



AT THE CROSSROAD  
OF INEQUALITIES /  
DISCRIMINATION

## Online training on intersectional discrimination

# 1. Stereotypes, power and discrimination

**The aim of this section is to introduce the basic concepts and terms regarding stereotypes and prejudice, and the types of discrimination based on them. After completing this section, you will:**

- be able to define basic concepts such as stereotypes, prejudice, unconscious bias and power dynamics;
- recognise how ignoring and being inactive about unfair or unequal treatment of individuals leads to discrimination;
- identify examples of different types of discrimination;
- start exploring where your unconscious biases lie.

## 1.1 Stereotypes

Every person is faced with a multitude of simple and complex tasks and challenges on a daily basis, giving them a huge number of options. If a person wanted to weigh all these options carefully, compare them with each other and make the best decision, they would be in a constant state of anxiety and worry about what to do. To ensure relative certainty, a person creates a framework within which they simplify complex phenomena and create a reality that makes decision-making easier.

Stereotypes simplify and systematise information and the world around us. As a result of this cognitive process, information is easier to identify, recall, predict their effects and react to them.

We face stereotypes of all kinds from birth – whether about gender, ethnicity, religion, 'race', age, disability or any other characteristics/circumstances.



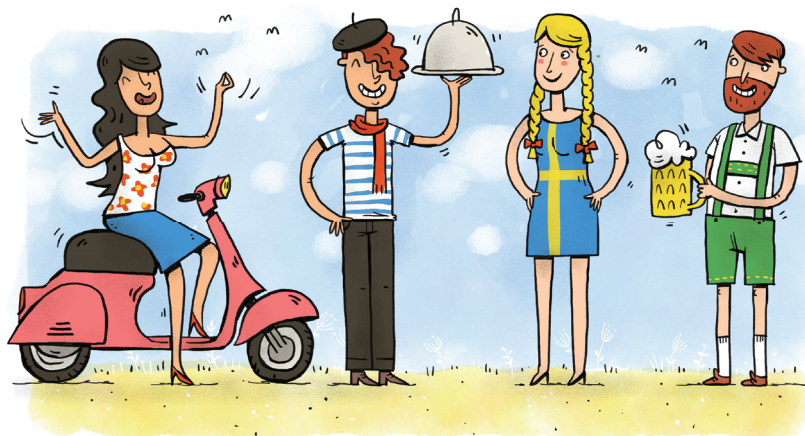
### Let's look at some examples of stereotypes:

- **A dog is a loyal animal.**
- **The Swiss are meticulous and the French cook well.**
- **The Roma like to steal.**
- **Foxes are cunning.**
- **Men are strong and women are gentle.**
- **All Black people dance well.**

### Consider

- Which of these stereotypes have you heard of?
- Do you think all statements are stereotypes?
- Do you think these stereotypes can influence your thinking and behaviour towards these groups?

Stereotypes are therefore created when we categorise people into groups and then attribute certain characteristics and behaviours to everyone in the formed category. We form categories based on our own experiences and on the messages we receive from our surroundings. When we think about a person belonging to a category, we see only generalised, limited and often unconfirmed information about the expected behaviour of that person, ignoring their individual characteristics and specifics.



The interesting thing about stereotypes is that each group attributes stereotypical characteristics to other groups. This means that there are stereotypes for each of 'our' groups. But 'we', who are part of this group, do not see ourselves as stereotypical and uniform, but see members of our group as heterogeneous. Our stereotypical thinking is directed towards other groups that we perceive as homogeneous.

Not all stereotypes are perceived to be negative or critical. This is the case with black people who are good dancers or French people who cook well. But that does not mean that every single person in that group identifies with that assumption. Or that every single person sees our notion as positive.



**Imagine the following situation. You are a recruiter and you are interviewing the following people for the position of secretary.**

**Tim** is a young white man with white hair dyed white and a long, dark, thick beard. He is tattooed on both hands, wears many massive rings, perhaps one with the image of a skull. He speaks with an accent.

**Sonia** is a white middle-aged woman with light brown hair worn in a ponytail. She is wearing make-up, but not too much. She wears small discreet golden earring in both ears. Her nails are painted with light pink nail varnish and she wears a ring on her ring finger. She is wearing a grey suit with a pink shirt. She speaks fluently and with a clear voice.

**Cynthia** is a middle-aged Black woman. She wears a colourful headband, above which are her dreadlocks, pinned up in a high bun. She wears dangling colourful earrings. Her clothes are also colourful and she is wearing red lipstick. She speaks fluently and with a clear voice.

