

In Conakry, a group of female humanitarian professionals met up to discuss what their greatest challenges were as women in the aid field. We set up a small exercise where each participant wrote her top three challenges on a post-it note and put it on a wall – we then grouped the notes into common themes. While many of the challenges were related to challenges posed by our male colleagues (i.e. a sense of an “old boys’ club”, harassment, everyday sexism), one recurring theme that surprised us: **“lack of support/mentorship/solidarity from other women”**. Some even went as far as saying they felt purposefully undermined by female colleagues, peers, and superiors.

This is not ok. There are already so many barriers to women succeeding in the humanitarian field, we should not be creating more for each other. All of us need to step up and support each other as professionals. Here are a few tips on how:

1. “Call her doctor”: this idea came from an experience of a female aid worker who has a PhD in psychology. She was at a meeting with many senior officials, all of whom were men and most of whom were doctors. On the agenda, everyone was introduced by their title and name (e.g. Dr. Abbas, Dr. Sow, Dr. Jones, etc), except her – she was on the agenda as only her first and last name. This scene occurs in many different iterations, where men’s credentials are visible and acknowledged, and women’s credentials are forgotten or obscured. Make it a point to call a female colleague with an MD/PhD “Doctor Maryam”. If you see a woman’s expert opinion being minimized, say, “..as Shondell is our resident expert in indigenous food systems, let’s listen to her”. There is a concept called **amplification**, which is when a woman makes a key point in a meeting, other women continue to discuss the idea while crediting the author, making sure men recognize the contribution of women and don’t try to take credit for it¹. Call out the credentials of your female colleagues, because chances are, no one else will.

2. Learn more about your female colleagues’ backgrounds: as we are a multicultural and multinational sector, what being a woman means is different depending on where we come from. Instead of assuming your female colleague is

afraid to go to the field, maybe she is undergoing a lot of stress because her family insists that she is responsible for childcare and she does not know how they will manage while she is away. Instead of assuming your female colleague is lazy for wanting to leave work early, maybe she prefers to come to work early and leave before it gets dark because she has been assaulted before on public transit. Instead of assuming that your female colleague is weak or shy, maybe she has trouble advocating for herself in front of men because of cultural norms in her home country. Be aware that your experience as a woman may be different from your peers’, and try to learn and empathize with where they are coming from.

3. Correct colleagues on inappropriate comments: even if it does not bother you: maybe you do not mind when a male colleague compliments you on your physical appearance, or shares a few off-color jokes. But be aware that other women may have had traumatic experiences and these kinds of things can be triggering for them, and they may not feel comfortable speaking out. It’s totally ok to say, “Thanks for the compliment, but that’s not appropriate for the workplace. I don’t mind, but it could make other women uncomfortable”, or “if you want to talk about that in a bar after work, that’s ok, but the office really isn’t the place for this kind of conversation.”

4. Call out sexism when you see it: when we experience everyday sexist actions in our workplace, it can be easy to brush them aside. Someone asks you, as the only woman in a room, to get coffee for everyone in a meeting. Or asks you to take notes when that is not your job. Or calls you “sweetie” or “young girl” when you are a qualified professional. These may seem harmless, but they often are signs of a deeper personal, cultural, or institutional bias towards women. There is a theory that impunity around smaller acts of sexism can encourage men to become bolder and enter into behaviors that can be considered harassment, so it is up to us to try to check these behaviors even when they feel small or harmless.

Checking these behaviors does not have to be confrontational – sometimes a bit of humor or just an educational chat can be enough (see box to right). Note: if you want to call someone out for behavior that affects another female colleague,

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check in with her before you intervene on her behalf. Sometimes, we can do more harm than good if our institutions do not have adequate protections in place

“CALLING IN” VS “CALLING OUT”

Many men are raised in environments where they were not educated about gender equity and simply are not aware that they are being insensitive or harassing. When this occurs, instead of “calling out” someone, which can lead them to be defensive, you can “call in” someone, which is less confrontational and more about educating them about lines they may have crossed. If, after being educated, the behavior persists you may start “calling them out” as they should now better.

5. Mentor younger / less senior women: if you are a woman who has a relatively senior position in an organization, that means you have figured out how to break through ‘the old boys’ club’ that exists in many organizations. Take the time to reach out to younger female colleagues, give them advice, let them know that you are there for them if they have any questions. They can be inside of your organization or in another organization, be international or national. Many young aid workers need mentors and role models, and if you can take the time to make yourself available, it can have a huge impact on the career of a young, female humanitarian.

6. Advocate for progressive maternity and childcare policies: many female aid workers, both national and international, feel left behind by the aid world when they have children. They may feel it is hard to “get back in the game” after maternity leave, or feel they were denied important opportunities when pregnant. Local staff, who are more likely to have their children in-country, may struggle to find childcare or even appropriate breastfeeding spaces. We need to better understand the specific barriers that mothers face in our organizations, and ensure that that these are minimized so that women can reach their full potential as professionals while being mothers.

7. Hire more women: many times, women are overlooked in the hiring process. Besides inherent biases that affect hiring in almost all industries, some environments have more overt biases that

discount women in the hiring process, or prevent women from even getting their CVs in the pile. If you are in a position to hire, look for gender balance. Of course, you have to hire people who are qualified for the task. But remember: structural barriers impede women from accessing opportunities that men have. This means that women with the skills you need may be harder to find-- but they almost always exist. If you cannot find a qualified woman the first time around, keep looking.