

# Event Gender Bias in Academia,

## 07 June, 2016

### Discussion – Experiences with gender biases

13 non-male people participated in an informal discussion to exchange experiences with gender biases and develop strategies how to deal with them. This protocol has been approved by the participants of the discussion.

The cases which figured centrally in the discussion described situations in which a woman was commented on their outer appearances in either a positive or negative way. The first question discussed was: Are comments like that actually problematic? Participants agreed that the comments on a woman's look in professional contexts are problematic in general, as they constitute an unnecessary focus on professionally irrelevant attributes. However, participants also reached agreement that the inappropriateness of comments on a person's outer appearance depended on several factors:

1. Relationship. Comments on a woman's outer appearance might be appropriate in personal relationships (depending on the individual relationship) but have no place in professional relationships. There was large agreement that comments on a person's look were unnecessary and not an indication of a professional relationship under any circumstance. Participants in the meeting expressed that they do not wish to be commented on their looks (including hair, make-up, figure, clothing, etc). However, they are considered particularly problematic when made from a superior, for instance the advisor. In such relationships, people feel unable to appropriately respond and express their disapproval without fearing personal disadvantages. Thus, men are kindly asked to avoid such comments.
2. Context. Again, participants agreed that outer appearance should not play any role in professional contexts to begin with. However, it seems possible to rank professional contexts in terms of how formal and professional they are. While lunch breaks leave room for some rather informal conversations, conferences are considered particularly professional contexts. For this reason, participants wish not to be commented on their outer appearance, especially not in context in which their academic contributions are at issue.
3. Content of Conversation. Closely connected to the context is the content of the conversation in which comments on one's look are uttered. Participants strongly disapprove of all kinds of comments that outcompete conversations about philosophical or scientific relevance.

Even though comments on outer appearance are problematic to various degrees, participants say that they make them feel uncomfortable in any case. And this is not only true in a given situation, but it affects women's behaviour in professional contexts more generally. Some participants explained that dressing up for conferences, for instance, gives them a very hard time. Many participants would prefer to dress nicely, but feel that this might send a wrong message. On the other hand, dressing in an utterly masculine way also feels wrong to some participants as they do not identify as male. Participants also agreed that even though there were ways to avoid being reduced to one's look, the need to deliberately take precautions is unwelcomed. The same questions arise not only for conferences, but for professional context in general. Given the discomfort caused by such comments, we ask everybody not to utter them in professional contexts.

What are possible reactions? In order to support people in dealing with such situations we discussed various ways to respond, and we evaluated their effectiveness as well as appropriateness. Participants agreed that depending on the various degrees to which a comment on outer appearance might be

problematic, different reactions might be called for. In any circumstance, participants feel that it is necessary to communicate their disapproval and not to hold back.

1. Show disapproval by conspicuously ignoring the comment and move on with the conversation. For some contexts this might be a good way to show that your look is not what matters to you in this conversation. Saying 'thank you', as polite as it might seem, was not considered a good option as it might invite further compliments. The same holds for giving compliments in return.
2. Some participants suggest to respond in a humorous way. For instance, one could utter a 'Thank you' or a compliment in return in an ironic or sarcastic way in order to express disapproval. Humour might make clear that a certain comment was out of line without producing any further awkwardness and it could perhaps even reduce awkwardness. Whether employing humour is actually an option depends on context and relationship, as well as on how comfortable someone feels with being sufficiently ironic or sarcastic.
3. Some situations can require some more direct addressing of the comment's inappropriateness. This should be done in a clear and firm, but polite and respectful manner. You could either
  - a. explain that these kinds of comments make you feel uncomfortable and that you therefore wish them to stop.
  - b. or you could point out that such comments are not only problematic for you personally, but are inappropriate in general. There is no reason to comment on a woman's look *in a professional context* and doing so actually shows some seriously problematic gender bias. Ask yourself if you would ever comment in the same way on a man's look.

Participants were undecided as to whether talking about gender biases, sexism, and discrimination is the best way to go. Some people feel this too big a step, other feel it to be just the right way to frame the problem.

4. Ask what a comment on your look is supposed to mean or achieve in the conversation. Such a question might already lead to the other person realizing that their comment was inappropriate. However, it also bears the risk of backfiring – you might be interpreted as enjoying such comments and want to hear more. In that case, make clear that this was not what you meant.
5. Finally, most participants felt that situations like the ones discussed typically take them by surprise and leave them unable to quickly and eloquently respond. If you witness an inappropriate situation, observe how the situation develops. If you realize that the woman has problems responding, step in and help out.

SWIP Germany has recently published a good practice guide to support departments in improving upon their academic climate. You can download the guide here: <http://swip-philosophinnen.org/good-practice-guide/>

After the discussion on how to handle difficult situations, participants discussed ideas for future events. The participants were interested in having workshops. Suggested topics were: How to deal with borderline cases (e.g., dealing with cases which are neither clearly inappropriate nor appropriate)? How to negotiate best at work? Should we have a women quotation regarding keynote speakers? The participants also welcomed to provide mentoring for female Master students at each university or at least a person they can talk to. It was suggested to integrate smaller gender bias related events into bigger conferences in order to increase awareness and (ease of) participation (also of male participants).

Everyone was encouraged to initiate events or mentoring program at their university or in collaboration with people from other universities. It was pointed out that one can usually apply for funding from the respective department for diversity or gender equality, from one's department or faculty and from organizations like SWIP.