**Consider which of these three people would you choose for the vacant position? Would you make your choice based on stereotypical assumptions about 'what people are like' – people with tattoos, white-dyed hair, with dreadlocks, speaking with an accent, presenting themselves in a conspicuous or inconspicuous manner? Or perhaps on the basis of gender, because women are 'better suited' to secretarial work? Or skin colour?**

The case illustrates the problem of decision-making based on stereotypes: it can lead to wrong decisions and discriminatory practices.

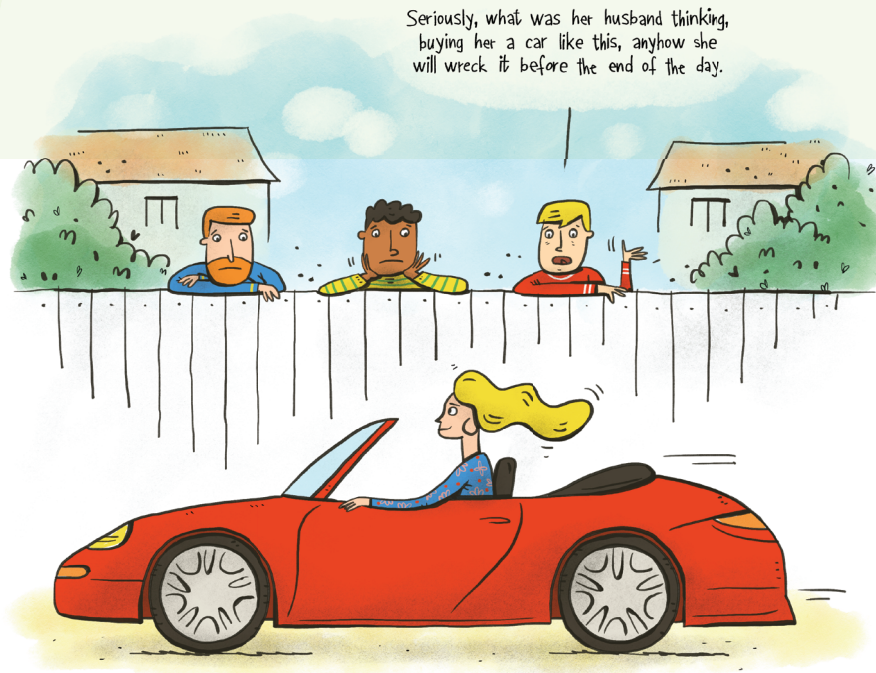
## 1.2 Prejudice

Like stereotypes, prejudices are unverified, unjustified and unreasoned opinions about other groups and the people who are part of these groups. Unlike stereotypes, prejudice is accompanied by negative feelings and attitudes towards people solely because they belong to a particular group. They are also accompanied by feelings of inferiority of these people, which in turn lead to disrespectful, intolerant, demeaning and contemptuous attitudes. Like stereotypes, prejudice is based on skin colour, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, culture, sexual orientation, age, disability, etc.



## Let's look at some examples of prejudices:

- **Blondes are stupid.**
- **All Muslims support extremist ideas.**
- **All politicians are corrupt and no one can be trusted.**
- **Black women are angry all the time.**
- **Gay are promiscuous and should be treated.**



### Consider

- Which of these stereotypes have you heard of?
- Do you think all statements are stereotypes?
- Do you agree that the ideal of Western society is a healthy, middle-aged, white, heterosexual, Christian, middle- or upper-class male? And that these idealised characteristics/circumstances are the cause of most prejudice in Western societies?

Some of the more common prejudices are racism (prejudice against certain people on the basis of skin colour), sexism (emphasising the superiority of one gender), ageism and gerontophobia (fear of old people and ageing), homophobia (fear of homosexuals), Islamophobia (fear of Muslims and Islam), xenophobia (fear of foreigners), ableism (discrimination against persons with mental or physical disabilities) and religious prejudice (fear of people of other religious affiliations).

Because prejudices are accompanied by strong emotions, they are more dangerous than stereotypes. They are often used as an excuse for acts of aggression, to justify systematic violence or discrimination, and to perpetuate the unequal balance of power in society.

## Stereotypes and prejudiced evaluations of others can escalate:

- making jokes about 'inferior' categories of people;
- avoiding interpersonal relationships or even contact;
- discrimination against people from other groups;
- physical violence;
- genocide.

