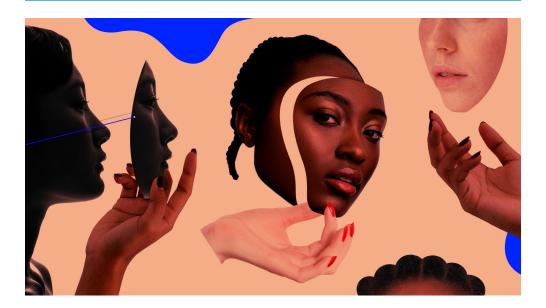Diversity

Stop Telling Women They Have Imposter Syndrome

by Ruchika Tulshyan and Jodi-Ann Burey

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Illustration by Marysia Machulska

Talisa Lavarry was exhausted. She had led the charge at her corporate event management company to plan a high-profile, security-intensive event, working around the clock and through weekends for months. Barack Obama was the keynote speaker.

Lavarry knew how to handle the complicated logistics required — but not the office politics. A golden opportunity to prove her expertise had turned into a living nightmare. Lavarry's colleagues interrogated and censured her, calling her professionalism into question. Their bullying,

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both subtle and overt, haunted each decision she made. Lavarry wondered whether her race had something to do with the way she was treated. She was, after all, the only Black woman on her team. She began doubting whether she was qualified for the job, despite constant praise from the client.

Things with her planning team became so acrimonious that Lavarry found herself demoted from lead to co-lead and was eventually unacknowledged altogether by her colleagues. Each action that chipped away at her role in her work doubly chipped away at her confidence. She became plagued by deep anxiety, self-hatred, and the feeling that she was a fraud.

What had started as healthy nervousness — Will I fit in? Will my colleagues like me? Can I do good work? — became a workplace-induced trauma that had her contemplating suicide.

Today, when Lavarry, who has since written a book about her experience, "*Confessions From Your Token Black Colleague,*" reflects on the imposter syndrome she fell prey to during that time, she knows it wasn't a lack of self-confidence that held her back. It was repeatedly facing systemic racism and bias.

Examining Imposter Syndrome as We Know It

Imposter syndrome is loosely defined as doubting your abilities and feeling like a fraud. It disproportionately affects high-achieving people, who find it difficult to accept their accomplishments. Many question whether they're deserving of accolades.

Psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes developed the concept, originally termed "imposter phenomenon," in their 1978 founding study, which focused on high-achieving women. They posited

that "despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, women who experience the imposter phenomenon persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise." Their findings spurred decades of thought leadership, programs, and initiatives to address imposter syndrome in women. Even famous women — from Hollywood superstars such as Charlize Theron and Viola Davis to business leaders such as Sheryl Sandberg and even former First Lady Michelle Obama and Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor — have confessed to experiencing it. A Google search yields more than 5 million results and shows solutions ranging from attending conferences to reading books to reciting one's accomplishments in front of a mirror. What's less explored is why imposter syndrome exists in the first place and what role workplace systems play in fostering and exacerbating it in women. We think there's room to question imposter syndrome as the reason women may be inclined to distrust their success.

The impact of systemic racism, classism, xenophobia, and other biases was categorically absent when the concept of imposter syndrome was developed. Many groups were excluded from the study, namely women of color and people of various income levels, genders, and professional backgrounds. Even as we know it today, imposter syndrome puts the blame on individuals, without accounting for the historical and cultural contexts that are foundational to how it manifests in both women of color and white women. Imposter syndrome directs our view toward fixing women at work instead of fixing the places where women work.

Feeling Unsure Shouldn't Make You an Imposter

Imposter syndrome took a fairly universal feeling of discomfort, second-guessing, and mild anxiety in the workplace and pathologized it, especially for women. As white men progress, their feelings of doubt usually abate as their work and intelligence are validated over time.

They're able to find role models who are like them, and rarely (if ever) do others question their competence, contributions, or leadership style. Women experience the opposite. Rarely are we invited to a women's career development conference where a session on "overcoming imposter syndrome" is not on the agenda.

The label of imposter syndrome is a heavy load to bear. "Imposter" brings a tinge of criminal fraudulence to the feeling of simply being unsure or anxious about joining a new team or learning a new skill. Add to that the medical undertone of "syndrome," which recalls the "female hysteria" diagnoses of the nineteenth century. Although feelings of uncertainty are an expected and normal part of professional life, women who experience them are deemed to *suffer* from imposter syndrome. Even if women demonstrate strength, ambition, and resilience, our daily battles with microaggressions, especially expectations and assumptions formed by stereotypes and racism, often push us down. Imposter syndrome as a concept fails to capture this dynamic and puts the onus on women to deal with the effects. Workplaces remain misdirected toward seeking individual solutions for issues disproportionately caused by systems of discrimination and abuses of power.

