

Women scarce in the one percent: Glass ceiling is more extensive than previously thought, study shows

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Men hold nearly all primary breadwinning positions in top income households, and the glass ceiling that has hindered women's advancement in the workplace is more extensive than previously thought, a new study by University of North Carolina at Charlotte researcher Jill Yavorsky and colleagues finds.

"Our results indicate that men control the majority of income resources in households in the top one percent of U.S. income distributions," Yavorsky said. "This matters because members in the one percent possess a great deal of political, economic, and social power and influence in our society. If men are primarily the ones who control these resources, it is likely that men, not [women](#), exercise the majority of power and influence that comes with being in these households."

The study, "Women in the One Percent: Gender Dynamics in Top Income Positions," is featured in the February issue of *American Sociological Review*, the flagship journal of the American Sociological Association. Yavorsky is an assistant professor in the Sociology Department and Organizational Science doctoral program at UNC Charlotte. Her co-authors are Lisa Keister of Duke University, Yue Qian of University of British Columbia and Michael Nau of The Ohio State University.

The new study uses the 1995 to 2016 Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF) to analyze gender income patterns in the one percent. To qualify for top one percent household status, the authors calculate that a household must bring in \$845,000 in total income in 2016 dollars. The researchers' calculations from the 2016 SCF also indicate that top one percent households receive nearly one-fourth of all U.S. income, further highlighting the importance of studying this group.

While the top one percent has garnered increased scholarly and media attention in recent years, little research has considered whether men's or

women's income is primarily responsible for moving households into the one percent. Research also has been sparse on whether women have access to their own pathways to earning one percent status based on their income alone.

This new study shows that women's income alone is sufficient for one percent status in only 5 percent of all elite households. Moreover, women's income is necessary in pushing a household over the one percent threshold in only 15 percent of all one percent households. In other words, women's income is largely inconsequential in most of these households for obtaining one percent status.

"It is widely documented that most U.S. income gains since the late 1970s have gone to the top one percent of households," the researchers indicated in their article. "However, if women's income is trivial in the vast majority of these households, as our results show, rising inequality is largely due to a small group of men's income disproportionately rising compared with all others."

Importantly, the study also indicates that the gender gap in personally earning one percent income has not narrowed since the mid- to late-1990s. This means that women's progress on this issue has stalled and women are no closer to earning elite-level income today than they were two decades ago.

"We know that women face a lot of barriers reaching top executive and CEO positions," Yavorsky said. "However, we did not know the extent to which women are excluded from high income positions more generally. The previous studies of the glass ceiling have really looked at women being barred from leadership positions. This study shows that the [glass ceiling](#) is more extensive than we previously thought. It extends to nearly all elite positions, even [self-employment](#)."

Notably, prior studies have identified that self-employment and [higher education](#) are two important factors that increase people's chances of earning exceptionally high income. While the findings by Yavorsky and her colleagues show that obtaining higher education and self-employment do increase the likelihood that women will reach one percent status via their own income, "higher education and self-employment are not enough to circumvent the institutionalized barriers of reaching elite status," Yavorsky said. Instead, their results show that women mostly enter one percent households through marriage by gaining access to their spouse's income.

Meanwhile, due to men's labor market advantages, men's one percent status is most closely associated with their own characteristics, particularly with their own self-employment and higher education.

Yavorsky points to a few reasons to explain these results. Women are less likely to be in really high-paying male-dominated fields such as elite finance and real estate positions, and they are less likely to make it to the top ranks of corporate America where income is particularly concentrated.

"Women also experience a number of entry barriers into self-employment," she said. "And once they become self-employed or start their own business, they experience additional gender-based obstacles to growing their businesses. Such growth might otherwise enable them to earn high [income](#). For example, previous research shows that women experience greater difficulties securing bank loans and venture capital funding for their businesses than men, which leads to a huge disadvantage for women entrepreneurs."

As a researcher who studies economic inequalities, Yavorsky points out that this latest research is not meant to say that women in one percent households are marginalized and disempowered. "They reap a host of

different social and economic benefits from being in one percent households," she said. "However, the broader implications of this research suggest that women likely do not have the substantive status and power within these households, which have significant implications for policy concerning the distribution of economic resources."

More information: Jill E. Yavorsky et al, Women in the One Percent: Gender Dynamics in Top Income Positions, *American Sociological Review* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0003122418820702](https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122418820702)

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