### 1.3 Unconscious bias

You may have waved your hand dismissively when you read about stereotypes and realised that all of the above does not apply to you, that you do not have such simplistic and negative notions about others. But the fact is that we all suffer from a phenomenon called unconscious bias, which is not the result of our deliberate or conscious decisions. In other words, each one of us has unconscious beliefs about certain groups in society, linked to the aforementioned fact that we categorise the world in order to make everyday decisions easier. Unconscious bias starts to develop at a young age and influences our decision-making, even if we are not aware of it.



**Imagine the following situations and consider whether they are real or imaginary.**

**Tim** and his colleague Ana changed their email signatures. He communicated with customers in the same way as always, but signed as Jana. It turned out that all of a sudden all the clients started to doubt his ability, they were disdainful towards him, someone even asked him if he was single. Jana, who had previously been accused of being slow, had never been so productive in her work. Tim realised why Ana was slower at her job than he was: she was constantly faced with having to convince her clients that she was doing a good job, that her suggestions were valid, and that she was professional. As a result, she was less efficient. As he was now, just by virtue of signing with the 'wrong', female name. Regardless of the fact that the way he worked had not changed in any way. Nor did Jana's, except that everyone was now convinced she was a man.

**Economists at the University of California, Berkeley**, conducted an experiment. They sent tens of thousands of job applications to hundreds of employers, half of them signed with typical white names, like Emily or Greg, and half with typical Black names, like Jamal or Lakisha. Fictitious Black applicants were called for interview 10% less often, even though their job applications were comparable to those of fictitious white applicants.

**Six people** were killed and nearly 20 injured at a mosque in Canada. Initial reports on the incident indicated that police had detained two people, one Canadian-born white male and one Moroccan-born male. Some media outlets sent out a press release that the suspect was a Moroccan man. In reality, the shooter was a white French-Canadian, whereas the Moroccan-Canadian man called the police when he heard the gunshots. When the police arrived at the scene of the shooting, they detained him.

#### **Answer:**

*All three situations are real and reflect an unconscious bias of those involved, which led to different kinds of prejudice: sexism, racism and Islamophobia. They show the consequences of unconscious bias, which in all three cases are discriminatory. When unconscious bias is combined with power and privilege, the combination can lead to unjust consequences for the most vulnerable and marginalised segments of the population.*

**Since unconscious bias is unconscious, the first step towards eliminating it is to realise that it exists in each one of us. This is followed by the following steps:**

- *identifying our own biases that lead to negative stereotypes or even prejudices we hold against others;*
- *awareness and vigilance that we are more likely to ignore our own biases when under pressure or when we have to make decisions on the spur of the moment; in such cases, it is good to take a step back, reassess the situation, and then make a decision;*
- *think about how we would feel if other people or groups stereotyped us the way we stereotype them;*
- *slowing down stereotypical assumptions about others by considering all individuals in a particular group who do not fit the pattern, whether they are friends, acquaintances or celebrities;*
- *affirmation of the awareness that each individual is unique, with characteristics that distinguish them from others in the group;*
- *changing the messages from those that exclude on the basis of gender, skin colour, ethnicity, sexual orientation and others to those that are inclusive;*
- *repeating the exercise: eliminating unconscious bias is a process that takes time and requires constant reflection and personal development.*

## 1.4 Power

Power is the ability to influence the behaviour and actions of persons. Power can be seen as unfair or malicious, but this does not change the fact that people, as social beings, use power to achieve their goals. Power can be the result of authority, social class or material status, personal charisma, knowledge or expertise, or coercion (violence or law), amongst other things.

Equally distributed power in society is a prerequisite for equality and fairness. Power is relational and interpersonal, so we speak of a balance of power between persons or groups in a given relationship. All parties in a relationship have a measure of power, but the question is how much power they have: equal or unequal, constant or changing over time.

Unfortunately, we cannot talk of a trend towards a more equal distribution of power, as power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few people. This means that certain groups of people have limited rights, options or opportunities. These may be women, ethnic or religious minorities, disabled people, non-binary people, people of other 'races', etc. Stereotypes and stereotyped roles perpetuate the unequal balance of power in society, and can affect the right to vote, right to speech, access to education and healthcare, decent living conditions, freedom of movement, etc. Unequal balance of power can also be perpetuated by legislation.

