Like everyone else in Ireland, I was shocked and deeply saddened by the murder of Ashling Murphy. Ashling, aged 23, was attacked and killed while she was out for a run along the banks of the Grand Canal in Tullamore at 4pm in the afternoon. There has rightly been an outcry about violence against women with the line “she was going for a run” appearing all over social media. This was the first sign of bias which I
found deeply troubling. She was going for a run in a supposedly “safe” place of recreation at a “safe” time. Of course, where she was, what she was doing or the time of day, shouldn't make a difference. But there is a bias against women who are seen to take risks by being out at night on their own in an environment perceived as more dangerous. They are seen as somehow more responsible for any violence perpetrated against them.

Over the weekend, as there were vigils taking place all over the country and even further afield, in memory of Ashling, I saw a tweet that asked “Where were the vigils for Urantsetseg Tserendorj?” which really stopped me in my tracks. Urantsetseg Tserendorj, aged 48, was stabbed in a knife attack on 20th January 2021 on Custom House Quay in Dublin at 9.30pm on her way home from her work as an office cleaner. She died from her injuries two weeks later.

So why the lack of outcry, the lack of public grief, the lack of vigils for Urantsetseg Tserendorj? I suggest that various types of implicit bias played their part.

Urantsetseg Tserendorj came from Mongolia originally, although had been living in Ireland for several years. The country and the culture are deeply unfamiliar to most Irish people. Her name looks unfamiliar. It’s a dangerous fact that we feel more empathy towards those who are more like us and with whom we can identify. It’s far easier for most Irish people to identify with Ashling Murphy’s family than with Urantsetseg Tserendorj’s. We can imagine Ashling being like our daughters or nieces or sisters. We can see our family reflected in Ashling’s family. We have a sense of the rites around death that they are going through. And we send our outpouring of grief and sympathy
to those most like us.

As referred to already, the location and time of day make a difference. Our bias attaches no blame to a woman out in a place of recreation in the middle of afternoon. But is there some implicit bias which blames her for taking the risk of walking along the quays at night? Urantsetseg was only going home from work. But there were no memes saying that in the days after she was attacked.

The I can’t help wondering if there is a bias that sees Ashling’s job as a primary school teacher as somehow of a higher calling than that of an office cleaner? And at 23 was she seen as being full of promise compared to a “middle-aged” 48 year old?

There is also the time bias. The time delay between the knife attack on Urantsetseg and her death in hospital two weeks later meant that our shock at the attack had dissipated by the time we heard the news of her death. Horrible as it sounds, we’d had time to get used to it because that’s what humans do – we adapt to what happens around us. We accommodate the shocking news over time. Think of huge scale shocks – the Twin Towers, the 2004 Tsunami, the rioting at the Capitol. We got used to what had happened in a matter of weeks, or even days (unless of course we had close connections who were caught up in the events which kept us closer to the aftershock).

So what’s all this got to do with the workplace? There has been so much written about unconscious bias and so many training courses delivered with much debate on their efficacy. I suggest there are some insights to be gained from the response to these two terrible events, a mini training opportunity if you will.
If it’s easier for us to understand and empathise with people who are like us, what does this mean for the people in our workplaces who aren’t like us? Are we denying them opportunities? Is it harder for them to get onto development programmes and access promotions? We really need to be aware of our perfectly understandable ease with those more like us. But just because it’s understandable doesn’t mean it’s OK. We need to act to address it and be fair.

Are we neglecting to acknowledge and reward the less high-profile job roles? Are we making assumptions about what a colleague wants from their career at 30 or 60?

Are we unconsciously blaming some colleagues for decisions that may not be choices for them? Do we seek to understand the constraints that colleagues may be working within? Covid brought the differences in people’s circumstances into sharp relief. Have we forgotten or did we ever make real effort to level the playing field as much as we could?

Do we give more credit to colleagues for more recent work or speedily completed work and tend to forget about excellent work that took place.

It’s important, important to help people acknowledge that we all have biases and important then to follow that up by actively working to address our biases and calling it out when we see it. And that’s for us as a society, not just for our workplaces.

May Aisling and Urantsetseg Rest in Peace. My condolences to their respective families and all who loved them.