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Misgendering in Schools and the Workplace

Misgendering, which is the blatant misuse of someone's pronouns or preferred name, can take place just about anywhere, but two specific places are within schools and the workplace. These two places in particular have a chance of having high rates of misgendering; however, they are also the places that are attempting to make changes for the better.

The people that are continuously victims of misgendering and harassment are normally those who “don't identify on a binary scale,”(Talking about Pronouns in the Workplace) and instead identify as “genderqueer, ‘genderfluid’, ‘non-binary’, ‘transgender’, or other terms.”(Talking about Pronouns in the Workplace) One would think that “everyone deserves to have their self-ascribed name and pronouns respected,”(Talking about Pronouns in the Workplace), but unfortunately many people still refuse to respect those identify as anything that isn't a CIS man or woman. This refusal to acknowledge people for who they are leads to misgendering. **While misgendering is a common occurrence in many places, specifically workplaces and schools, employers and faculty should find ways to ensure that people's preferred names and pronouns are used and respected. Not only can constant misgendering can be considered harassment and discrimination, which can lead to a lawsuit, but the active misgendering of students could potentially lead to bullying and harassment, or in some cases, students face the risk of being outed to fellow classmates, teachers, or family.**

The topic of misgendering being wrong and how we need to have respect for those around us relates to two Catholic Social Teachings. The first CST connection is with the CST of Solidarity, which is defined as everyone being part of one human family, no matter what race, ethnicity, economic, and ideological differences. With this definition, the topic of respect for those around us, no matter what their gender identity is, and Solidarity are closely connected by the fact that they both address equality no matter what, which includes someone's gender identity. The second CST that relates to the topic is the CST of Rights and Responsibilities, which can be simply defined as everyone deserving to have rights and dignity, and because every person deserves to be treated with respect and dignity, that means that those who are often victims of misgendering and harassment should be respected.

When it comes to misgendering, adults are not the only ones being negatively affected. In many cases, students are also facing harassment and misgendering at school done by classmates, teachers, etc. Not only can students be possibly misgendered, which is already terrible, but they can also end up being bullied by those around them. This constant bullying and harassment can not only make the student uncomfortable at school, but it can also have a severe negative impact on their mental health. Additionally, students who don't identify on the binary scale face the risk of potentially being outed at school, whether it be intentional or by accident. This may prove to be a serious issue, since many of these students are not supported by their parents at home, and in extreme cases some may be "forced out or [they must] [run] away from home as a result of their gender identity." (Baboolall) Also, this could potentially lead to an increase in LGBTQ+ youth homelessness, which is another terrible issue in itself.

In some cases of misgendering in schools, teachers are the ones causing the problem. Unfortunately, many teachers refuse to respect a student's name and pronouns, whether it be for

political reasons, religious reasons, etc. In a specific case in Indiana, a teacher refused to respect a student's name and pronouns for religious reasons, which was against "the school district's adoption of a policy that allowed transgender students to change the first names and pronouns listed in their school records and required all staff to address students accordingly."(McCarthy) Since, the teacher wasn't following the rules that the school had already put in place, he was fired. However, the teacher argued that the school did not accommodate his religious beliefs, and they shouldn't be able to fire him. This debate eventually led to the case being taken to court, and luckily, "the court held that the teacher's religious opposition to transgenderism was directly at odds with the school's policy of respect for transgender students."(McCarthy) So, the school won the court case, and the teacher remained fired. This single court case acts as an example for how issues of misgendering and harassment can, and will be, taken to the federal level if necessary.

Now when it comes to adults being misgendered, the workplace is a common place for this to occur, and since there are "more than 2.0 million transgender people in the United States, and 1.2 million people who identify as nonbinary, employers cannot continue to ignore a significant population that experiences systemic barriers to employment, work performance, and career progression."(Baboolall) Although some employers have chosen to ignore the issue, as previously stated, other employers, as well as coworkers, will treat transgender people very poorly and with little to no respect. In some of the extreme cases, employers and coworkers may "consistently and intentionally refer to an employee with the incorrect set of pronouns or by a previous name, despite being corrected numerous times,"(Is It Discrimination If My Employer Doesn't Use My Preferred Pronouns?) which can then "constitute [as] workplace harassment."(Is It Discrimination If My Employer Doesn't Use My Preferred Pronouns?) Although misgendering alone isn't something that can be taken to court, workplace harassment is, and many people have

taken their workplaces to court on the basis of workplace harassment and won. For example, one person who identified as non-binary and used they/them pronouns had asked their employer to make sure that their pronouns were respected. When the person was constantly being misgendered and harassed by fellow employees, the employer fired the victim because they were ‘coming on too strong too fast’, were being too ‘militant’, and were not a ‘good fit’ with the rest of the team.”(Wong) This of course was not true, and the employer had simply fired the person because they did not want to deal with the issue. As a result of this, the victim “filed a complaint with the BC Human Rights Tribunal against the [company] as well as [their coworker] and others, alleging that they had been discriminated in their employment on the basis of their gender identity or expression.” (Wong) Fortunately, the victim won the lawsuit, and “the Tribunal ordered the respondents to pay the complainant \$30,000 in damages, and ordered the employer to implement a pronoun policy and mandatory diversity, equity and inclusion training.”(Wong) So, this example shows an instance in which misgendering was taken to an extreme, which led to a lawsuit against not only the person who was harassing their coworker, but also against the company itself. Also, the implementation of a pronoun policy, as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion training, shows that these court cases can truly make a long-lasting change for the better.