## There are different types of power:

- **Power over:** is similar to the domination of someone over someone else. It is about limiting another person's options through everyday practices and uncritically reproduced traditions.
- **Power together with:** social or political power that presupposes a common understanding of a goal and the ability to participate in the struggle to achieve that common goal.
- **Inner power:** the ability to understand oneself, one's situation and the inner power to influence one's own life or to accept change; this includes self-awareness, self-esteem, a clear identity and determination.
- **Power to:** the empowered person has the power to change, the power to transform traditional practices based on 'power over', as well as the ability to access and control the means of production.



**Imagine the following situations and consider whether they involve an unequal balance of power.**

**A public institution** launches a call for proposals for NGOs. The call for proposals states that NGOs have one month to submit their application, and the institution then has two months to publish the results of the call. When an NGO is one day late in submitting its application, it is not accepted for consideration. When a public institution is one month late in publishing the results, it sends information to the NGOs that it is late due to the large number of applications and asks for their understanding.

**The waiting times** for a hip examination are very long. Person A is wealthy and can afford to pay for an examination by a private orthopaedic surgeon, or to have surgery in a private health centre. Person B does not have enough money and is awaiting an examination in the public healthcare system. In the meantime, their condition deteriorates so much that they cannot perform their work and lose their job.

**Mark and Jan** have problems with maths. Mark's parents hire a tutor, but Jan's parents can't afford one. Mark fixes his negative grade, while Jan has a make-up exam at the end of the year. His parents are not highly educated and are unable to help him study on their own, so Jan repeats a grade. With the help of his instructors, Mark finishes his schooling and attends a private university, where the tuition is expensive. Jan fails to pass maths and gets failing grades in physics and geography, so he drops out and takes a job as a construction worker.

**Answer:**

*All three examples reflect an uneven balance of power that negatively affects those with relatively less power.*

## 1.5 Discrimination

Discrimination is any unjustified unequal treatment, whether actual or by law, based on a person's personal characteristics/circumstances, without objective reason. These characteristics/circumstances, whether gender, sexual orientation, skin colour, ethnic origin, migrant status, etc., and the stereotypes and prejudices associated with them, result in less favourable treatment which undermines, restricts or excludes the enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms, other rights, legal interests and benefits.

### There are several types of discrimination.

#### Direct discrimination

- Inequality in law, policy or treatment of a person or group based on their sex/gender.
- It is the easiest to identify and eliminate. For example, in some countries, women are not allowed to own land.
- For example, the right to inherit land is still not equal between women and men in 35 countries.

#### Indirect discrimination

- Equal treatment for all is guaranteed in laws and policies, but in reality, individuals have unequal opportunities and chances.
- This may be due to unconscious and deeply held prejudices or gender stereotypes.
- For example, the measures to curb Covid-19, related to the closure of schools and kindergartens, had a greater impact on women, as they primarily took on the care and education of children, in line with their gender roles.

#### Multiple discrimination

- Some people are discriminated against on the basis of several personal characteristics/circumstances. This phenomenon can manifest itself in two ways. In the first case, a person is discriminated against in several fields separately. In the second case, called intersectional discrimination, the discriminations are not cumulative, but multiplicative.
- For example, a migrant from Afghanistan is discriminated against in Slovenia on the basis of her gender, religion and migrant status. She may be discriminated against separately, for example if she asks for a female gynaecologist because of her religious beliefs, but her requests are ignored; in another case, no one wants her as a tenant when looking for an apartment because of her migrant status. If she is turned down



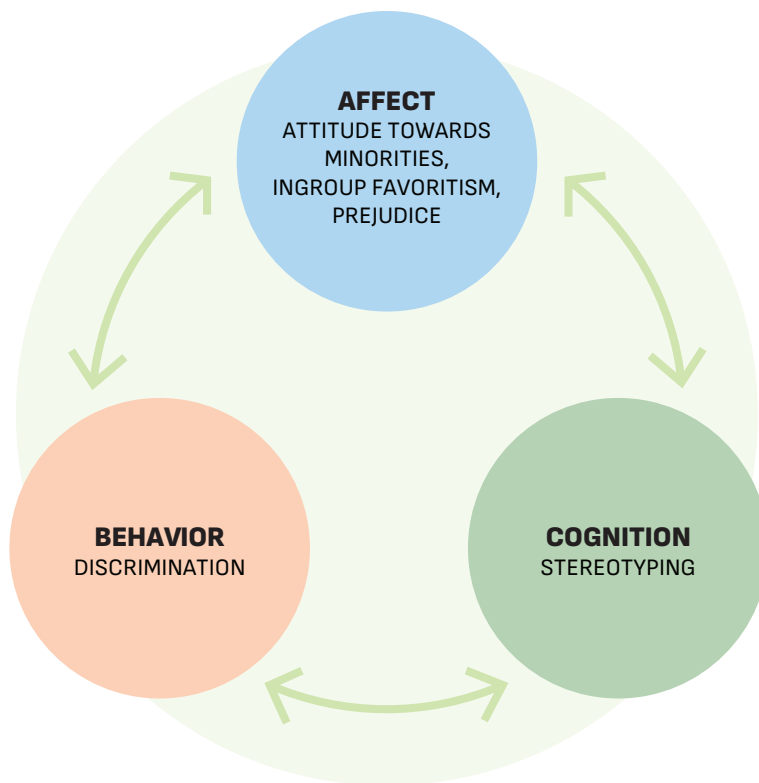
at a job interview because she is a woman and is likely to have children soon, and because she will have many children as a Muslim and be on maternity leave all the time, this is intersectional discrimination.

