

My name is Elizabeth Wynn, I'm the Equality and Diversity manager at the Babraham Institute. And today I'm going to be giving a brief talk on benevolent sexism. I'm going to be covering what benevolent sexism is, why it's harmful, and offering a few tips on what you can do about it.

Benevolent sexism, the term, was coined by Peter Glick and Susan Fiske. They actually came up with a theory called Ambivalence Sexism, where they said that sexism was made up of two distinct but complementary parts: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism.

So let's cover what those two things are. Hostile sexism is what you might think of immediately when you think about sexism. It's overt, objectifying, insulting and or degrading. Examples of hostile sexism include: demeaning language, cat calling, discrimination or violence against women. So what we classically think of as sexism.

Benevolent sexism, on the other hand, is framed positively, but it can be condescending, patronizing and or reinforcing gendered stereotypes. Some examples of that, a reference letter or appraisal focusing on personality, not achievements. We know that this happens far more frequently for women than men.

Only caring about women when they are mothers, wives and daughters. This is something that men will say, they only realize the importance of feminism or the sort of existence of sexism when they had a daughter. It only seems relevant to them when they put it in terms of their mothers, wives and daughters.

Believing that women are more compassionate and nurturing by nature. Or believing that women need to be protected.

To give you more of an idea of what we mean by a benevolent sexism, here are some image examples. So this image on the left, an advert for a book about the victims of Jack the Ripper. "They were more than just headlines. They were mothers, daughters and wives." As opposed to people with their own lives. We are putting the focus on their relationships.

“Women do it better” with an image of an iron. So this seems to be complimentary, ‘women are good at this’, but by associating women with housework, with ironing in this case, it excuses men from doing it. And it makes these domestic chores, which take up a lot of time and effort, it makes them firmly women's business. After all, why should a man bother to do it? You're just better at it.

This image about types of soft skills to include on your resumé. I found this on a job advice website and the website wasn't aimed at women, it was a general job advice website. But they chose to illustrate this article on soft skills with images that all appear to be women, associating women with things like communication skills, positive attitude, teamwork. And again, these are all great skills. These are all important things, but they're important for everyone and the suggestion here by illustrating this with just women is that these are perhaps skills that women have more than men or that it's more important for women to highlight than men.

Finally, this sort of inspirational quote, “A real woman can do it all by herself, but a real man won't let her.” So removing agency from the woman, saying that it's a real man's responsibility to protect her and do things for her.

So those are examples of benevolent sexism. And I've already sort of highlighted the underlying message behind these images. Let's talk more about the harm that benevolent sexism can cause.

Countries with more benevolent sexism also have more hostile sexism. These two things, though they might seem contradictory, often go hand-in-hand. Countries with more benevolent sexism have fewer women in leadership roles, even when controlled for hostile sexism.

This might be because women who endorse benevolent sexist ideas have lower career ambitions. And men who endorse benevolent sexist ideas give women less challenging tasks. This, again, probably comes from the idea that women need to be protected, you don't want to give them something too difficult to do. However, if women are never given challenging high profile opportunities to achieve things at work, they aren't going to be able to progress as quickly.

Exposure to benevolent sexism decreases women's work performance more than exposure to hostile sexism. This is an insidious aspect of the benevolent sexism. Exposure to hostile sexism can galvanize women, the response is sort of, "I'm going to show you wrong." Whereas benevolent sexism undermines women's confidence and lowers their work performance. This, these statistics, this information is all from Peter Glick again.

Really, the underlying thing here, all the reasons why benevolent sexism is harmful boils down to the fact that it reinforces gender stereotypes and norms and limits everyone's potential. It's not just women's potential. For example, if you have a line manager who strongly believes that women are just better caregivers, that a woman should be at home with the children. That person might be less likely to grant their male employee paternity leave or shared parental leave, or they might penalize them for taking it. So benevolent sexism harmful to everyone.

What can you do about benevolent sexism? First of all, raise awareness. There might be some examples of benevolent sexism that you weren't aware of before, but now that you've seen them like this, now that they've been explained in this context, perhaps you're now aware of how they can be harmful. So pay it forward, introduce other people to the idea.

Take the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory and encourage others to do so as well. So the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory was something designed by Peter Glick and Susan Fiske. It's a short online test you can take. It's about 20 questions, 20 statements, and you just say how much you agree with them. I think that some of them are very obvious. Like 'women only have relationships with men in order to get money', or 'women should be put on a pedestal'. So some of them are very clear what the 'right' answer is. But I think that they can be useful for introducing you to some ideas that you didn't realize were examples of benevolent sexism before.

Split workplace 'women's work'. So this is things like taking notes, planning team outings, organizing the collection for someone's leading do, or the card for someone's birthday. These are the sort of things which can often get left to women, even when it's not part of their job description. And the problem with this is that it takes time away from doing your actual job. Doing things like organizing the Christmas meal is nice, but it's

not going to be recognized at your appraisal. It's not going to go on your CV, it's not going to help you get your next role. And if these types of activities, though, there may be small, they can add up. And if these types of activities are overwhelmingly left to women to do, then that can add up to a disproportionate effect on women's productivity. So look at your team. See what these kinds of tasks are. Who does them and how you can split them in an even way.

Call out benevolent sexism. This doesn't need to be aggressive. The way I phrased it, 'call out', does sound a bit aggressive. But this just means point out benevolent sexism when you see it. It might not even need to be pointing out what someone else is doing. For example, if you're watching a TV program or, you know, the news, something someone says, "Hey, don't you think that's an example of benevolent sexism?" Again, raising awareness, but also challenging it where you can.

Analyse your own unconscious bias. So as an Equality and Diversity Manager, I talk about unconscious bias a lot and I know that people can be quite fed up with it. The reason it's important is because a lot of these expressions of benevolent sexism are the result of the attitudes, the ideas about men's roles and women's roles, and the relationship between men and women that we have absorbed growing up, that we have learned from our culture growing up. And unconscious biases aren't a moral failing. They're simply a product of what we learned and how we express them. But once you are aware of your unconscious biases, then you can consciously work against them. So it's an important thing to be aware of.

Tackle hostile sexism. As we learned earlier, countries with more hostile sexism have more benevolent sexism. These two things go together very often. So by tackling one, we can tackle the other.

That's the end of my suggestions. So I really have one thing I want you to remember as you go away from this talk and that's that "Benevolent sexism is B.S."