

Asian employees' experiences in the workplace differ—sometimes dramatically—by ethnicity and gender

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Asian Americans have roots in more than 24 countries, representing a wide range of religious, cultural, socioeconomic, and immigration backgrounds. Nonetheless, Asian Americans are often treated as a monolithic group. In today's climate, where employers are hyper-focused on creating true meritocracies that provide a consistent employee experience, it's time to move on to less clunky and more accurate analysis.

This report discusses data from 3877 employees surveyed by two industry-wide studies (in law and tech) and 7 companies from a broad range of industries. It is one of very few studies that uses industry data to compare the workplace experiences of six different groups of Asian employees: men and women whose heritage is East Asian (China, Japan, Mongolia etc.), South Asian (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh etc.) and Southeast Asian (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore etc.).

Underlying this research is a well-documented drop-off of representation and promotions of Asian employees at senior levels, as well as research that shows that the drop-off is more pronounced among Asian women than Asian men. Emerging research suggests that South Asian employees may escape barriers to leadership positions that affect other ethnic groups. Our research finds many other divergences in the workplace experiences reported by different groups of Asian employees. Understanding these differences is vital.

In today's climate, employers are hyper focused on creating true meritocracies that provide a consistent employee experience. To accomplish this effectively, it's time to recognize how the experiences of different groups of Asian employees diverge. A failure to do so can lead to retention and management issues, and organizational dysfunction, because the talents and skills of a company's workforce are not deployed effectively. Knowing precisely where artificial obstacles exist will help organizations identify hidden gems within their own organization, which can be more cost-effective than finding new hires who themselves may ultimately leave due to the same obstacles.

To highlight how Asian employees' experiences differ, we compare to the experiences reported by white male employees; we also include information on white women. When we describe effects as "most likely" for a particular group, we're referring to the groups represented in these data; effects for groups not included may be larger.

“
The vast majority of this very small, elite group of successful Asians in [my] industry are South Asian men by a wide margin and then East Asian men.”

- East Asian woman

”

Prove-it-again reported most by South Asian and East Asian women

Groups that are stereotyped as less competent need to provide more evidence of competence to be seen as equally competent, as when a woman needs stronger qualifications than a man applying for the same position. South Asian women and East Asian women are the most likely to report being held to higher standards than their colleagues. Every group of Asian women report more prove-it-again bias than do men of the same group, with truly dramatic differences between South Asian men and South Asian women.

“

Overall, we are very fortunate with our workplace. I feel very supported, but still often viewed as too young, too female to be taken seriously.

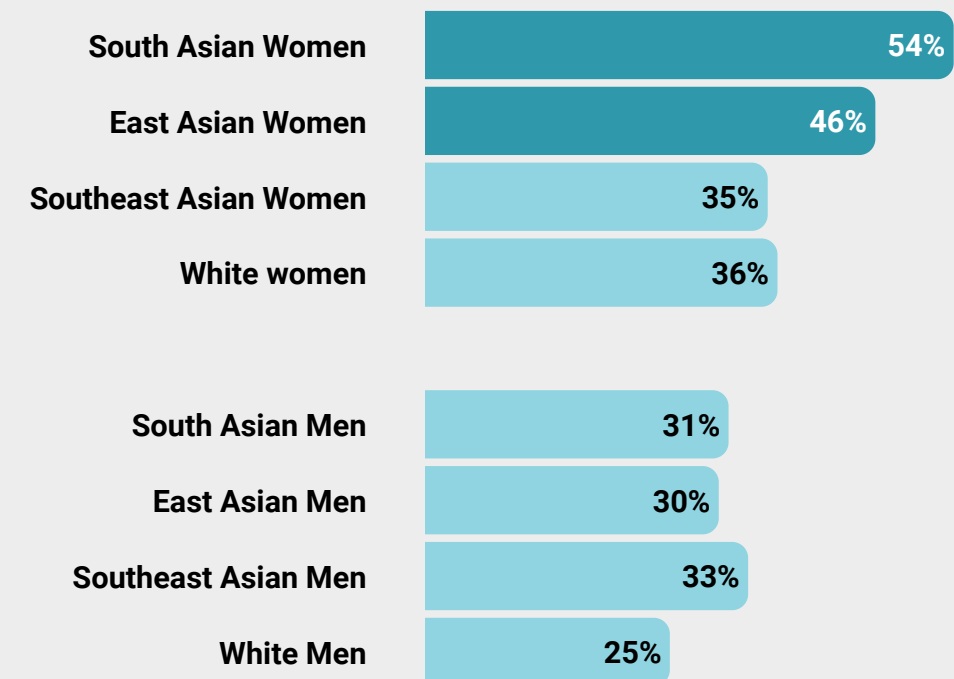
- South Asian woman

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South Asian women and East Asian women most likely to report they must prove themselves repeatedly

Over half (54%) of South Asian women and 46% of East Asian women report having to prove themselves over and over again to get the same level of recognition as their colleagues, as compared to 25% of white men.

I have to prove myself over and over again to get the same level of recognition



East Asian women and South Asian women most likely to report the “stolen idea”

43% of East Asian women and 40% of South Asian women report that other people get credit for ideas they originally offered, as compared to 22% of white men.



“
During a brainstorm meeting, I expressed an idea and nobody commented on it. Minutes later a male colleague expressed the same idea using different words, and everybody commented that the idea was great.

- East Asian woman

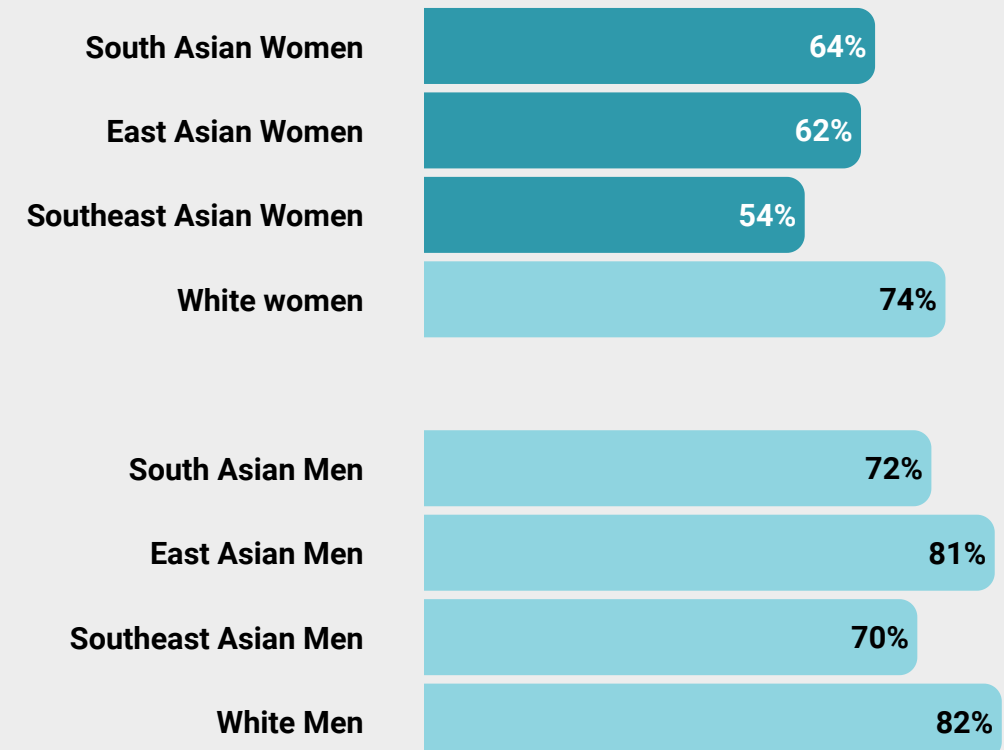
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Different groups of Asian women report the highest levels of Tightrope bias, depending on the type of bias

Assertiveness is less accepted from some groups than others. Prior research shows that white people tend to [dislike Asian Americans who behave in dominant ways](#), which provides incentives for Asian Americans to conform to the stereotype that they are [passive, quiet](#) and [lacking in leadership potential](#).

Prior research on ethnicity reports a decline in representation of Asian employees at senior levels, with East Asian employees—but not South Asian employees—[underrepresented in leadership roles](#). Prior research on gender shows that [Asian women are even less represented in leadership roles than Asian men](#). Looking at ethnicity and gender simultaneously yields new findings.

People expect me to play a leadership role



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There are clear stereotypes at play for what/who makes for an effective leader - with a more typically male association in areas such as height, appearance, social skills, personality.

- South Asian woman

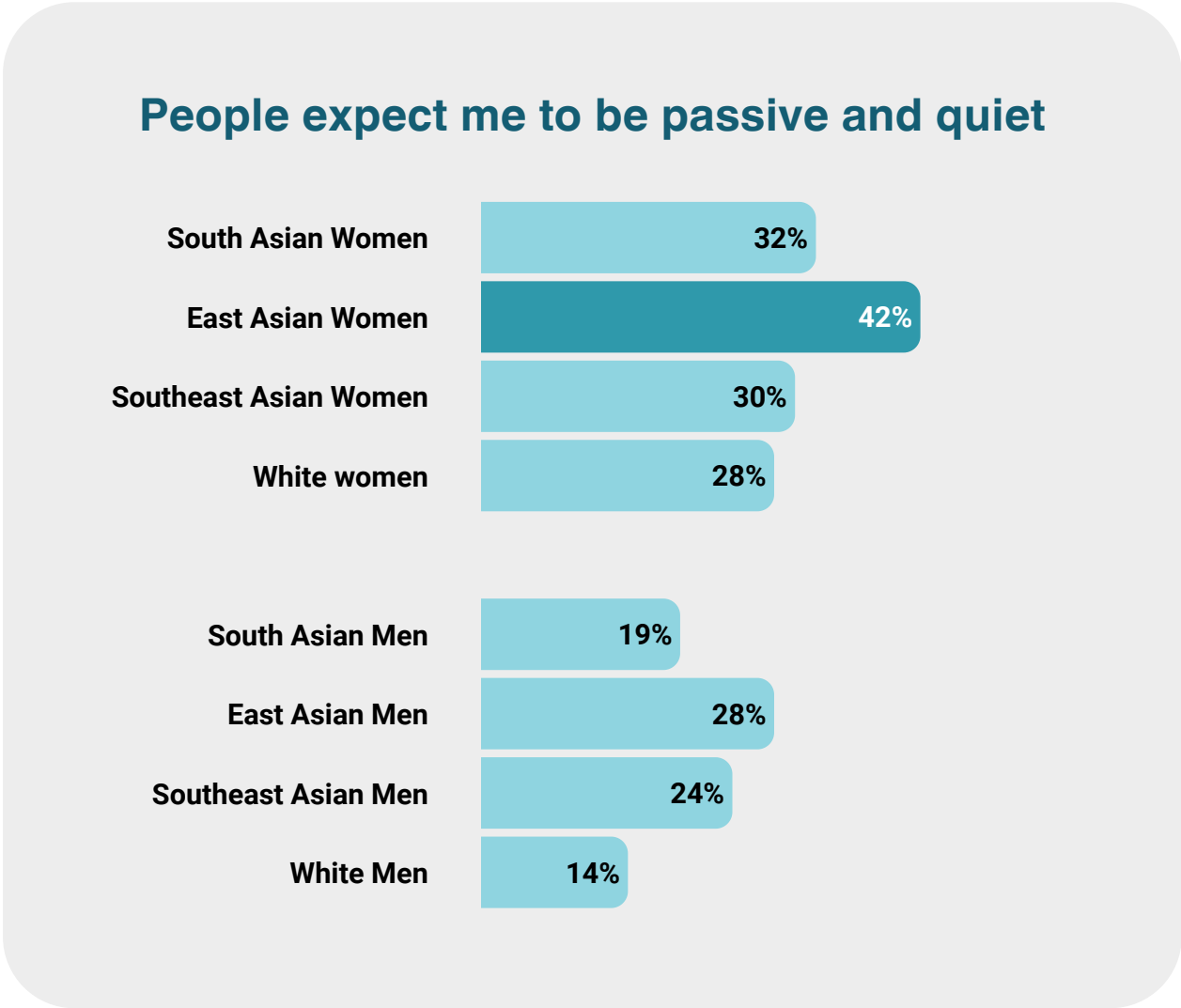
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Southeast Asian women least likely to be seen as leaders:

Southeast Asian women are least likely to report that people expect them to be leaders (54%), followed by East Asian women (62%), and South Asian women (64%). In every group, men are more likely to report being seen as leaders than are women of the same group. Southeast Asian men (70%) are least likely to report that they're expected to play leadership roles, followed by South Asian men (72%), and East Asian men (80%). These findings highlight the importance of disaggregating by both ethnicity and gender to understand impacts: our results provide a deeper dive than prior research focused on ethnicity OR gender.