Bias and Exclusion Exacerbate Feelings of Doubt

For women of color, self-doubt and the feeling that we don't belong in corporate workplaces can be even more pronounced. Not because women of color (a broad, imprecise categorization) have an innate deficiency, but because the intersection of our race and gender often places us in a precarious position at work. Many of us across the world are implicitly, if not explicitly, told we don't belong in white- and male-dominated workplaces. Half of the women of color surveyed by Working Mother Media plan to leave their jobs in the next two years, citing feelings of marginalization or disillusionment, which is consistent with

our experiences. Exclusion that exacerbated self-doubt was a key reason for each of our transitions from corporate workplaces to entrepreneurship.

"Who is deemed 'professional' is an assessment process that's culturally biased and skewed," said Tina Opie, an associate professor at Babson College, in an interview last year. When employees from marginalized backgrounds try to hold themselves up to a standard that no one like them has met (and that they're often not expected to be able to meet), the pressure to excel can become too much to bear. The once-engaged Latina woman suddenly becomes quiet in meetings. The Indian woman who was a sure shot for promotion gets vague feedback about lacking leadership presence. The trans woman who always spoke up doesn't anymore because her manager makes gender-insensitive remarks. The Black woman whose questions once helped create better products for the organization doesn't feel safe contributing feedback after being told she's not a team player. For women of color, universal feelings of doubt become magnified by chronic battles with systemic bias and racism.

In truth, we don't belong because we were never supposed to belong. Our presence in most of these spaces is a result of decades of grassroots activism and begrudgingly developed legislation. Academic institutions and corporations are still mired in the cultural inertia of the good ol' boys' clubs and white supremacy. Biased practices across institutions routinely stymie the ability of individuals from underrepresented groups to truly thrive.

The answer to overcoming imposter syndrome is not to fix individuals but to create an environment that fosters a variety of leadership styles and in which diverse racial, ethnic, and gender identities are seen as just as professional as the current model, which Opie describes as usually "Eurocentric, masculine, and heteronormative."

Confidence Doesn't Equal Competence

We often falsely equate confidence — most often, the type demonstrated by white male leaders — with competence and leadership. Employees who can't (or won't) conform to male-biased social styles are told they have imposter syndrome. According to organizational psychologist Tomas Chamorro Premuzic:

> *The truth of the matter is that pretty much anywhere in the world men tend to think that they are much smarter than women. Yet arrogance and overconfidence are inversely related to leadership talent — the ability to build and maintain high-performing teams, and to inspire followers to set aside their selfish agendas in order to work for the common interest of the group.*

The same systems that reward confidence in male leaders, even if they're incompetent, punish white women for lacking confidence, women of color for showing too much of it, and all women for demonstrating it in a way that's deemed unacceptable. These biases are insidious and complex and stem from narrow definitions of acceptable behavior drawn from white male models of leadership. Research from Kecia M. Thomas finds that too often women of color enter their companies as "pets" but are treated as threats once they gain influence in their roles. Women of color are by no means a monolith, but we are often linked by our common experiences of navigating stereotypes that hold us back from reaching our full potential.

Fixing Bias, Not Women

Imposter syndrome is especially prevalent in biased, toxic cultures that value individualism and overwork. Yet the "fix women's imposter syndrome" narrative has persisted, decade after decade. We see inclusive workplaces as a multivitamin that can ensure that women of color can thrive. Rather than focus on fixing imposter syndrome,

professionals whose identities have been marginalized and discriminated against must experience a cultural shift writ large.

Leaders must create a culture for women and people of color that addresses systemic bias and racism. Only by doing so can we reduce the experiences that culminate in so-called imposter syndrome among employees from marginalized communities — or at the very least, help those employees channel healthy self-doubt into positive motivation, which is best fostered within a supportive work culture.

Perhaps then we can stop misdiagnosing women with "imposter syndrome" once and for all.

Editor's Note, 3/31: We added a reference to Talisa Lavarry's book.

Ruchika Tulshyan is the author of *The Diversity Advantage: Fixing Gender Inequality In The Workplace* and the forthcoming book *Inclusion on Purpose: An Intersectional Approach to Creating a Culture of Belonging at Work*. She is the founder of Candour, an inclusion strategy firm.

Jodi-Ann Burey is a sought-after speaker and writer who works at the intersections of race, culture, and health equity. She is the creator and host of Black Cancer, a podcast about the lives of people of color through their cancer journeys. Her TEDx talk, "Why You Should Not Bring Your Authentic Self to Work," embodies her disruption of traditional narratives about racism at work.