

Psychologists: Women are not to blame for the wage gap

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Women should not be blamed for the gender wage gap in the United States, according to psychologists at Rice University. To eliminate the gap, organizations must provide training, support and opportunities for growth, the researchers said.

The authors of the review paper, "Victim Precipitation and the Wage Gap," draw upon existing psychological research to highlight myths regarding the gap between men and [women](#) and to offer possible explanations for why it exists.

The paper by Mikki Hebl, the Martha and Henry Malcolm Lovett Chair of Psychology in Rice's School of Social Sciences, Rice psychology graduate students Abby Corrington, Shannon Cheng and Linnea Ng, and Hebl lab manager Ivy Watson appeared in the March 2018 issue of the journal *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*.

"People often justify the gender [wage gap](#) by suggesting that 'women are not doing the same amount of work,' 'they are opting out' or 'they are working fewer hours,'" the authors wrote. "These justifications put the responsibility and blame on women themselves, preventing us from identifying and addressing the real root of the problem: not women's actions or inactions but systemic inequity within organizations and society."

The researchers outlined the following five myths regarding the wage gap and offered six suggestions for its elimination.

Myth No. 1: Women are not doing equal work.

Contrary to popular belief, women are the primary earners in 44 percent of families, and more than 75 percent of single mothers are the primary earners. In addition, women do more service-related work and mentoring than men, the authors wrote. For example, research has found that female associate professors spend approximately 220 more hours over two semesters than their male counterparts on teaching, mentoring and service. Women also spend more than an hour, on average, doing household and child care work each day.

Myth No. 2: Women leave the workplace to have and raise children.

Women leave the workplace for reasons other than to have and raise children, the researchers wrote. Sometimes it is for a better job offer or lack of opportunity at a current employer (including training, advancement and meaningful work). Sixty-six percent of first-time pregnant mothers work during their pregnancy, with 88 percent of those who work doing so into the third trimester. Also, women are often "mommy tracked" after returning to work—i.e., deprioritized for promotions, opportunities and projects.

Myth No. 3: Women choose less lucrative professions.

While women do tend to enter lower-earning occupations, the researchers said this does not explain the wage gap. Women earn less money than men within the same job, even within stereotypically feminine jobs, such as nursing and social work. In addition, research shows that female MBAs start out making less money than male MBAs, and that as women enter stereotypically masculine fields, the average salary for that field decreases.

Myth No. 4: Women don't ask for what they want.

Women do ask for what they want, but still receive less than men. This is often attributed to women lacking negotiation skills compared to men, but what goes unnoticed is the fact that women are expected to behave communally and do what's best for others. Research shows that when women behave in ways counter to this expectation, they are devalued, liked less and therefore less influential. Negotiations are not communal, meaning that women are violating social gender norms just by engaging in negotiations. When they do negotiate, research showed women receive lower offers—from both men and women—than men.

Myth No. 5: Women don't have as much education or experience as men.

This is not correct, as women hold the majority of undergraduate, master's and doctoral degrees. Studies also show that women earn less than men even after accounting for their prior work experience. In addition, the wage gap increases as women advance in their careers, with the largest wage gaps at the executive level.

The researchers offered six suggestions on how organizations can eliminate the wage gap:

- Organizations must identify and remove barriers. This can be accomplished by investing more resources in training to fast-track lower managers and conducting focus groups with women.
- Organizations must provide equal growth opportunities. They must offer accurate feedback for women and give them opportunities to connect with influential people in the organization.
- Organizations must take action toward implementing better

work/life balance. They must encourage women and men to take time off by providing maternity and paternity leave and not penalize people who choose to do so. They must also consider day care services or subsidies, as well as flexible schedules, remote work and/or job sharing.

- Organizations must provide ongoing training. They should have women represented across all levels of the organization. In addition, employees should be educated to behave in non-sexist ways, and diversity training should be designed according to research.
- Organizations should have anti-discrimination policies, as well as share salary ranges and the data on which they are based.
- Organizations should have and promote male allies (men who are in positions of influence who advocate for women).

The researchers hope their paper will shed light on the wage gap and provide employers with the tools to be more transparent and fair.

"It's simply time to stop blaming women for the wage gap," the authors said. "One dollar for men must be one dollar for women."

More information: Shannon Cheng et al, Victim Precipitation and the Wage Gap, *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1017/iop.2017.100](https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2017.100)

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