Misgendering has many negative effects, whether it be by having an effect on people’s mental health, leading to people losing their jobs, or even people being outed when they’re not ready. First, the mental health effects can go across a wide range, but in many cases “when people are misgendered, they feel invalidated and unseen. When this happens daily, it becomes a burden that can negatively impact their mental health and their ability to function in the world.”(Katz-Wise) Also, “there is a chance that [one’s] family might not accept [them] for who

[they] are, so the process of coming out is inherently difficult emotionally and socially.”(Chowdry) So, not only does being misgendered negatively affect one’s mood and emotions, but it also affects one’s ability to function properly in society. This can then lead to negative outcomes in one’s career or social life as well. To expand on the negative effects on one’s career, misgendering can also lead someone to feel unwelcome and uncomfortable in their workplace, which can then lead to them having to quit said job if they are not being properly accommodated for. Not only that, “if someone’s family kicks them out after they come out as trans, and they can’t find a job due to transphobic employers, there are few other options.”(Bertie 253) In addition to this, data found from a McKinsey study found that “transgender adults are twice as likely as cisgender adults to be unemployed,”(Baboolall) “cisgender employees make 32 percent more money a year than transgender employees, even when the latter have similar or higher education levels,”(Baboolall) and “more than half of transgender employees say they are not comfortable being out at work, and two-thirds remain in the closet in professional interactions outside their own companies.”(Baboolall) This data goes to show that transgender adults are not only suffering mentally, but also financially, since they are less likely to be employed simply for being themselves. So, it is incredibly important for businesses to be more supportive and accepting of transgender, non-binary, etc. people, since they might already not be supported at home, they might be struggling mentally, and a job is their only chance at supporting themselves and living a sustainable life.

Unfortunately in the past, the issue of misgendering was not addressed whatsoever. Many people were forced to either hide their identities as someone who doesn’t identify on the binary scale, or they would have to face the harassment that came with being publicly out. As one could assume, the harassment and discrimination that people would face was much harsher than what

people deal with now, although it is still terrible. In many unfortunate cases, people have been beaten or killed simply for being their true selves, and these instances were often overlooked. In the year 2021 alone, “at least 57 transgender or gender non-conforming people fatally shot or killed by other violent means.”(Fatal Violence against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2021) The article even says “at least because too often these stories go unreported — or misreported.”(Fatal Violence against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2021) Additionally, many people would be refused jobs, and would instead have to turn to careers that are statistically much more dangerous and potentially life threatening, and some would even be forced into homelessness since they were not given the opportunity to get a job.

In more recent years, people are still being misgendered and discriminated against, despite many people’s efforts to inform others that what they’re doing is wrong. For example, many people try to inform their employers and coworkers of their proper name and pronouns, but they are normally overlooked and continuously misgendered. Some employers will give the excuse that someone’s name and pronouns don’t have to be used unless they are written on that person’s birth certificate; however, “whether or not an employee has taken the steps to change their legal name and gender is irrelevant,” (Is It Discrimination If My Employer Doesn't Use My Preferred Pronouns?) and they should still be respected no matter what. This same issue occurs in schools as well. Many students are denied proper respect simply because they have not gotten a legal name change, but as previously mentioned, it should not matter what name is on someone’s birth certificate, and people should simply respect whatever name and pronouns someone is asking to have used for themselves. Even more so, “according to The PPS Administrative Directive 4.30.061-A section III-A, ‘Students of all ages have the right to be

addressed by a name and pronouns that correspond to their gender identity. Regardless of whether a transgender or nonbinary student has legally changed their name or gender, students and staff should always use the pronoun and name with which the student identifies or requests.” (Chowdry) So, there are no excuses, legal or otherwise, that can be made for not using someone’s proper name and pronouns, and in most cases nowadays in the adult world, this constant misgendering and harassment can be enough to go to court on the count of workplace discrimination as previously stated.

On a brighter note, things are finally starting to look up for those who have faced misgendering for so long. Schools and businesses are finally beginning to make the necessary changes to ensure the safety and comfort of their students and employees. Some of the steps that schools are taking in order to ensure that their students feel comfortable include “mandating respect for their names and pronouns,”(Chowdry) as well as taking action against teachers and students who refuse to follow this mandate. A situation like this was seen in the previously mentioned Indiana case, where a teacher refused to respect a students name and pronouns, and was promptly fired, since this behavior went against the school’s policy. Another solution that is being implemented into many businesses and schools is “a pronoun policy and mandatory diversity, equity and inclusion training.”(Wong) This training would include ways to make those around you feel comfortable and supported, as well as learning more about the many diverse gender identities that exist, and how to address others properly and respectfully. By making it so everyone must participate in this diversity, equity, and inclusion training, there are likely to be considerably less incidents in which someone is being discriminated against at work or at school.

I am very proud to say that within this past school year, Flintridge Sacred Heart has also implemented their own diversity, equity, and inclusion training. With this, the school will be able

to support its diverse community, promote more diversity, and ensure that every member of the community feels as safe and welcomed as possible. In my opinion, continuing on the topic of misgendering, I think it could be very beneficial for the school to also add in a pronoun policy, similar to the school in Indiana, to ensure that every student is addressed in a way that they feel most comfortable. I also think that it could be very helpful to have everyone at the beginning of each school year to fill out their proper name and pronouns on a notecard and turn it into their teachers, just to make sure that everyone's names and pronouns are used, even if they cannot be on the syllabus for any reason.

In conclusion, misgendering of others is still a very prominent issue, but it continues to be recognized and addressed more and more as time goes on. More people are able to be out and feel comfortable doing so, without having to worry about being discriminated against in places like their schools and workplaces, where they should feel safe. New solutions, such as the previously mentioned diversity, equity, and inclusion training, have also been proving to be successful at making schools and workplaces a much safer environment. Additionally, with more court cases coming forward, and more of these cases being a success, things are truly starting to take a positive turn for the better, and as more time goes on, misgendering and harassment will decrease, and people will be able to peacefully enjoy their lives, while still being themselves.

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