Brick walls and glass ceilings

VOCABULARY PRACTICE
UPPER-INTERMEDIATE | B2

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 Match each precise term with its definition.

1 tokenism ____	**a** a symbolic effort to appear inclusive without making substantive change
2 gatekeeping ____	**b** controlling who gains access to opportunities or resources
3 meritocracy ____	**c** a system in which advancement is based purely on ability and effort
4 implicit bias ____	**d** unconscious attitudes that influence judgement without a person's awareness
5 pay gap ____	**e** a measurable difference in average earnings between groups
6 glass cliff ____	**f** the tendency for women or minorities to be promoted into precarious leadership roles during crises
7 affirmative action ____	**g** policies designed to improve opportunities for historically disadvantaged groups
8 old boys' network ____	**h** an informal system of connections that favours a particular group, often excluding others
9 microaggression ____	**i** a subtle, often unintentional comment or action that conveys bias
10 allyship ____	**j** active support for a marginalised group by someone outside it

2 Choose the word with the most suitable connotation.

1 For a symbolic gesture without real change: tokenism / genuine reform.

2 For controlling access to opportunities: gatekeeping / open access.

3 For advancement based purely on ability: meritocracy / nepotism.

4 For unconscious attitudes affecting judgement: implicit bias / deliberate prejudice.

5 For women promoted into precarious roles during crises: the glass cliff / a secure promotion.

6 For an informal network favouring one group: old boys' network / open community.

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7 For a subtle, unintentional biased comment: a microaggression / an explicit insult.

8 For active support from outside a marginalised group: allyship / indifference.

3 Complete the workplace-equity collocations with one word.

1 _____ bias (= unconscious, unintentional bias)

2 the gender pay _____ (= a measurable earnings gap)

3 the glass _____ (= promoted into a risky role during crisis)

4 _____ action (= policy improving opportunities for disadvantaged groups)

5 an old boys' _____ (= an informal network favouring insiders)

6 a _____ appointment (= symbolic, without real change)

7 _____ practices (= controlling access to opportunities)

8 genuine _____ (= active support from outside a group)

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4 Complete the case notes with words and phrases from the box.

affirmative action | allyship | gatekeeping | glass cliff | implicit bias | meritocracy | microaggression | old boys' network | pay gap | tokenism

Case A: Critics accused the company of 1 _____, appointing a single minority director without changing broader hiring practices.
Case B: Researchers documented a persistent 2 _____, with women earning less than men in equivalent roles.
Case C: The new CEO took over during a period of financial crisis, an example some analysts called a 3 _____, as failure was almost guaranteed regardless of her ability.
Case D: Some employees described subtle exclusion through an informal 4 _____, where key decisions were made outside formal channels.
Case E: Training sessions addressed 5 _____, helping staff recognise unconscious assumptions affecting hiring decisions.
Case F: A colleague's comment was identified as a 6 _____, unintentional but still hurtful to those affected.
Case G: The company defended its 7 _____ policy, arguing it corrected historical imbalances rather than undermining genuine 8 _____.
Case H: Senior leaders were praised for their 9 _____, actively using their influence to support underrepresented colleagues, rather than simply avoiding 10 _____ of opportunities.

5 Read the text and answer the questions briefly.

Meritocracy under scrutiny

Organisations frequently describe themselves as meritocracies, implying that advancement depends purely on ability and effort. Researchers studying workplace inequality increasingly challenge this framing, arguing that implicit bias shapes hiring and promotion decisions even among evaluators who consciously believe they are acting fairly. This creates a paradox: the belief that a system is already meritocratic can reduce vigilance against bias, since evaluators assume unfairness has already been eliminated. Genuine progress, researchers suggest, requires acknowledging that bias operates even within systems that appear procedurally fair, rather than assuming meritocratic rhetoric guarantees meritocratic outcomes.

1 What do organisations frequently describe themselves as? _____

2 What does this framing imply? _____

3 What do researchers argue shapes hiring and promotion decisions? _____

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4 What paradox does this create? _____

5 What does genuine progress require, according to researchers? _____

6 Does meritocratic rhetoric guarantee meritocratic outcomes, according to the text? _____

6 Rewrite each sentence using the word in capitals. Do not change the meaning.

1 The appointment was symbolic, without real structural change. TOKENISM _____

2 Unconscious attitudes influenced the hiring decision. IMPLICIT BIAS _____

3 She was promoted into a very risky leadership role during the crisis. GLASS CLIFF _____

4 There was a measurable earnings gap between men and women. PAY GAP _____

OVER TO YOU

Write a 120-150 word account analysing how implicit bias or systemic barriers might affect career progression in a workplace, distinguishing observation from interpretation.

[ ] Use at least twelve target expressions. [ ] Control connotation carefully. [ ] Avoid unsupported assumptions.

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ANSWER KEY

1 Precise terms

1 a 2 b 3 c 4 d 5 e 6 f 7 g 8 h 9 i 10 j

2 Connotation

1 tokenism 2 gatekeeping 3 meritocracy 4 implicit bias 5 the glass cliff 6 old boys' network 7 a microaggression 8 allyship

3 Collocations

1 implicit 2 gap 3 cliff 4 affirmative 5 network 6 token 7 gatekeeping 8 allyship

4 Case notes

1 tokenism 2 pay gap 3 glass cliff 4 old boys' network 5 implicit bias 6 microaggression
7 affirmative action 8 meritocracy 9 allyship 10 gatekeeping

5 Reading - suggested answers

1 Meritocracies.
2 That advancement depends purely on ability and effort.
3 Implicit bias.
4 The belief that a system is already meritocratic can reduce vigilance against bias.
5 Acknowledging that bias operates even within systems that appear procedurally fair.
6 No.

6 Rewriting - possible answers

1 The appointment was tokenism. 2 Implicit bias influenced the hiring decision.
3 She was placed on a glass cliff. 4 There was a pay gap between men and women.

Over to you

Answers will vary. Check lexical precision, appropriate connotation and separation of fact from inference.