

Women in mostly male workplaces exhibit psychological stress response

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Today's workforce is highly sex-segregated—for example, most elementary school teachers are women, while most chemistry professors are men. Indiana University Bloomington researchers Bianca Manago, a doctoral student in sociology, and Cate Taylor, an assistant professor of sociology and gender studies, examine one important consequence of this occupational sex segregation: the stress exposure of women working in highly male-dominated occupations.

"We find that such women are more likely to experience [exposure](#) to high levels of interpersonal, workplace stressors," Manago said.

Previous research has shown that women working in male-dominated [occupations](#) face particular challenges. They encounter social isolation, performance pressures, sexual harassment, obstacles to mobility, moments of both high visibility and invisibility, co-workers' doubts about their competence, and low levels of workplace social support. Chronic exposure to these types of social stressors is known to cause vulnerability to disease and mortality through dysregulation of the human body's stress response.

Manago and Taylor measure whether women in occupations that were made up of 85 percent or more men, also known as "token" women, show such dysregulation by analyzing their daily cortisol patterns. Cortisol is a stress hormone that naturally fluctuates through the day, but people with high levels of interpersonal stress exposure have different patterns of fluctuation than people exposed to more average levels of

stress.

"We find that women in male-dominated occupations have less healthy, or 'dysregulated,' patterns of cortisol throughout the day," Manago said. "We use nationally representative data, the MIDUS National Study of Daily Experiences, which allow us to assess women's cortisol profiles in workers across the United States.

"We also use statistical techniques to account for individuals' occupational and individual-level characteristics, allowing us to be more confident that the dysregulation of cortisol profiles we observe is due to the negative working conditions of token women, and not their own personal characteristics nor the characteristics of their occupations."

Previous work has shown that women in male-dominated occupations encounter difficult and negative workplace climates. And previous researchers have hypothesized that exposure to such difficult and negative workplace climates can expose these women to chronic [stress](#). The IU research is the first to demonstrate that such negative workplace climates can be expressed in these women's bodies and can, in fact, dysregulate their [stress response](#), potentially for years after the exposure to the stressful workplace climate.

"Our findings are especially important because dysregulated cortisol profiles are associated with negative health outcomes," Taylor said. "Thus, our project provides evidence that the negative workplace social climates encountered by women in male-dominated occupations may be linked to later negative health outcomes for these [women](#)."

More information: Indiana University faculty members and graduate students are presenting research findings at the 110th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, which takes place Aug. 21 to 25 Chicago.

Provided by Indiana University

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