

Study looks into the connection between religion and equal pay

October 29 2020



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In a new study published in the *Academy of Management Journal* by Traci Sitzmann, an Associate Professor at the University of Colorado Denver Business School, and Elizabeth Campbell, an Assistant Professor at the University of Minnesota, provide empirical evidence and an explanation into why religion perpetuates the gender wage gap.

While studying trends in 140 countries around the world, researchers found the gender [wage](#) gap is 29 percentage points greater in the most religious countries. Women earn 46% as much as men in the most religious countries and 75% of men's wages in secular countries. This trend of a greater gender wage gap in religious cultures applies across all six major world religions—Buddhism, Christianity, Folk, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism.

The same trend occurs in the United States—the gender wage gap is eight percentage points greater in religious than secular states.

Sitzmann and Campbell also conducted a series of experiments to demonstrate that the effect of religiosity on the gender wage gap is causal, meaning religion is the cause for the wage gap. The researchers found being exposed to religious values resulted in supervisors allocating significantly higher wages to male than [female employees](#), even though the employees performed at the same level.

Why does religion increase the gender wage gap?

Sitzmann and Campbell's research shows that religion sets up different social expectations for men and women in three areas:

- Religiosity socializes members to increase their family size, placing a heavy burden on women because men are permitted or even expected to repudiate domestic tasks. This decreases a women's career success due to the infeasibility of both working full-time and taking on most domestic responsibilities.
- Believing they are protecting a women's sexuality, religious societies place restrictions on women's ability to enter public spaces, interact unchaperoned with members of the opposite sex, and freely choose their apparel. Religion is often misused to legitimize violations of women's human rights.
- Religiosity advocates that men should pursue power and decision-making authority, while women should heed power and defer to men's authority. This unequal distribution of power results in women's underrepresentation in leadership positions. Indeed, Pope Francis indicated that "the door is closed" to women who wish to be ordained priests.

What are the implications?

Religious values are central to cultures around the world. In the U.S., Congress has their own chaplain to opening meetings with prayer; money is imprinted with "In God We Trust;" Supreme Court nomination hearings focus on the justice's [religious values](#); and increasingly businesses are demonstrating religious support by providing employees with a place to pray and evoking god as an explanation for firm policies.

"The existing management literature proposes that religion is a 'benign and positive force,' which is in direct opposition to research on the intersection between religion and gender," said Sitzmann. "Our research is instrumental for documenting that religiosity has a systematic effect on women's wages, suggesting that businesses should toe a fine line between permitting religious freedom and ensuring that freedom does not infringe upon the rights of others."

What is the solution?

A common notion is that the gender wage gap will resolve itself over time, but this is also contingent upon religiosity. The gender wage gap in secular U.S. states will take approximately 28 years to close, while the gap in religious states will take approximately 109 years to close, according to Sitzmann's study.

Rather than waiting 47 years for wage parity, organizational leaders and policymakers can assess whether employees are paid equitably based on the value of their work, regardless of gender. This is required for organizations in Iceland, which has helped the country maintain the smallest [gender wage gap](#) for the past nine years.

"Research has provided incontrovertible evidence that men and women's job performance is the same," said Sitzmann. "Wages should align with performance, rather than with employees' gender. I hope this research sensitizes organizational leaders to rectify cases where professional equals are compensated unequally based on [gender](#)."

More information: Traci Sitzmann et al, The Hidden Cost of Prayer: Religiosity and the Gender Wage Gap, *Academy of Management Journal* (2020). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2019.1254](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2019.1254)

Provided by University of Colorado Denver

Citation: Study looks into the connection between religion and equal pay (2020, October 29) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-10-religion-equal.html>

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