East Asian women most likely to be seen as passive and quiet

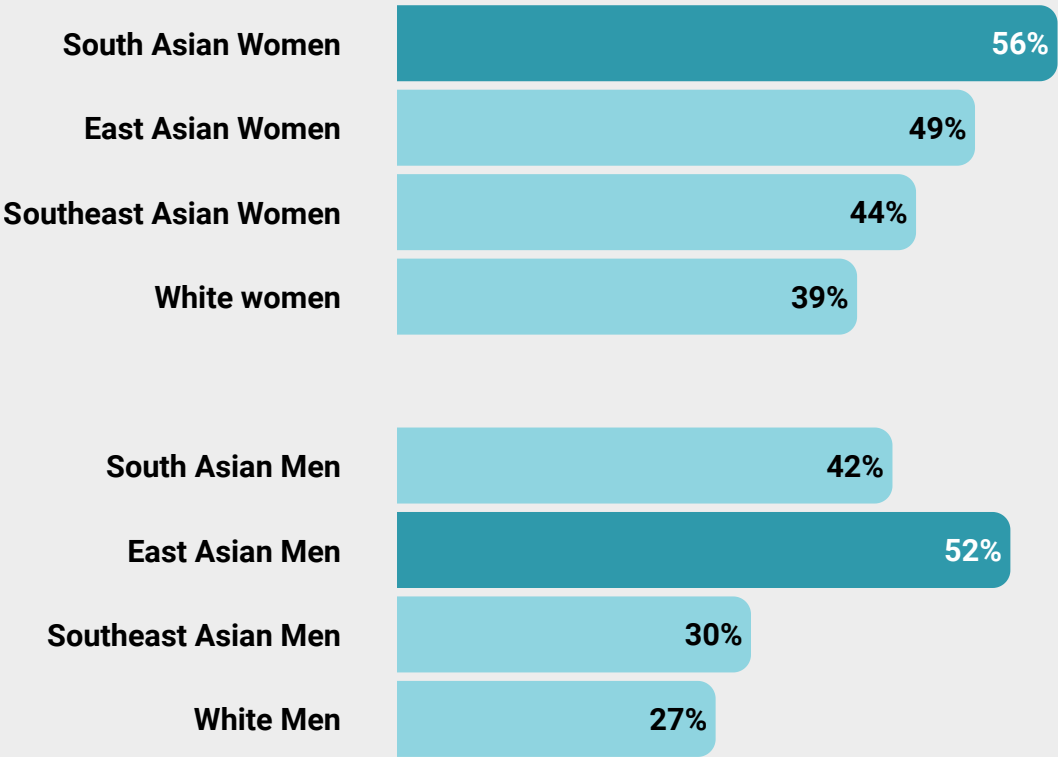
East Asian women are more likely (42%) than all other groups to report that they are expected to be passive and quiet, compared to 14% of white men. While East Asian men report this expectation at dramatically lower rates (28%) than East Asian women, they still report it at higher rates than any other group of men.



South Asian women and East Asian men need to be “everyone’s best friend”:

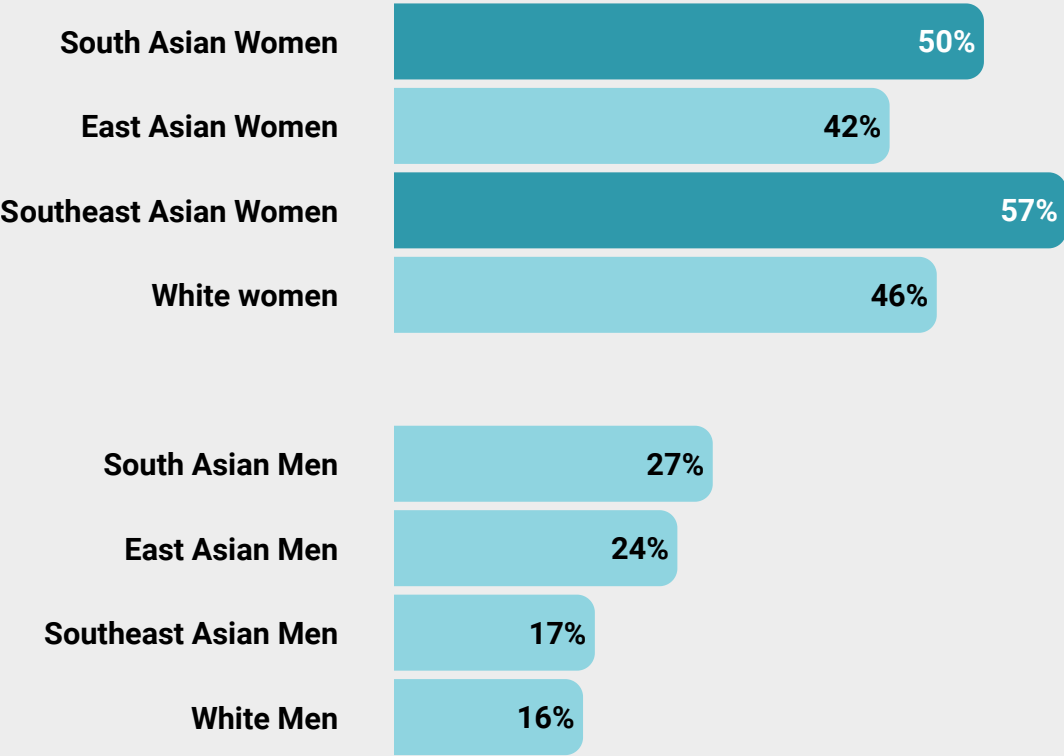
South Asian women are most likely group (56%) to report that, to get ahead, they need to be “everyone’s best friend”. Among men, East Asian men are the most likely (52%) to report this. Obviously, being simultaneously super-likeable *and* authoritative is harder than just being authoritative.

People like me have to be everyone’s best friend to get ahead here



Maternal Wall

When women have children, it changes perception of their work commitment



Southeast Asian and South Asian women are most likely to report bias triggered by motherhood:

When women have children, it can [change colleagues' perception of their commitment and competence](#). Southeast Asian women are most likely to report this (57%), followed by South Asian women (50%), as compared to only 16% of white men.

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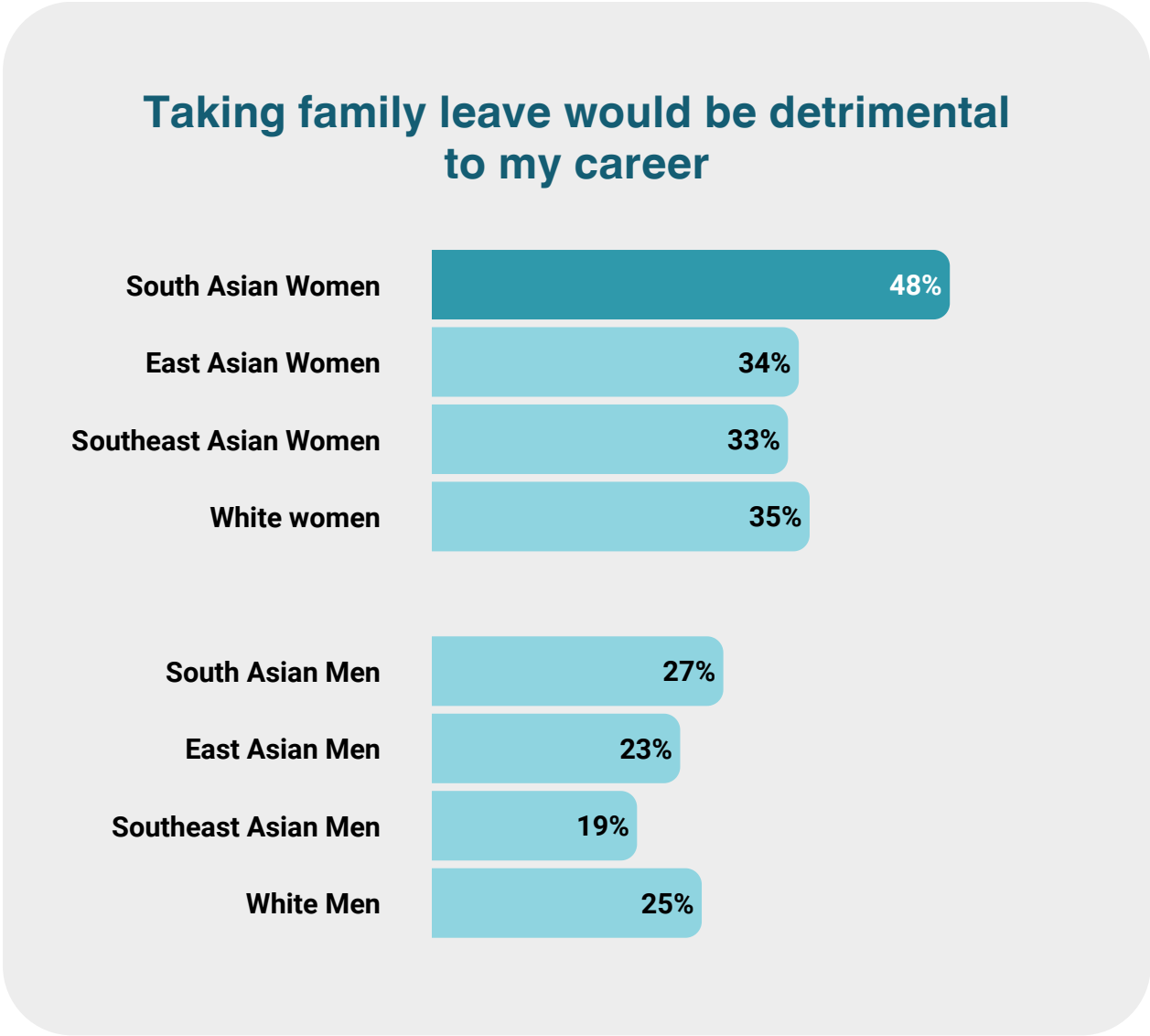
I got a lower rating one year because I was on maternity leave for 4 months.

