

# Women of Color Get Asked to Do More “Office Housework.” Here’s How They Can Say No.

by Ruchika Tulshyan

APRIL 06, 2018



HAYON THAPALIYA FOR HBR

Selena Rezvani was in an all-day strategy session when she faced a challenge many women of color are intimately familiar with: she was expected to arrange lunch for everyone present.

Simultaneously, seven heads in the room turned towards her, the only non-white person in the room, to place the order. “No one seemed to consider asking the white guy next to me who was my [same] age and level,” recalls Rezvani, now VP of Consulting & Research at Be Leaderly, and author of *Pushback*. “The silent agreement in the room was unnerving.”

The women of color whom I interviewed for this story shared similar experiences: situations where white coworkers displayed an unwavering conviction that it was the woman of color’s duty to do less-important tasks around the office. One woman told me: “I’m often asked to shut the door in a meeting, even if I’m sitting far away from the door. I did it earlier in my career but these days I just say no.”

These aren’t just anecdotal experiences. Research from the Center for WorkLife Law at the University of California, Hastings College of the Law has shown that women and people of color often wind up with worse assignments than their white male counterparts, hindering their ability to be promoted. In their article about this research, Joan Williams and Marina Multhaup define “office housework” as everything from “administrative work that keeps things moving forward, like taking notes or finding a time everyone can meet” to “work that’s important but undervalued, like initiating new processes or keeping track of contracts” and work that’s “usually not tied to revenue goals, so [these efforts] are far less likely to result in a promotion than, say, chairing an innovation or digital transformation committee.”

Research shows that white women face challenges to advancement in every industry. However, the statistics for women of color are worse: we face a “double jeopardy,” where we experience bias related to both our gender and our race.

Shutting the door or ordering lunch doesn’t take a lot of time but doing these tasks negatively reinforces the power dynamics that place women of color in lower positions. And they’re faced with two unappealing options. They can either do the task and risk being constantly expected to complete these tasks, which Williams’ and Multhaup’s research has shown to impair their ability to get promoted. Or they can say no and risk being penalized.

Caty, a manager at a technology company who requested I not share her last name, says, “As a visibly black woman in the workplace, I am often caught in a double-bind where if I don’t accept the office housework, I’m considered an ‘Angry Black’ woman.”

The professional women of color I spoke with told me they’ve been characterized as aggressive, out-of-character, or too emotional when they advocate for themselves in the workplace.

While all women walk a tightrope between being liked and respected, for women of color, the experience is particularly egregious.

The most obvious solution here is to change the culture of these organizations so people in power don’t make these requests. But that takes time. And while I hesitate to put the onus on women to fix the problem, I want to offer tips to help women of color who find themselves in these situations, while we continue pushing leaders for equity.

Below is a roundup of advice from successful women of color on how to turn down these office housework requests *without* being penalized.

**Have a watertight refusal in place.** It’s smart to have a solid argument ready. You might say: “I was hired to do X and doing Y would take away time from completing X well.” For on-the-spot requests like ordering lunch, I’ve used, “I really need to be present during this discussion as it’s critical to what I’m working on.” For longer-term requests, like constantly being asked to lead mentoring activities (which research has shown is one of the time-consuming “organizational citizenship” tasks that women are asked to take on), I’ve said something like, “I’m working on [very important project], and I’m worried I won’t have the bandwidth to be helpful to [said mentee.]”

**Arm yourself with evidence.** Most people make these kinds of requests without realizing the impact on women of color. Evidence can help them understand the cumulative effect. Olive Goh, a director in the financial industry, told me that a friend of hers made a list of revenue-generating tasks she was responsible for, as well as all the non-revenue generating expectations that were placed on her. She created similar lists for men at the same level in her organization, and took those lists to her boss. This made it easier for her to decline the housework tasks, or to at least make the case for splitting them more evenly with the men in her office.

**Offer a “no” and a “communal give.”** “Women face less backlash in negotiations when they make their request communal (“it benefits us”) rather than personal (“it benefits me”),” says Rezvani. She coaches her female clients to consider saying no to lower-prestige tasks - planning a meeting, for example – and then offering a “yes” to higher-caliber ones that would give your team an edge, like performing a competitor analysis.

**Check with your manager.** In previous jobs, I would regularly double-check with my managers if I was asked to take on non-essential work. Getting them to sign off on whether the task was necessary helped me better understand whether saying no would get me labeled as “difficult.” Rezvani advises setting up expectations in advance with your manager. “Contract verbally with your manager that they will back you up and provide cover,” she says. If your boss agrees that the task isn’t necessary or worth your time, it’s easier to avoid the backlash from saying no.

**Ask for more information.** You can ask the requester why they’re specifically encouraging you to do this extra labor, says Caty. “Have them tell you what unique and/or specific traits make you best suited to do this work. This will help the requester think critically about why they requested you do the labor as opposed to others who are also capable.”

**Use humor.** Acknowledge, with some levity, the absurdity of women doing more office work than men, says Rezvani. “You can say to a man: ‘Research shows that I’m more likely to get asked to do this kind of thing than you, and that you’re going to like me less when I decline. But guess what I’m going to do?’” I’m not humorous by nature, but making light of the situation has helped me in my own career. I once responded by saying “I’d rather [male colleague] ordered lunch as I’m already in charge of meals at home,” then cracked a smile. Rezvani also heard one woman quip, ‘My answer is no, that is, if it’s okay with you.’

**Rotate tasks.** If you’re on a team that meets regularly, propose that you all rotate tasks like facilitating, taking notes, scheduling, etc., advises Rezvani. This sets the expectation from day one that everyone has equal value to contribute.

**Practice saying no with allies.** With practice, saying “no” will become easier. I’ve previously written about a group of female professors at Carnegie Mellon who formed an “I just can’t say no” club to help them refuse what they called “office favors.” Cultivating this network of allies becomes

particularly important for women of color as we progress. Enlist colleagues to help you figure out collectively how to refuse office housework requests in a manner that feels authentic to you.

**If you can't say no, at least get credit for the work.** Sometimes there's no way to decline the work. In those cases, find a way to acknowledge that this work is "extra labor," says Caty, especially in performance reviews and in conversations with your manager. You want people to understand that you're taking on extra responsibilities and not assume these chores are part of your job description. Caty advises however: "If the labor continues to not be recognized or rewarded, I'd either stop doing the work or leave the team or organization."

**Use your influence to break norms.** As you climb the ranks, make sure to pay it forward. Rezvani says: "When someone suggests that the smart female manager you happen to mentor could do the booth set-up at the expo, call out that it's below their pay grade: 'I don't think it's a good use of Camilla's technical experience and skills to deploy her that way.'"

There's growing evidence that women of color toe a narrower line between being respected and liked. It's imperative that leaders understand and work toward mitigating the impact of office housework on the careers of multicultural women. In the meantime, I encourage more women of color to say no to these requests.



Ruchika Tulshyan is the author of *The Diversity Advantage: Fixing Gender Inequality In The Workplace* and the founder of Candour, an inclusion strategy firm. She is also adjunct faculty at Seattle University.

---

**This article is about DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**

 FOLLOW THIS TOPIC

Related Topics: RACE | GENDER

# Comments

Leave a Comment

POST

16 COMMENTS

---

**Mary Cole** a month ago

I am female and have lived through this crap. As a new member of a computer engineering group years ago I was asked/told to pour the coffee. I believe my response was 'f\*\*\* that' and I was never asked to do that sort of thing again. Engineers learn fast.

REPLY



▼ [JOIN THE CONVERSATION](#)

---

## POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.