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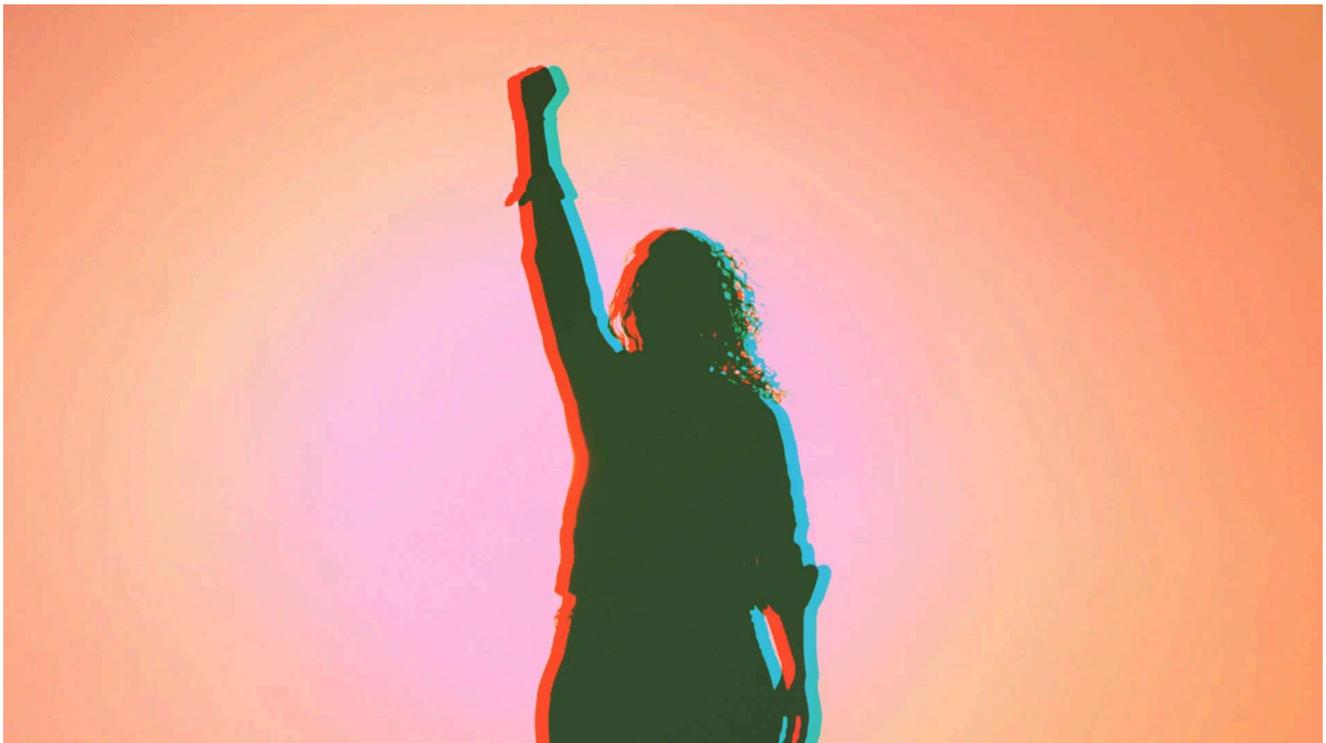
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6 women on how they deal with sexism and discrimination at work

Implicit bias is alive and well in the workplace. These women faced it, and in some cases changed it for the women who came after them.

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BY LYDIA DISHMAN

When Kay Koplovitz, the founder, chairman, and CEO of the USA Network, was invited to a media lunch for the Augusta National Golf Tournament in 1982, she ran into a bit of a snag. Women weren't allowed into the dining room on the second floor of the club."I was talking to Hord Hardin, [then] chairman of the Masters Tournament and the Augusta

National Golf Club, and we got to the top of the stairs,” she says, “and he looks at me and says, ‘Kay, we got a problem.’”

At this point, Koplovitz says she didn’t miss a beat and asked what they were going to do about it. “What we did is we went down to the trophy room [where women were allowed] and we ate there—for the next 10 years,” she recalls. The Club didn’t admit women as members until 2012.

Although this happened in the 1980s, Koplovitz, who’s currently the founder and chairman of the investment firm Springboard Enterprises, maintains, “It’s important for us to understand that these things still happen, and you’ve just got to figure out on the fly, at the moment, how to change that situation.”

She’s unfortunately right. In the course of reporting this story and interviewing over a dozen women (some of whom were unwilling to have their experiences published), I learned that not only are they continually relegated to **pick up office “housework,”** but professional women at all levels are routinely talked over at meetings, have others take credit for their ideas, and get comments like, “You’re nagging me like my wife,” when they ask a male colleague to do something. These and other **microaggressions** breed a toxic culture that can make female employees feel unsafe and want to quit, even if they love the work they’re doing.