– East Asian woman

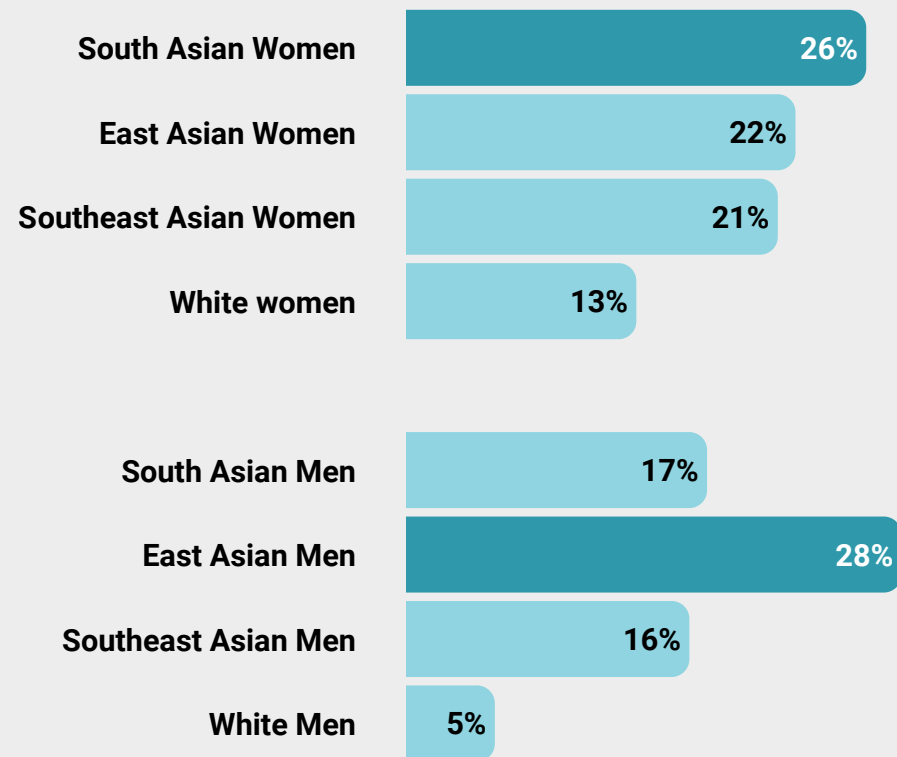
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South Asian women feel less able to take family leave:

Penalizing someone from taking [family leave](#) often is illegal. Nonetheless such penalties are common, with South Asian women most likely to be affected: a shocking 48% fear that taking family leave would harm their careers. All other groups also report at high levels that taking family leave would be detrimental to their careers.



If someone of my race or gender performs poorly it reflects negatively on me



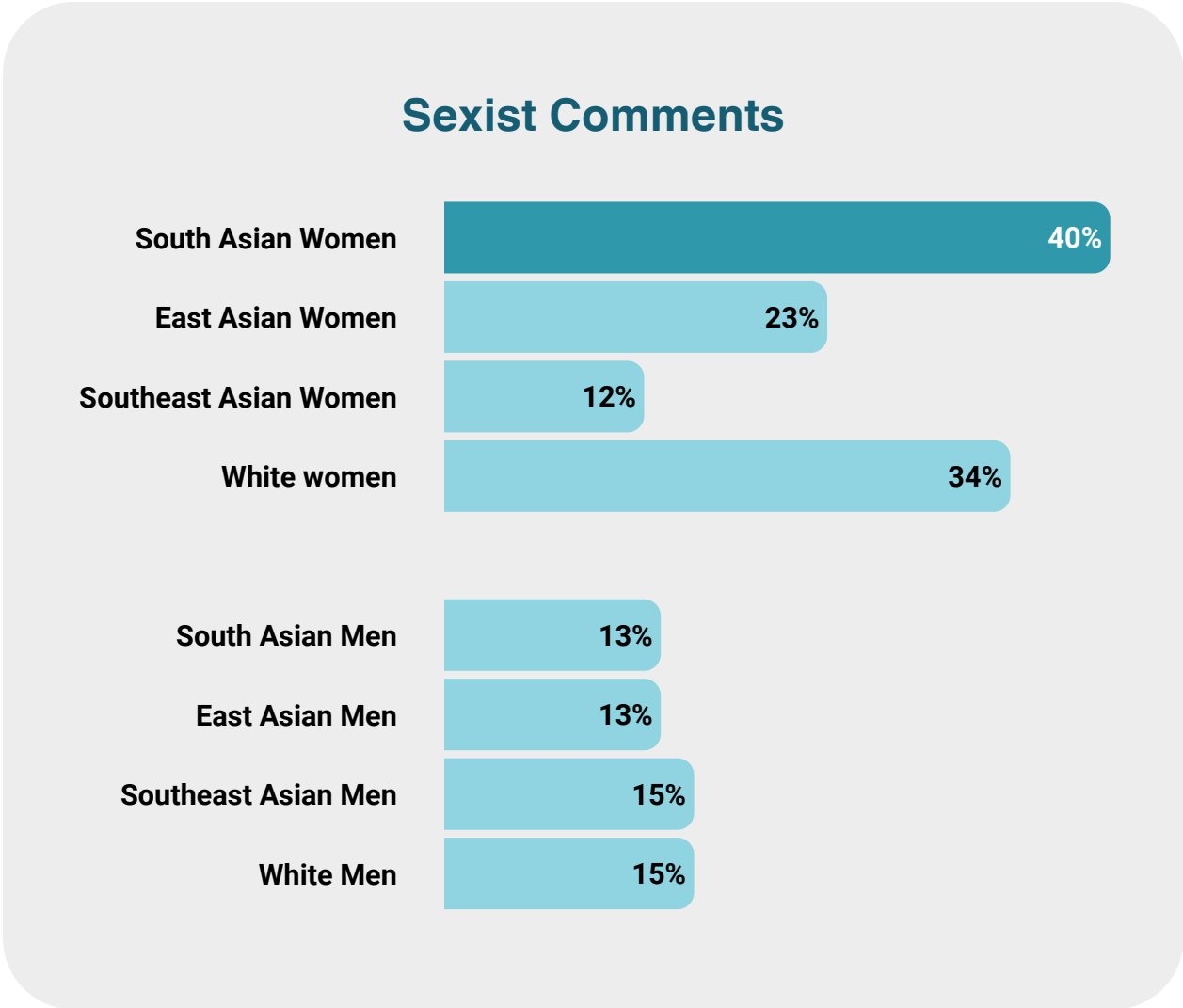
Tug of war reported most by East Asian men and South Asian women

Bias against a group can fuel conflict within the group. 28% of East Asian men and 26% of South Asian women report feeling worried that if someone else of their race/gender performs poorly, it will reflect negatively on them.

Different groups of Asian women report the highest levels of sexual harassment, depending on the type of harassment

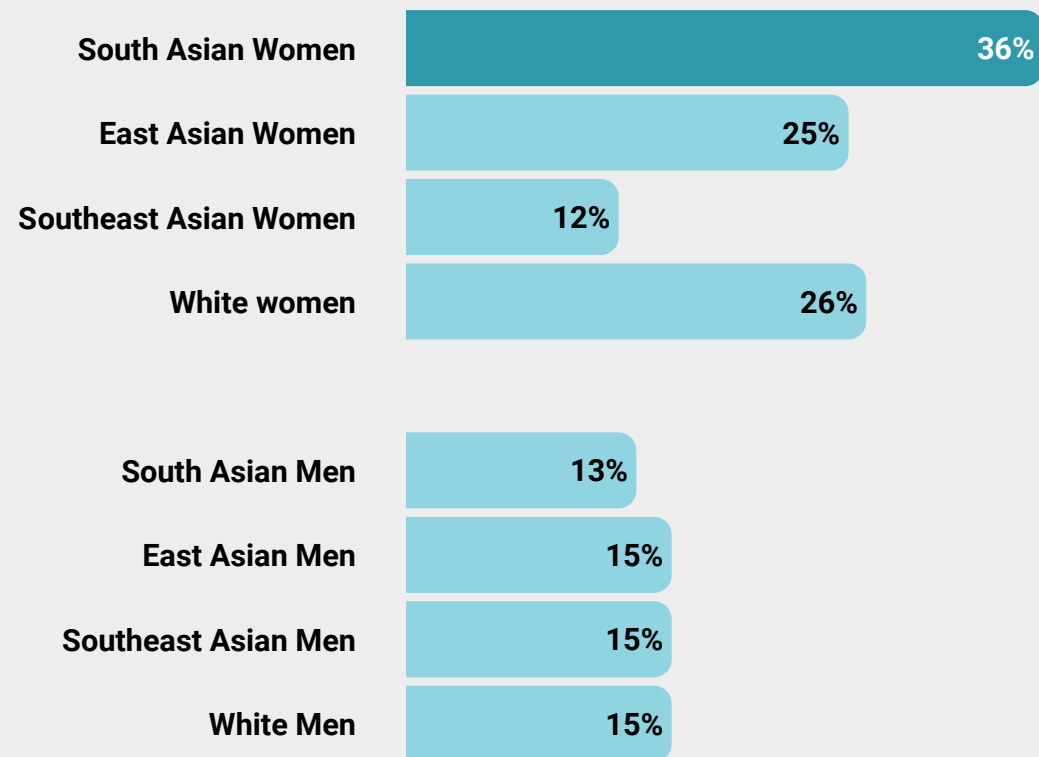
Asian women report more sexual harassment than white women. Which group of Asian women is most affected differs depending on the type of harassment.

South Asian women are more likely (40%) to report receiving or hearing sexist comments than any other group—more likely than white women and much more likely than other Asian women.



South Asian women are also most likely (36%) to report sexual jokes or stories.

Sexual jokes or stories



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[I've heard] unnecessary comments in a team room environment, such as sharing inappropriate comments / perspectives (saying things like Me Too movement didn't happen).

– South Asian woman

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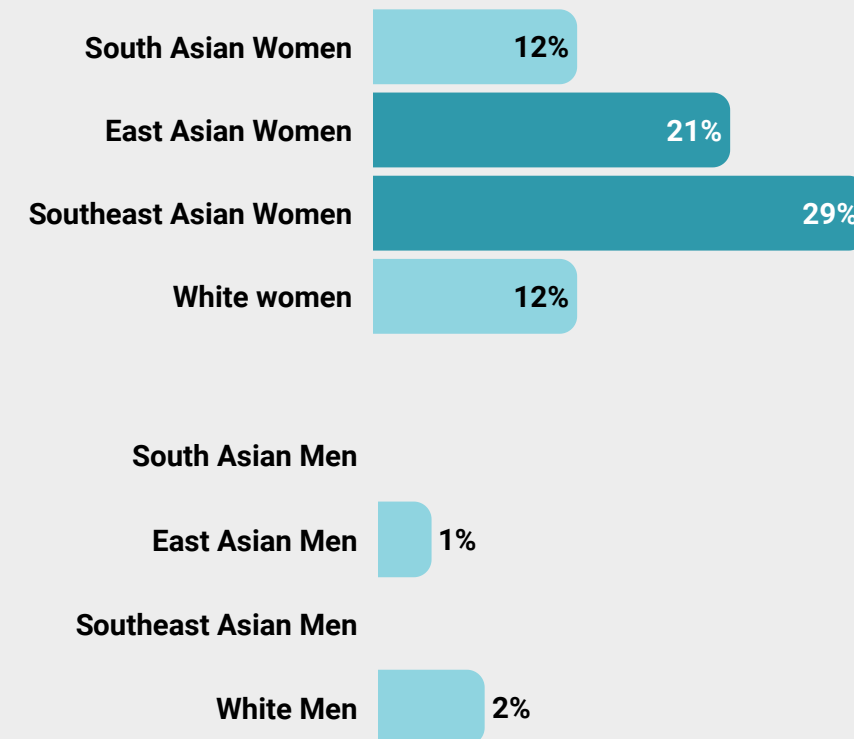
Male coworker repeatedly asking female coworker to social meal or event outside of work (that seemed like a date: exclusive, just the two of them and not an outing with other people) when female has declined several times.