There is also **positive discrimination**. This includes measures that give vulnerable groups in society a more favourable position in order to help ensure equal opportunities. These are usually limited and temporary measures. Examples of such measures are gender quotas in elections, employment quotas for people with disabilities, admission quotas for students from minority or disadvantaged groups, preferences in the recruitment of young people and so on.

Discrimination can affect many aspects of life, including employment, education, housing, healthcare and legal protection. It can lead to severe psychological, physiological and wider negative social consequences.

Discrimination perpetuates the privileges of one group in relation to other (discriminated) groups or individuals. Discrimination is an element of maintaining the balance of power in society. Often there is a chain reaction, a kind of vicious circle of discrimination, as illustrated in the figure below. Discrimination in one area lead to a worsening situation of an individual or group in other areas.

### The vicious circle of discrimination





## Imagine the following situations and consider if there is suspected discrimination in the following cases.

1. At a job interview at a computer programming company, the head of the department asks the candidate if she plans to have children in the near future.
2. A restaurant owner refuses to serve a person because they are wearing a religious head covering.
3. Your colleagues always expect you to prepare food and drink for meetings, as you are the youngest person on the team.
4. The local sports club publishes the training schedule. The number of hours for women's training has been reduced, as women do not train as seriously as men.
5. The head of department asks you to take on additional tasks. They believe in your ability to learn new technologies faster as a younger employee.
6. A youth worker organises workshops on financial literacy specifically for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.
7. Marko applies for the position of receptionist. The employer rejects him because he has a strong accent, which the employer thinks could make it difficult to communicate with customers.
8. Mateja and Luka equally fulfilled the criteria for employment at a chemical institute. The institute has a specific measure in place to remove objective barriers to gender imbalance. Mateja was recruited on the basis of quotas.
9. A youth worker at a workshop on job-searching techniques advises young people from minority ethnic groups not to mention their ethnicity on their CV.

### Answers:

1. *The question is discriminatory as it relates to personal life and family plans. These should not influence employment decisions. It is gender discrimination because it is often aimed at women.*
2. *Refusal of service on the basis of wearing a religious head covering is an example of discrimination, as it is based on an individual's religious affiliation.*
3. *While it may be unpleasant and seem unfair that you are the one who has to make coffee, it is not necessarily discrimination unless it is expected simply because of your gender, 'race' or other personal characteristics. If it is because of your age or your status as the youngest person, it is not discrimination by definition, but may be an example of unequal treatment.*
4. *This is a clear example of gender discrimination, as it is based on gender stereotypes and inequalities in sport.*
5. *Although this may be perceived as an extra burden, it is not discrimination. You are expected to take on tasks according to your skills and abilities. This case could be discriminatory if you were selected solely on the basis of your age, without taking into account your actual skills or abilities.*
6. *This is not discrimination, as the youth worker is targeting a specific need of a particular group of young people who may not have the same opportunities to learn about finance as their peers from families with a better economic situation.*
7. *Although the ability to communicate is important, this may be a case of discrimination on the basis of nationality, especially if Marko's accent does not actually affect his intelligibility or his communicative skills.*
8. *This is an example of positive discrimination, as they have given preference to the person of under-represented gender.*
9. *Although the youth worker wants to protect young people from potential discrimination, advising young people to hide their identities is in itself discriminatory. By acting in this way, the youth worker is reinforcing systemic inequalities instead of fighting them.*



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