enlightened and informed choices can be made. In short, the goal is not to be unduly swayed by stereotypes and biases.

Examples of critical thinking

- You have an important choice to make for your business and you want to gather opinions and comments from all employees before making your final decision. After analyzing different factors and considering your employees' feedback, you share your ideas with them and make an informed decision.
- You want to buy a new car. You first look at brands that you know and prefer. But before making a final decision, you set out to learn more about a few other brands and models. That way, you end-up choosing a car that best suits your needs.

Learn by examples!

Topic: Manual Labour

Stereotypes: Women aren't as physically strong as men.

Biases: An employer prefers to hire men for positions involving manual labour.

Discrimination: An employer categorically refuses to hire women for positions involving manual labour.

Critical thinking: An employer analyzes applications without regard to gender when hiring new employees for a job involving manual labour.

Topic: Neighbourhoods

Stereotypes: Big-city neighbourhoods that are home to racial minorities are dangerous.

Biases: You avoid visiting certain establishments in those neighbourhoods because you don't feel safe.

Discrimination: You refuse to spend time in those neighbourhoods and you encourage your acquaintances to avoid them, even though the reputation of certain establishments may be damaged.

Critical thinking: You decide to spend time in these neighbourhoods to form an informed opinion on certain establishments or you take the time to ask questions of people who know the neighbourhood better than you do.

Topic: Dog Breeds

Stereotypes: Some dog breeds (pit bulls, for example) are aggressive and dangerous.

Biases: You don't like certain breeds because they are considered dangerous and aggressive.

Discrimination: You support measures aimed at banning the adoption or ownership of certain breeds in your community.

Critical thinking: You take the time to learn about each animal's background and history before forming an opinion.

Topic: Childcare

Stereotypes: Men are not as good at taking care of children as women.

Biases: You believe women make better parents than men.

Discrimination: You refuse to leave your children alone with a man (father, grandfather, guardian).

Critical thinking: You take the time to get to know each person when assessing whether they are qualified to take care of your children.

Tips to overcome biases and stereotypes

- **Understand biases and stereotypes:** It is quite normal to have biases or stereotypes. The first step is knowing that we have them and realizing that we are willing to challenge them.
- **Analyze first impressions:** Biases and stereotypes typically help us to make quicker decisions. Consider allowing more time before deciding.
- **Identify biases and stereotypes:** It is not always easy to recognize our personal biases and stereotypes. Try to assess ideas and decision-making to identify any biases or stereotypes.
- **Experience new things:** Expand your social circle and your community to gain new perspectives.
- **Words are important:** Words can reflect our biases and stereotypes. Pay special attention to words — and how they can make others feel.
- **Impact of micro-messages:** Biases and stereotypes can influence non-verbal behaviour. Be aware of micro-messages, such as: tone of voice, facial expressions and posture.

A deeper dive on this topic

Check out the **Government of Canada's Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+)**, which helps to build awareness regarding systemic inequalities within our society.

References

- 1 Royal Bank of Canada (2013). Outsmarting our brains : Overcoming hidden biases to harness diversity's true potential, with the collaboration of Ernst & Young, https://www.rbc.com/diversity-inclusion/_assets-custom/includes/pdf/Outsmarting_our_brains_Overcoming_hidden_biases.pdf, p. 4.
- 2 Dr. Neal Goodman (November 10th 2020). « WiSC and Wine - Communication Correction - Our Unconscious Bias », Webinar presented by the Women in Supply Chain Association.; Royal Bank of Canada (2013). Outsmarting our brains : Overcoming hidden biases to harness diversity's true potential, with the collaboration of Ernst & Young, https://www.rbc.com/diversity-inclusion/_assets-custom/includes/pdf/Outsmarting_our_brains_Overcoming_hidden_biases.pdf, p. 6;

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