- East Asian woman

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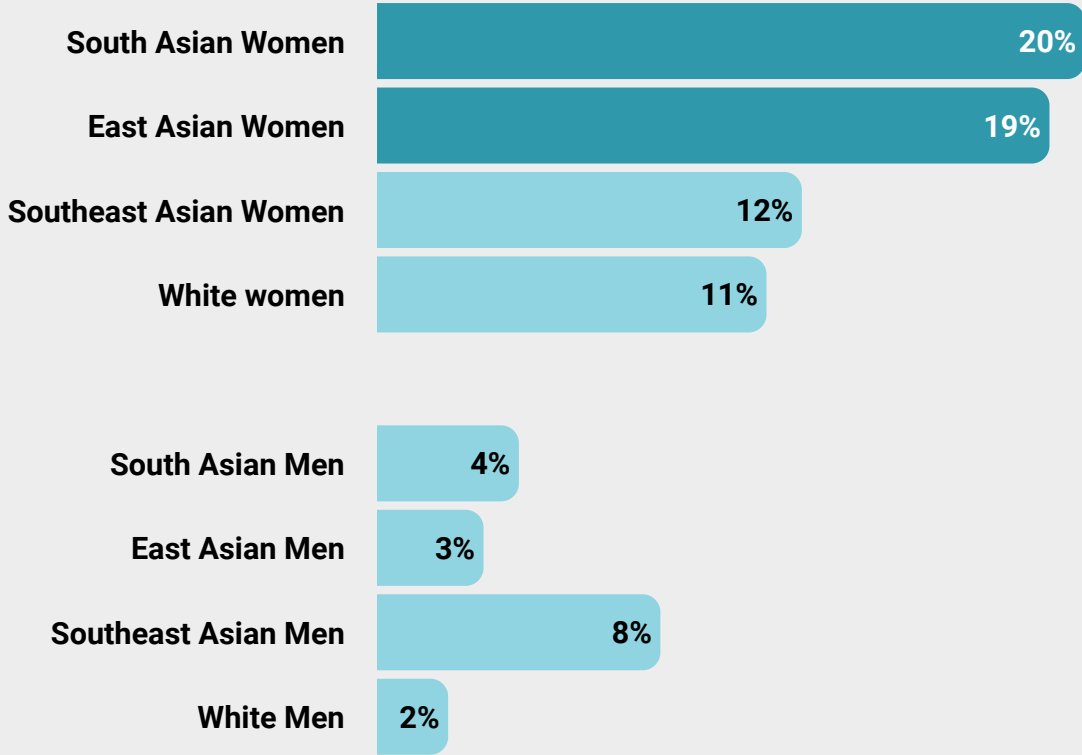
Southeast Asian women were most likely to report unwanted sexual or romantic attention, which they reported at a shockingly high level (29%), followed by East Asian women (21%).

Unwanted romantic or sexual attention



South Asian women (20%) and East Asian women (19%) were most likely to experience unwanted physical contact.

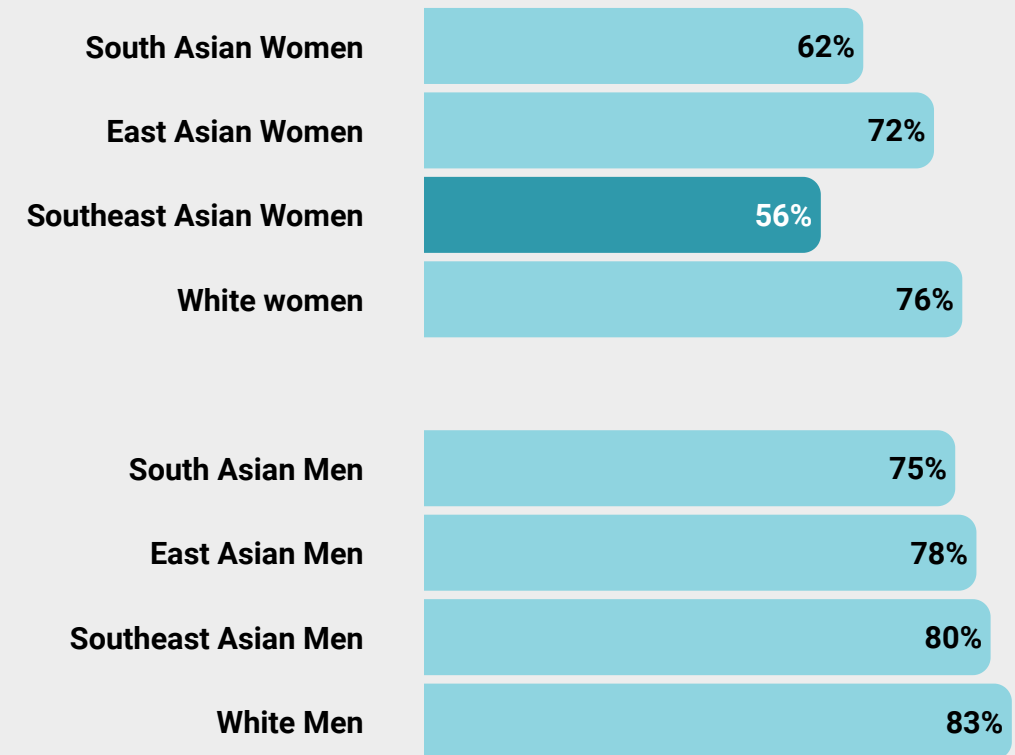
Unwanted physical contact



Access to high-profile opportunities is lowest for Southeast Asian women

All Asian employees report lower access to high-profile opportunities as compared to white men. Southeast Asian women report the lowest access: only 56% did, as compared to 83% of white men.

I have had the same access to desirable assignment as my colleagues



“

I find it extremely frustrating that it feels like Asian Americans are excluded from DEI conversations, opportunities, and initiatives. It is never explicitly stated but is strongly implied that Asians are considered equivalent to white people -- a privileged class and therefore not in need of support, mentorship or sponsorship.

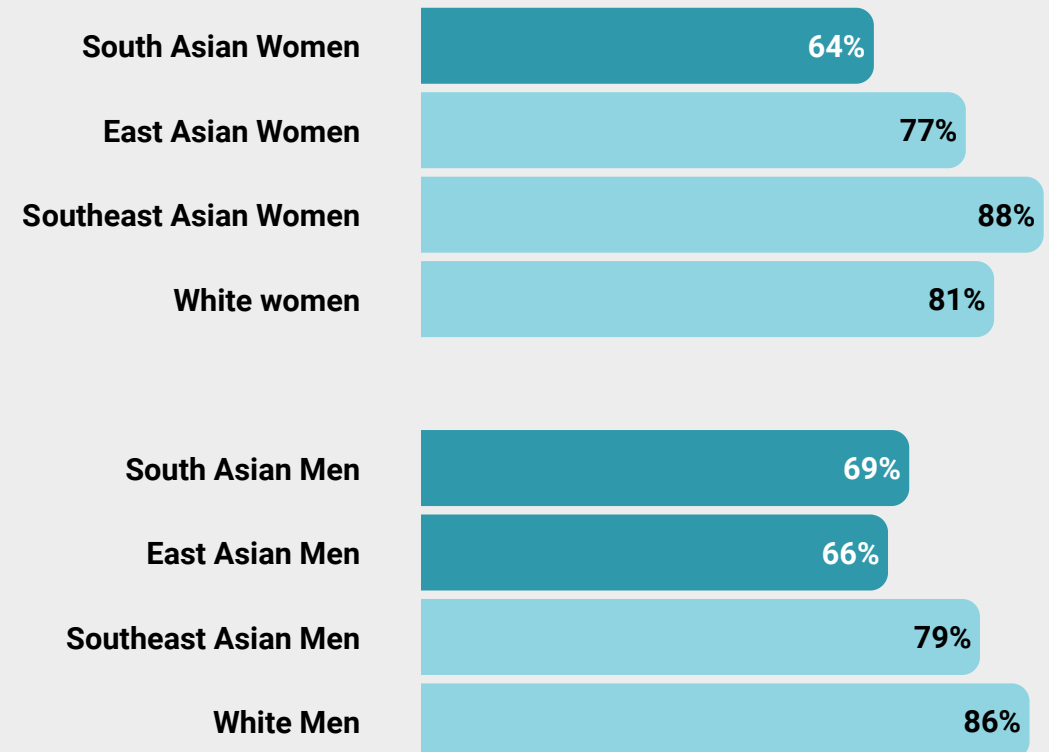
- Southeast Asian woman

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South Asian employees and East Asian men report the least recognition for their work

86% of white men but only South Asian women (64%), closely followed by East Asian men (66%) and South Asian men (69%) report that they receive fair recognition for their work.

I feel that I receive fair recognition for my work at [my company]



“

Not being considered for professional opportunities for which I was well qualified and often better qualified than others that were considered or selected.

– East Asian man

”

“

I currently have published 4 first author papers and a senior author paper and have a career development award, yet two other members of my division who have definitively published less were promoted and not me.

– South Asian man

”

Fewer promotions for South Asian women and men

Nearly three-fourths (74%) of white men but only about half (53%) of South Asian women report they have been given the advancement opportunities and promotions that they deserve.

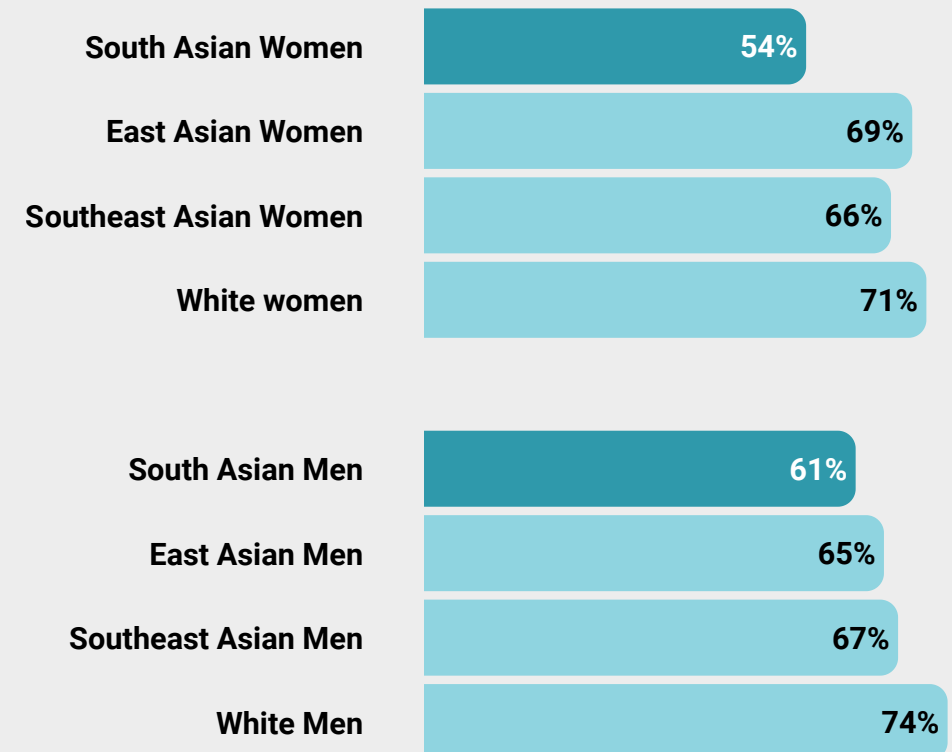
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You can only excel here if you are part of the in crowd. Otherwise you are relegated to being an individual contributor for the majority of your career.

– Southeast Asian woman

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I have been given the advancement opportunities and promotions I deserve



Office housework burden highest for East Asian women and South Asian women

Along with white women (41%), East Asian women and South Asian women are most likely to report doing “office housework” – 41% of East Asian women and 40% of South Asian women report doing more administrative work than colleagues in comparable roles.