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Kaethe Schuster, a sales and marketing national account executive within DowDuPont Performance Building Solutions, who’s been with Dow for 19

years (17 of those in the construction industry), was familiar with Koplovitz's dilemma of being excluded on typically all-male excursions.

“In the construction industry, building relationships is foremost, and those relationships are, by nature, long term,” Schuster says, and many times those opportunities to connect happen during golf games, fishing, or skeet shooting. “I absolutely had to step up to be included, making it clear that I was interested and willing, even if it was an activity that was new to me,” she says. Even though she'd not had much experience in saltwater fishing, Schuster contends that the first time she went, she even recruited her own team for the event.

“I have found that they are often really fun, and no one is judging the newbie,” she says. In fact, the others often try to help, and that begins to build rapport. “If you are already skilled, make a lasting impression.” In addition to creating some of her strongest industry partnerships, Schuster has learned that being fully and consistently engaged is the first step to overcoming any potential gender bias. “Show up. Every time. Do what you said you would do. And that holds true for men and women alike,” she explains.

That's a place Heather Combs, the current chief revenue officer of 3Pillar, found herself in for more than 20 years, working in male-dominated industries. “I've witnessed my fair share of subtle and not-so-subtle aggressions,” she says. When she started her career in sales, catering mostly to general counsels at large companies, most positions were generally filled by older white men, many of whom behaved as if corporate America was one giant, good old boys' club, says Combs.

“Often, I'd walk into a room and learn that I was no longer “Heather” — but rather, “honey,” “sweetheart,” “babe,” or one of a dozen other

diminutive nicknames,” Combs recalls. Back then, her strategy was to simply smile, ignore the comment, and seize the chance to exceed expectations by speaking matter-of-factly through her agenda. “The confidence was often rewarded with sales success,” she says, and continues to use it today. “I don’t hedge my language when I’m presenting an idea or a product, I speak boldly and without equivocation.”

Combs says it’s important for women to look for roles at companies where the culture and leadership consider their employees’ abilities before they consider their gender or race, like hers. “At 3Pillar, I’m not defined by my gender. Even when I’m the only woman in the room, I’m the chief revenue officer, full stop. You don’t have to let your gender define you.”

But in some cases, it can’t help but define you. When Soulayma Gourani, a lecturer, corporate adviser, and author, was first interviewing for the role of senior VP of sales, she was asked if she expected to have children. “I responded that I didn’t know—but I also didn’t think much of the question at the time,” she remembers. Gourani was unaware that although it is **not technically illegal** for an interviewer to ask those questions, it was (and still is) illegal to make a hiring selection based on someone’s answer to those questions. “And we can presume that the answers to such questions formed the basis for a selection decision,” she adds. In her case, she did get pregnant and was terminated with no notice. “I was three months’ pregnant and the breadwinner of my family. That same day, I was escorted out of my office without the chance to say goodbye to my colleagues.”

Gourani fought the decision for 10 months in court. Eventually, she decided to create the biggest workaround of all. “I decided to start my own business. Adversity became the foundation for my leadership skills, my values, my ability to focus, and my sense of responsibility.”

For others who find themselves pigeonholed by sexist interviewers, Gourani says take this as a red flag. You're not legally required to let potential employers know if you're expecting. "If you decide to take the job, just beware of your the potential outcomes, and be prepared to document all of your interactions, reviews, and your employer's response to your pregnancy," she says.

Although Gourani had to learn the hard way, mentoring from others who've been there can shortcut having to figure out a workaround. Amy Millman, the president of Springboard Enterprises, points out that especially for female founders who are seeking funding, it's especially important, as most investors and founders are men.

"It hasn't been their experience to involve [women], or they're just ignorant," Millman says, explaining why inappropriate comments are often made during pitches. Not long ago, she says, a lawyer took one of Springboard's female entrepreneurs to Silicon Valley to pitch for funding. One of the potential investors, on meeting the woman, quipped to the lawyer that it was Take Your Daughter to Work Day. "The entrepreneur told me she had to hold her breath for a minute," because she was momentarily thrown off balance a bit. Still, says Millman, she recovered and gave her pitch but did not get funded. "It was clear it was a practice session for her," says Millman, but the founder also realized she did not want to get investment from that VC. Says Millman, "Know that you don't have to do business with people who are not respectful of you. There are plenty of others out there."

That was similar to a lesson that stuck with Daily Burn's CEO Tricia Han when took the helm in late 2017 as a first-time CEO. Her former college roommate is a "brilliant" Asian-American woman who successfully climbed the executive ladder in the finance world. "Even she had

experiences of walking into meetings and having people assume she was the secretary,” recalls Han, “so I asked her what tactics she used to overcome bias and just as importantly, to avoid feeling demoralized.” Han’s roommate simply said: “Not everyone will want to work with you. But some will. And you have to recognize the people that are willing to engage and cultivate those relationships.”

The final deadline for Fast Company’s [Brands That Matter Awards](#) is Friday, May 30, at 11:59 p.m. PT. [Apply today.](#)

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