
TED TALK

***WHAT DOES MY
HEADSCARF MEAN
TO YOU***

YASSMIN ABDEL-MAGIED

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

INSTRUCTIONS

Individually or as a group, watch the TED talk “What Does My Headscarf Mean to You?” (available at leanin.org/mean-to-you). Then use the questions below for a group discussion.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Bias affects how we understand the world and how we treat people. As Yassmin says, we all carry some form of bias—whether about race, gender, class, education, religion, disability, or something else. What’s a snap judgment you’ve made about someone recently? How could this judgment have been based in bias? If you’ve had the chance to get to know the person, how did your opinion of them change over time?
- Yassmin says she was born into a world that often isn’t fair to people like her—brown, female, and Muslim. But she also acknowledges her privilege—she has amazing parents, a good education, and wonderful mentors. What biases do you face? In what ways are you privileged?
- What was your first impression of Yassmin? How did your impression of her change with each outfit change?
- Yassmin cites several studies that show how bias can hold back women and racial/ethnic minorities. One study by the Australian National University showed that people with Middle Eastern last names had to send out 64 percent more job applications than people with Anglo-Saxon-sounding last names. For people with Chinese surnames, that number rose to 68 percent. That’s a lot of extra work to overcome bias before even meeting an employer face-to-face. Have you or someone you know experienced bias based on your name? Imagine you’re on a hiring committee and someone makes a judgment about an applicant based on their name. What would you say to this person?
- Another study Yassmin references found that identical résumés that differed only in the name of the applicant—Jennifer or John—were judged differently. Jennifers were deemed less competent, less likely to be offered the job, and offered less money than Johns. Have you faced gender bias at work? Pick one instance that stands out—how did you react? Based on your experience, would you react differently if you face gender bias in the future?

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- Had you heard of the “merit paradox” before? **Researchers found** that when an organization promotes meritocracy, managers are more likely to favor men over women—giving men better evaluations and higher pay—even when women’s and men’s performances are equal. In other words, when you focus on being meritocratic rather than on overcoming your own bias, you can fail to notice when you let those biases take over—and end up being even less meritocratic in the end. Have you been part of an organization that claimed to be meritocratic? Was everyone really rewarded based on merit?
 - Since we have to talk about bias to fight it, pick one study Yassmin brings up in her talk and share its findings with a coworker, friend, or family member. Which study will you share and why?
 - Mentoring is one way to help people access opportunities that would otherwise be blocked by bias. Yassmin challenges everyone to mentor someone from a background different than their own. How can you find a protégé who’s different from you and mentor them in a meaningful way? If you’ve mentored someone from a different background, what tips do you have for others looking to do the same thing? If you’re looking for more mentoring tips, check out leanin.org/mentor.
 - Diversity is everyone’s issue. Yassmin reminds us that we’re all part of a system that disadvantages racial/ethnic minorities, LGBTQ persons, and women of all races. We can and must all be part of the solution. In addition to mentoring, what are some other ways you can advocate for a more inclusive workplace?
 - What’s one key takeaway from the talk that you’d share with someone else?