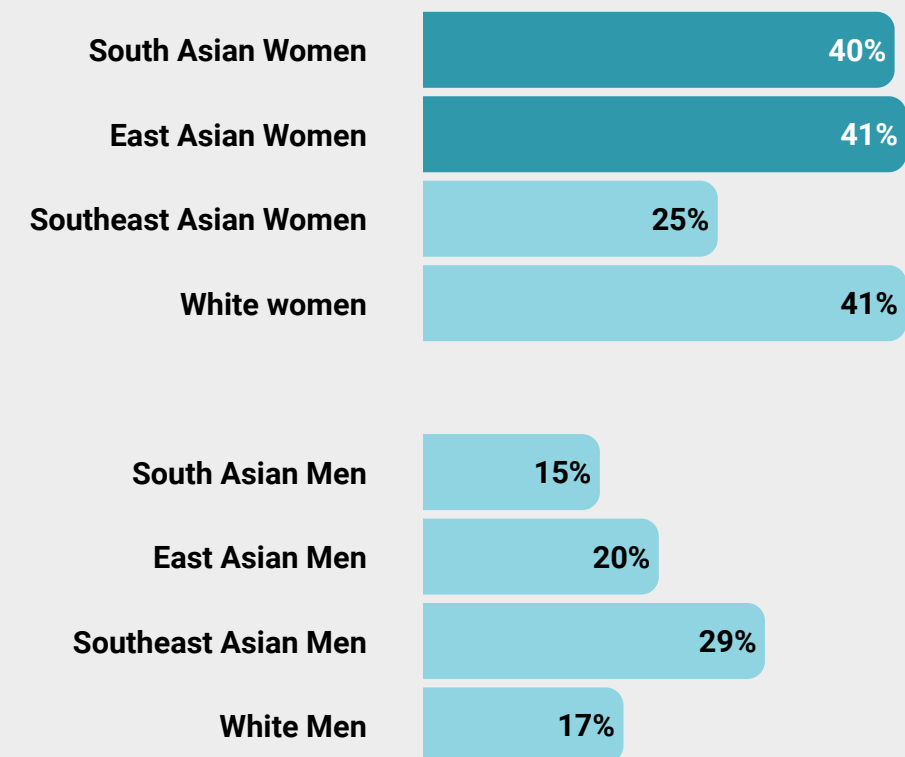
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I often carry the load for people who are not on top of their work, but we still have a deadline to meet.

- East Asian woman

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I more often play administrative roles as compared to my colleagues



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Having to report to nursing as a physician and performing nursing tasks that do not allow growth as a physician.

– South Asian woman

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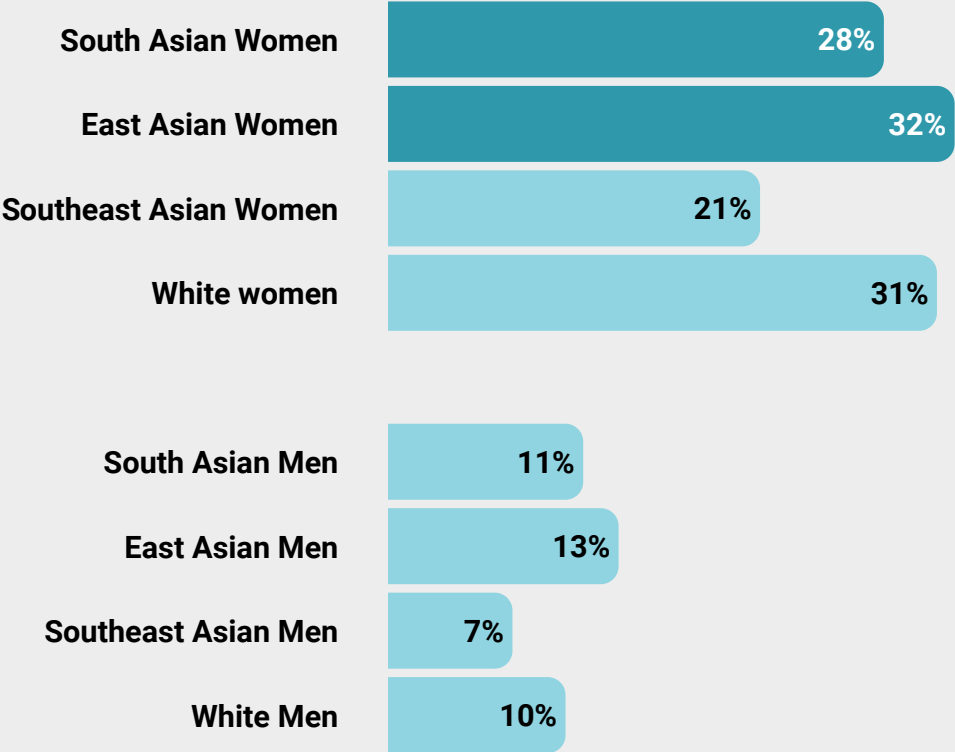
I've constantly been slotted into admin roles even though I have a Master's degree and have been physically looked past SO many times. There have been SO many executives who have come late or cancelled meetings with me because they've decided I'm not worth their time.

- South Asian woman

”

East Asian women (32%) and South Asian women (28%) report doing more literal office housework like planning parties or cleaning up after meetings.

I more often do tasks such as planning parties as compared to my colleagues



South Asian women report least access to sponsorship

As compared to white people, about half of whom report they have a sponsor who is willing to use their influence to help advance their careers, sponsorship is dramatically lower for South Asian women (28%), who report the lowest level of sponsorship of any group, followed by South Asian men (38%) and Southeast Asian men (40%).

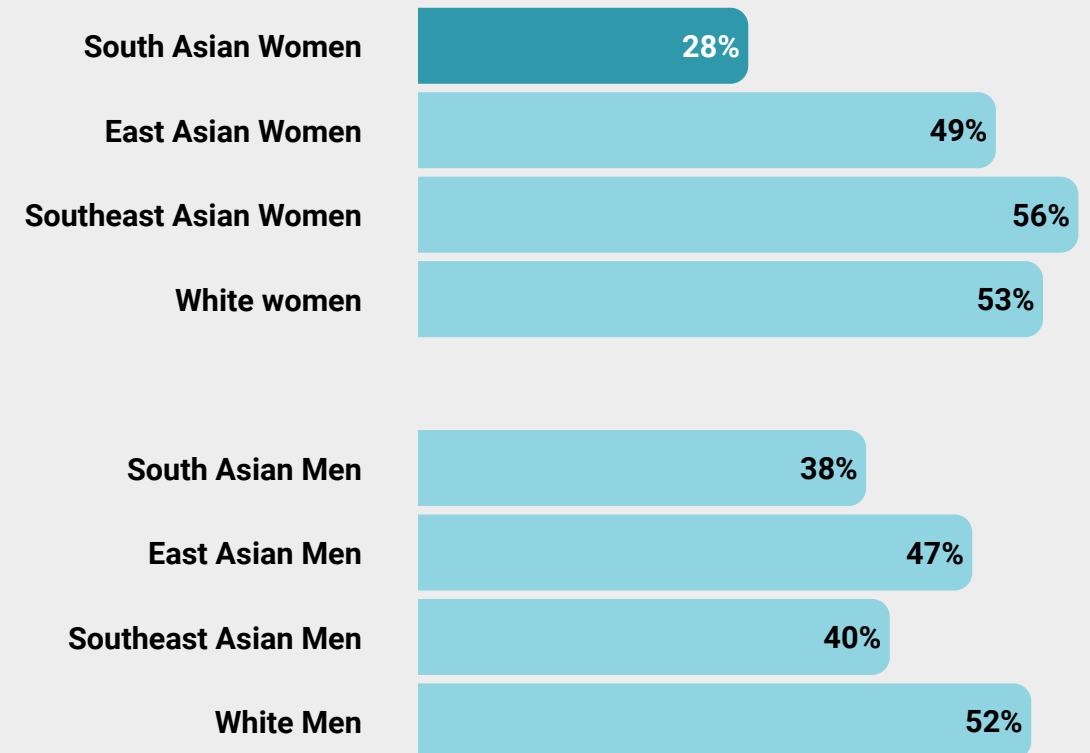
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Over time, the lack of inclusion in pitches, client dinner meetings, Board meetings, and other visibility opportunities creates a fading effect, where promising up-and-coming Asian talent internalizes a message that people are happy to rely on their expertise but they aren't leadership material.

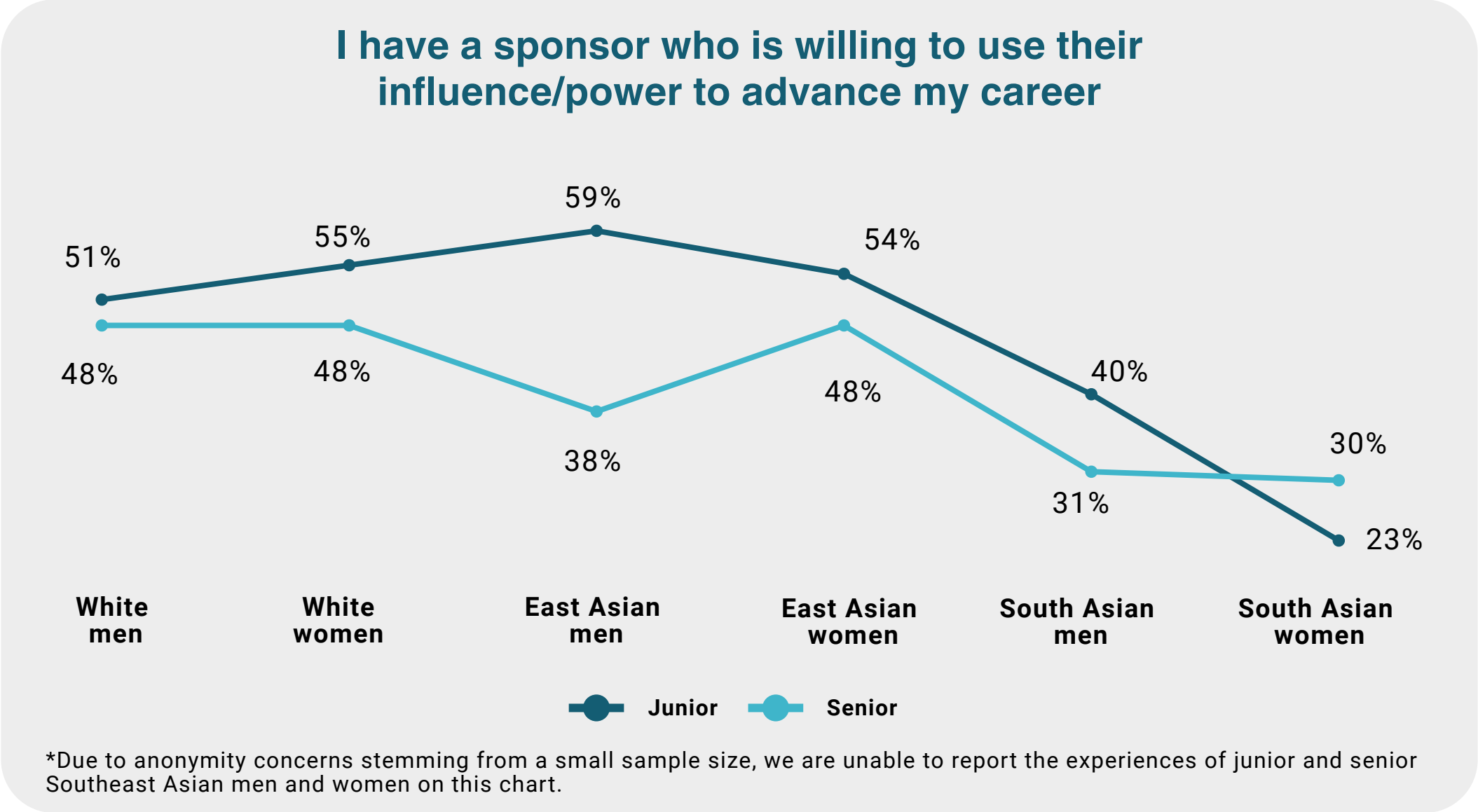
- East Asian woman

”

I have a sponsor who is willing to use their influence/power to advance my career



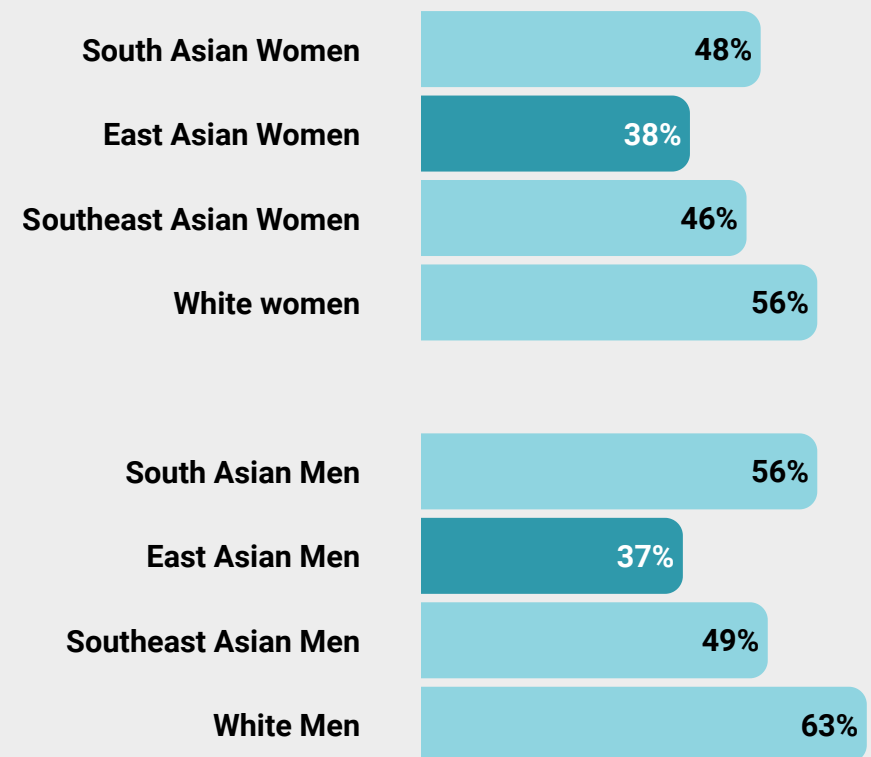
Past research suggests that one reason Asian employees are underrepresented in leadership positions is because sponsorship levels decrease for Asian employees as they move to more senior levels. We explored this in our data at the intersection of ethnicity and gender for Asian employees. Results reveal that East Asian men are the most likely to experience a dramatic drop in sponsorship moving from junior to senior levels, with 59% reporting sponsorship access at junior levels but only 38% reporting it at senior levels; whereas South Asian women are the least likely to report getting sponsorship at both junior (23%) and senior levels (30%).



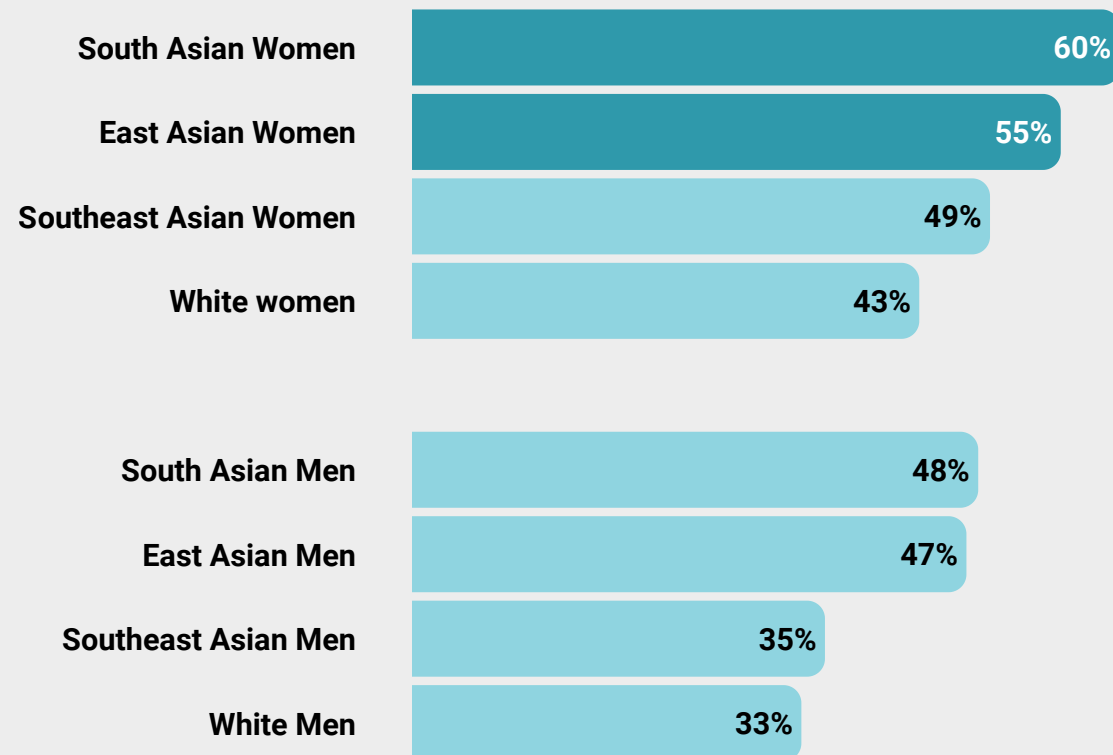
East Asian employees report the lowest levels of belonging

As compared with nearly two-thirds (63%) of white men, East Asian men (37%) and women (38%) are the least likely to report that successful people at their companies are a lot like them.

People who succeed at [my company] are a lot like me



There are unwritten rules about getting ahead that others know but I don't



East Asian women and South Asian women feel excluded from inside knowledge

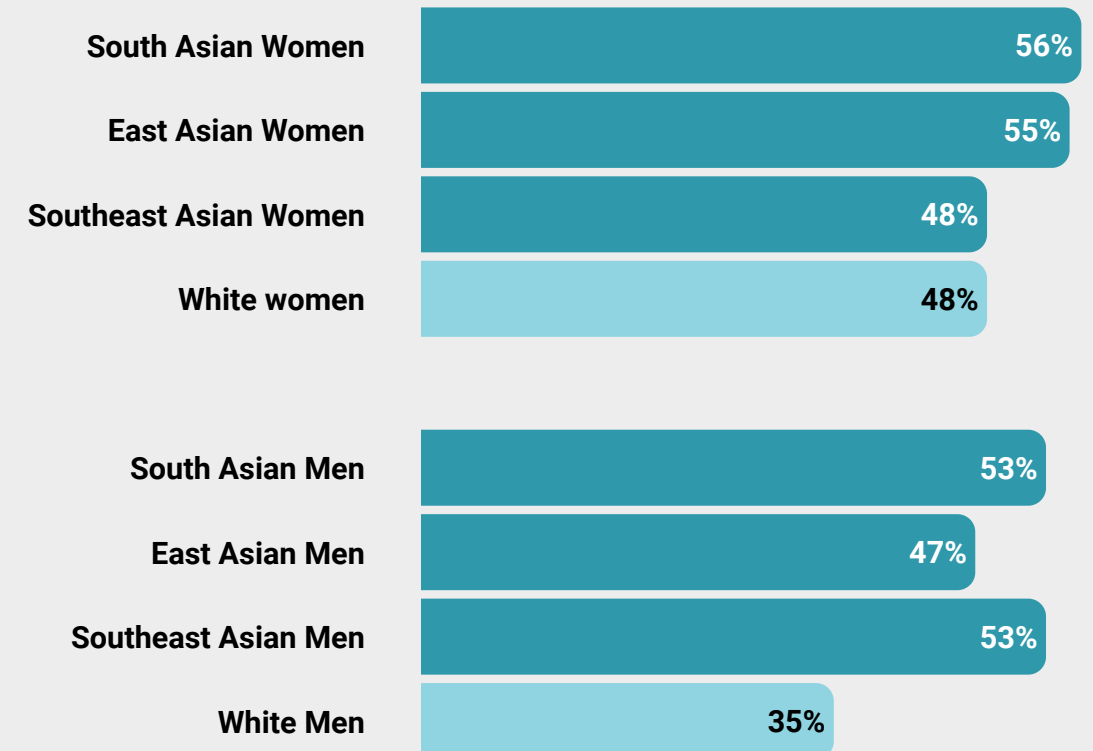
As compared with only a third (33%) of white men, 60% of South Asian women and 55% of East Asian women report unwritten rules for getting ahead at their companies that others seem to know about, but they don't.

All Asian men and women report lower compensation

Only about a third (35%) of white men but about half of Asian employees report that they suspect they're paid less compared to colleagues with comparable seniority and experience.

Other research indicates that the pay gap for Asian employees differs by [gender](#) and [ethnic_group](#), highlighting the importance of considering both ethnicity and gender in all compensation analyses.

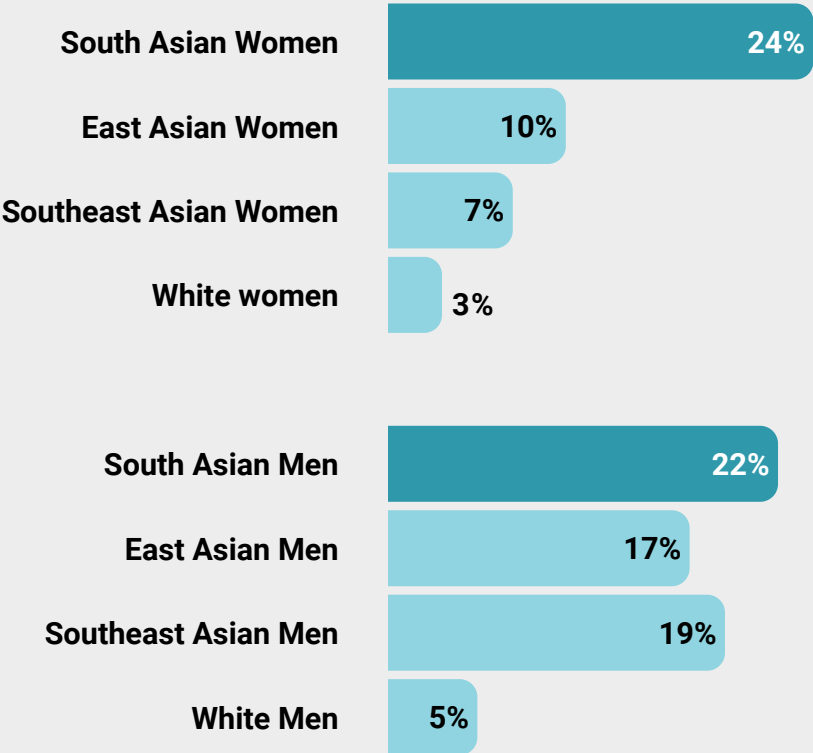
I suspect I get paid less



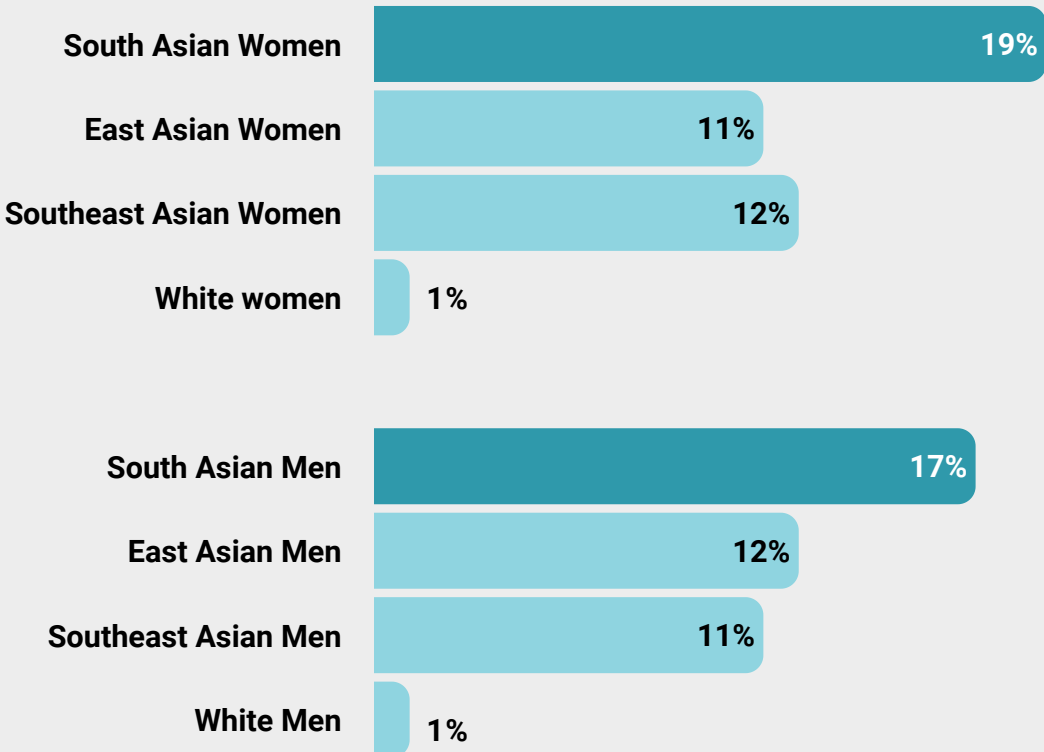
South Asian men and women seen as “forever foreigners”

South Asian women (24%) and men (22%) are most likely to report that coworkers are surprised by their English language skills. South Asian employees are also most likely to report that coworkers assume they are immigrants, though they are not.

Coworkers are surprised by my English language skills



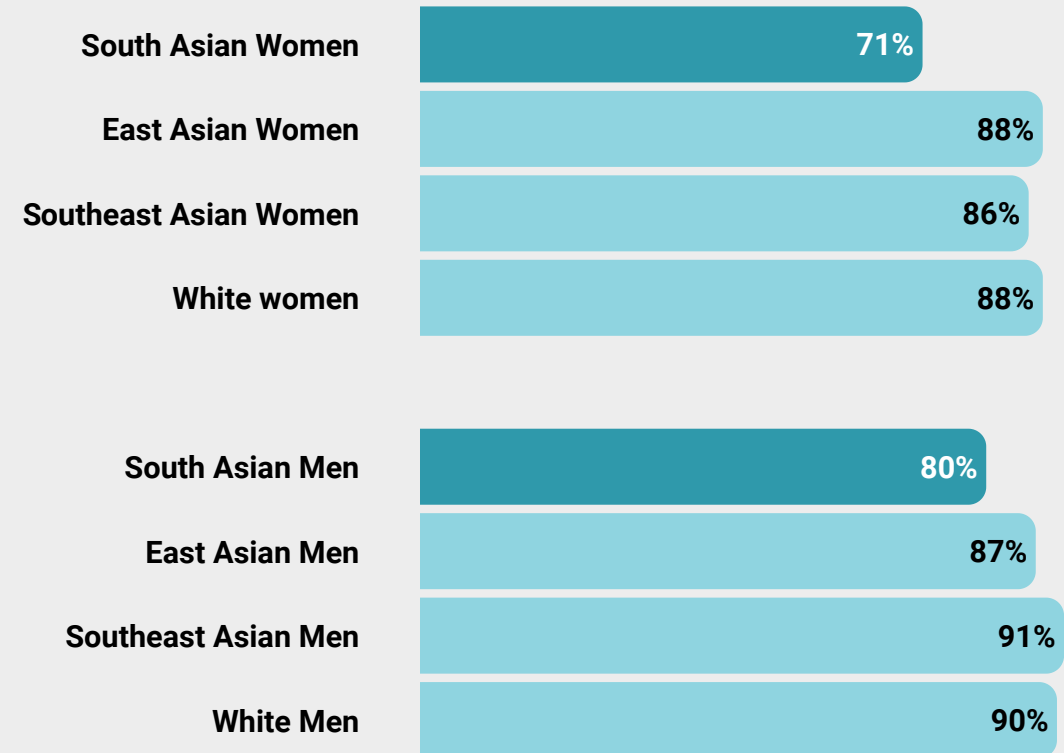
Coworkers assume I am an immigrant though I am not



South Asian employees least likely to see performance evaluations as fair and honest

Only 71% of South Asian women, but 90% of white men report that their performance evaluations have been fair.

My performance evaluations have been fair



Additionally, over one-fifth of East Asian women, Southeast Asian women, and South Asian women and men report getting less honest feedback on their performance evaluations than their colleagues.



Asian women assumed to be staff

Over a quarter of Asian women report being confused for administrative or custodial staff although they hold higher level positions—much more than do Asian men. Being repeatedly mistaken for staff can undercut one's authority.

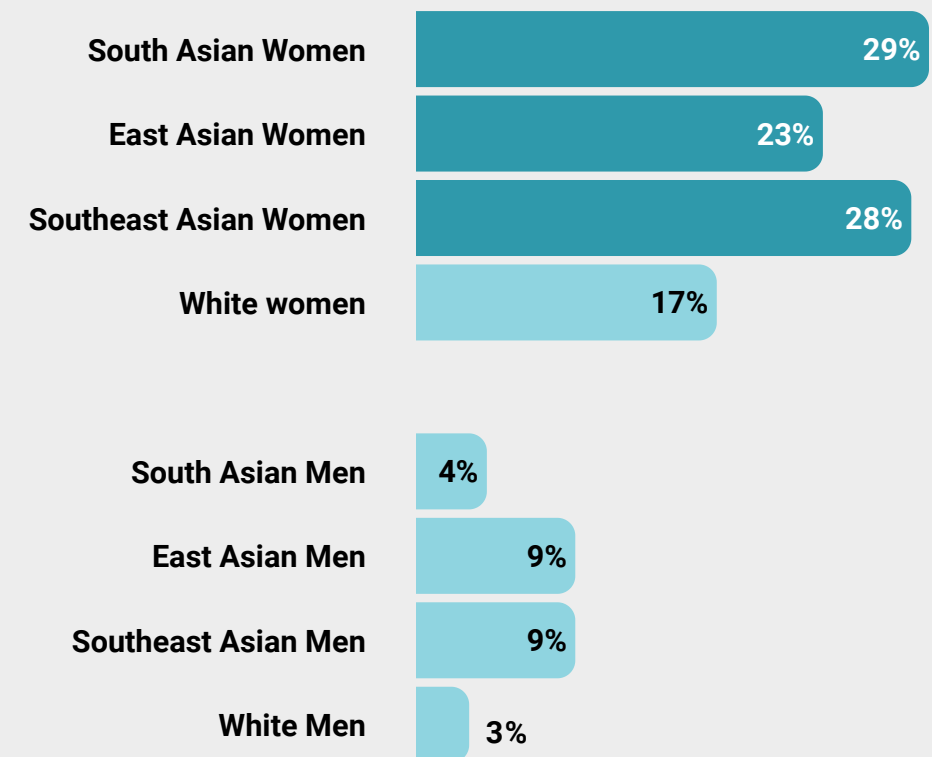
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My old boss got flowers for all the admins on "National Admin. Day", including me, but I was not an admin.

- Southeast Asian man

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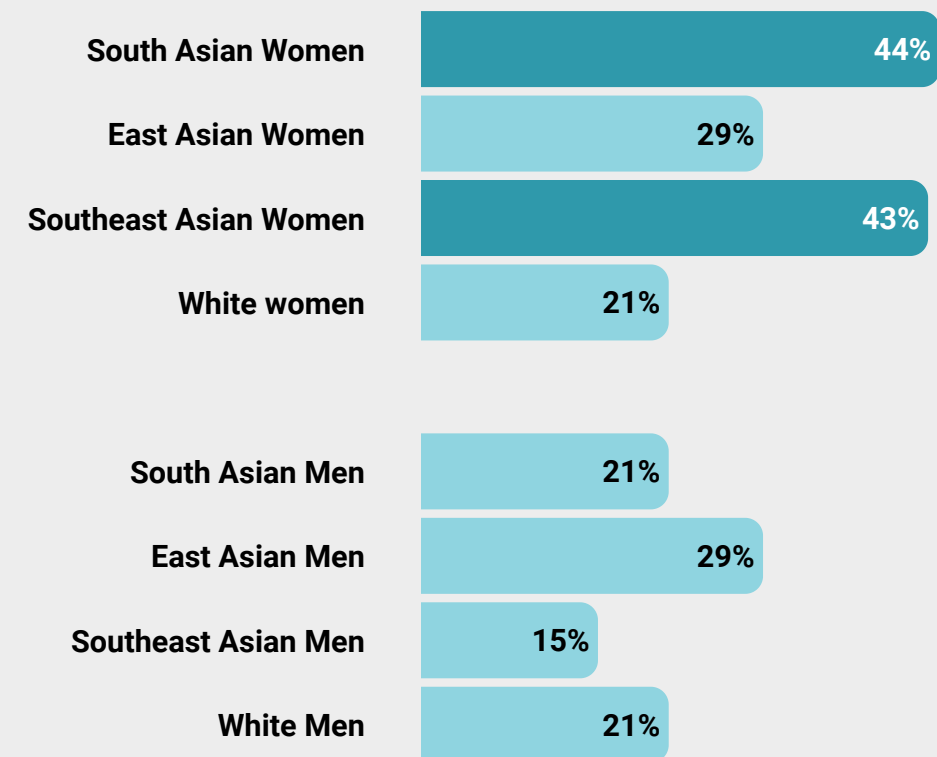
People assume I am admin/custodial staff, but I am in a higher-level position



South Asian women and Southeast Asian women least likely to see a future with their companies

Given the bias faced by Asian employees, it is unsurprising that they are less likely to see positive outcomes for themselves at these companies. In particular, we find that around 44% of South Asian women and 43% of Southeast Asian women report that they don't see a long-term future for themselves at their firm.

I don't see a long term future for myself at [my company]



Good news!

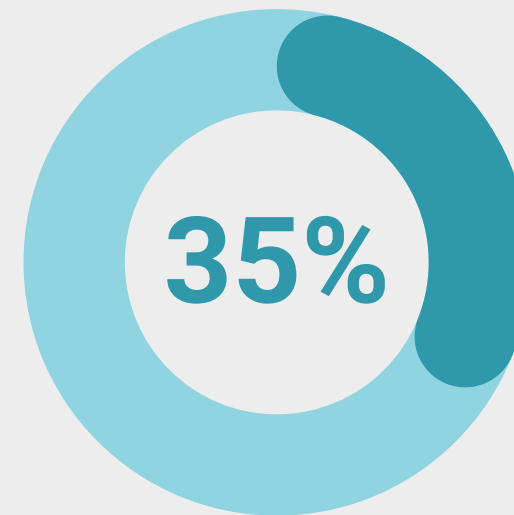
Although bias in the workplace is prevalent against Asian employees, and the most common types of bias depend on the intersection of ethnicity and gender, there is a solution. Bias can be interrupted, improving outcomes improve for all groups. EAC's Bias Interrupters training can level the playing field for all groups by introducing small tweaks and systemic changes that remove artificial obstacles for any one group.

EAC has seen wild success with our Bias Interrupters training!

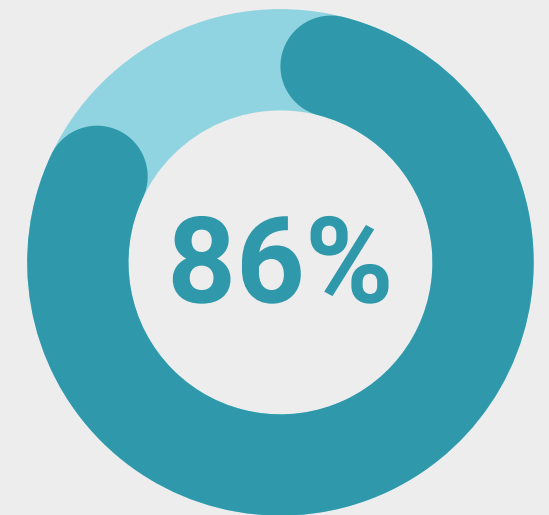
Interrupting bias in performance evaluations leads to better-quality, more fair evaluations for all employees.

At a consumer goods organization, after the Bias Interrupters intervention, there was a 52-percentage point increase in evidence-based feedback across all groups.

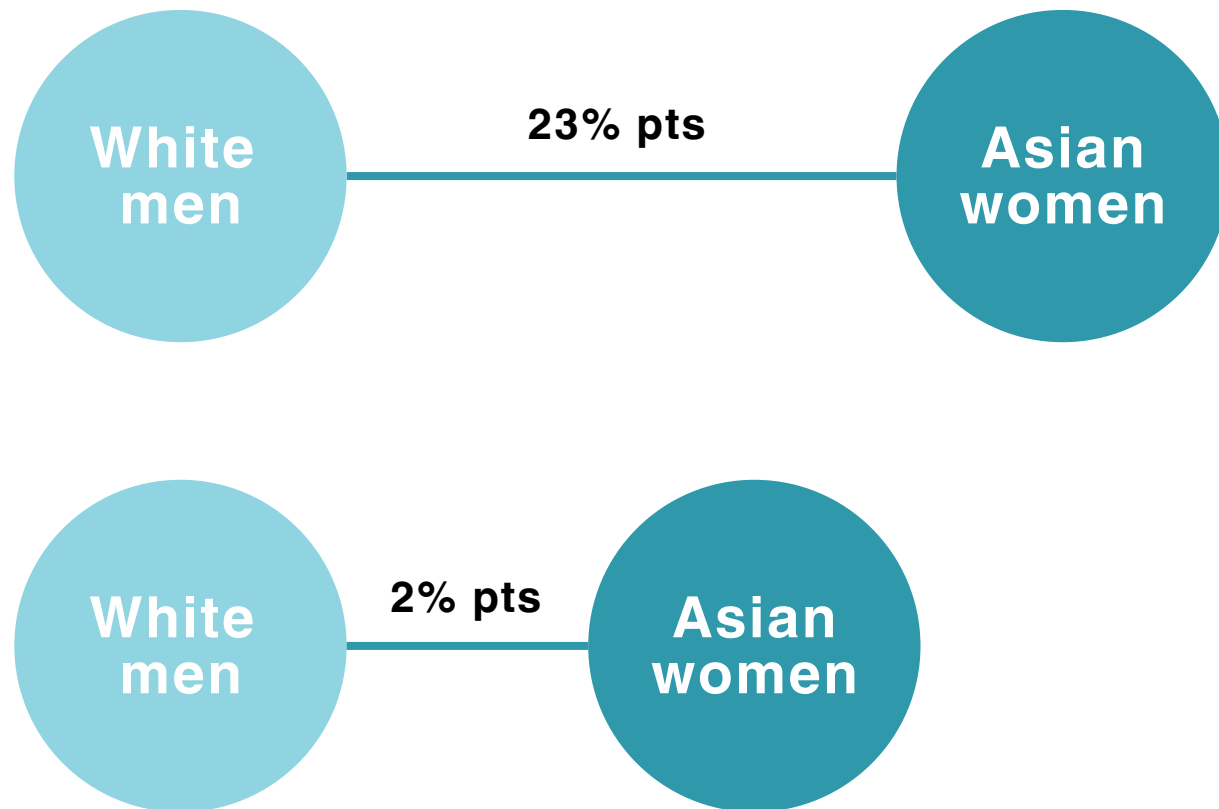
Evidence based feedback improved by 52 percentage points post-workshop for all groups



Pre-Workshop



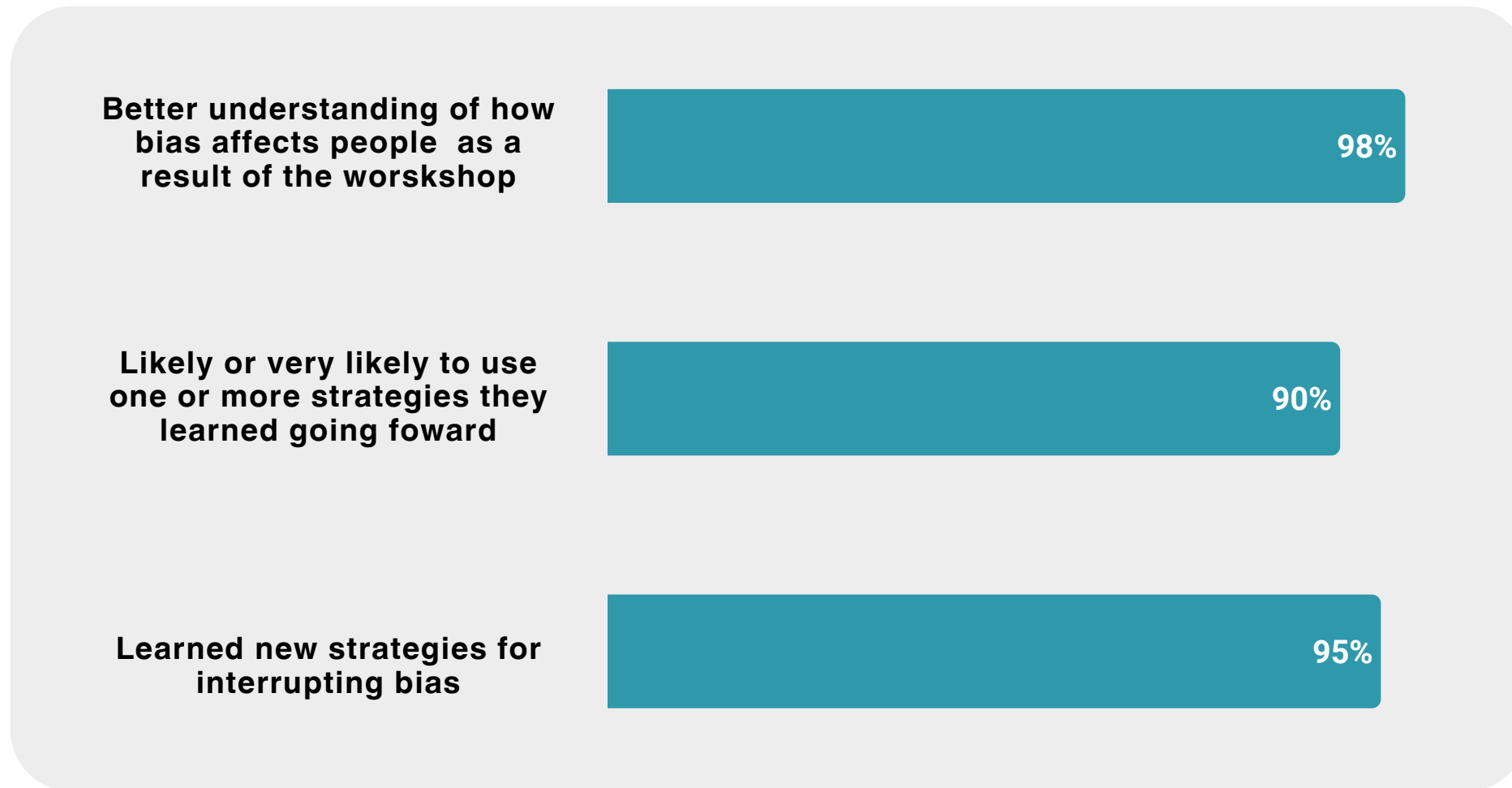
Post-Workshop



Interrupting bias in office housework leads to a fairer overall distribution of non-promotable work across all employees.

At a financial institution, after the Bias Interrupters intervention, there was a 21-percentage point reduction in bias for literal office housework. Pre-intervention there was a big difference between White men and Asian women in office housework. Post-intervention all groups were reporting doing similar levels of literal office

These [trainings](#) are also received very positively by all employees – polls after our trainings show that attendees (including at companies with a high level of backlash against diversity initiatives):



You can [read more](#) about our success with Bias Interrupters reducing inequity and leveling the playing field for all groups.

Recommendations for Companies to Support Asian Employees

1. Disaggregate Data by Ethnicity and Gender

Data aggregated for all Asian employees can mask the different obstacles faced by various Asian subgroups. Disaggregating data by both race/ethnicity and gender allows companies to identify and respond to specific barriers faced by, for example, South Asian women or East Asian men.

- Use internal data to identify gaps in belonging, hiring, promotion, retention, sponsorships, performance evaluations, and compensation by race/ethnicity and gender.
- Partner with external research consultants if internal data collection or analysis is a challenge.

2. Examine Promotion and Retention Pathways

Companies should go beyond aggregate group statistics and scrutinize whether subgroups of Asian men and women are being promoted and retained fairly—particularly into leadership roles. **While Asian employees may be well-represented at entry and mid-level positions, they remain significantly underrepresented in executive leadership.** Conduct a thorough review of your promotions process:

- Are Asian employees being promoted at the same rate as their peers with similar qualifications and tenure? Are Asian employees seeing a drop in representation as they move up the ranks due lower than expected promotion rates?
- Is employee retention lower for some Asian employees? For example, are South Asian women or East Asian men more likely to leave the company compared to other groups?

3. Sponsorship Access

Sponsorship is the key to advancement. Sponsors actively use their influence and power to advocate for talented employees.

- Track who is being sponsored and for what opportunities, and address disparities in access.
- Create systems to easily recommend employees for networking and sponsorship opportunities because if self-promotion is the only way to get the word out, then Asian employees may be left out given that Asian cultures often value modesty.

4. Access to High-profile Opportunities

Access to high-profile opportunities is another key to promotion opportunities. High-profile work can get you noticed and lead to advancements and promotions.

- Track who is getting high-profile work and who is getting stuck doing non-promotable office housework, and address disparities in access.
- Ensure Asian employees are being identified for and given access to visible, high-impact assignments. For example, are Southeast Asian women less likely than their peers to get high-profile work thereby impacting their visibility and advancement in the organization?

5. Expand Leadership Prototypes

Companies should critically examine whether their default image of a “leader” aligns with a very specific prototype, potentially sidelining capable Asian employees whose leadership may look different.

- Expand leadership criteria to not just include outspoken or assertive personalities.
- Don’t insist on likeability, modesty, or deference from some, but not others.
- If you comment on “culture fit,” “executive presence,” or other vague concepts, start with a clear definition and keep track to ensure such concepts are applied consistently.

6. Evaluate Performance Evaluations for Bias

Performance evaluations are critical career defining points, yet they can be influenced by bias. Companies should investigate whether feedback in performance evaluations is based on stereotypical or vague language. Are Asian employees more likely to be labelled as “technical” or to be praised for being “team players”, but less likely to have leadership skills mentioned in their evaluations?

- Train managers to recognize and challenge stereotypes that cast Asian employees as passive or unsuited for leadership.
- Standardize evaluation criteria for consistency across all employees – ensure that all employees can be evaluated on technical skills, leaderships skills, and goals.

- Give honest feedback to everyone who is evaluated – otherwise some groups won't get notice of problems in time to correct them.
- Use evidence to write good performance evaluations – read more [here](#) on how to write the best evaluations.

Methodology:

The sample size for this study comprises of two industry level studies (law and tech) and 7 companies including a professional services firm, 2 Financial and Banking institutions, a medical school department, an energy company, an engineering firm, and a tech firm. The total number of white and Asian employees in this dataset is 3855 and the sample breakdown by race/ethnicity and gender is given below:

Race/ethnicity & gender	Respondents
White men	1789
White women	1386
East Asian men	160
East Asian women	168
South Asian men	119
South Asian women	124
Southeast Asian men	56
Southeast Asian women	53

Data

The WES data were collected primarily using a 1-6 Likert scale: strongly agree to strongly disagree. For ease of understanding of our predicted report audience, we present the data in the form of percentages of agreement with each question. Although much of the data was collected on a Likert scale of 1–6, we recalculated percentages by using 1–3 (strongly disagree to slightly disagree) on the Likert scale as “no” and 4–6 (slightly agree to strongly agree) on the scale as “yes.” We report the percentages in the text, but all statistical analyses were conducted on the original Likert scale data.

Qualitative data

The survey included two open-ended text boxes for participants to share more information about their experiences. These sources of qualitative data are used throughout the report as quotes to lend nuance and detail to the quantitative data.