

Women are 'running with leaded shoes' when promoted at work, says study

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Promotion at work has greater emotional benefit for men than women, says a new study on gender and workplace emotion.

Women and men feel different at work, as moving up the ranks alleviates negative feelings such as frustration less for women than for men, says a sweeping new study on gender differences in emotion at

work.

The study, led by researchers at Yale University and co-authored by Jochen Menges at Cambridge Judge Business School, finds that rank is associated with greater emotional benefits for men than for women, and that women reported greater negative feelings than men across all ranks.

Because emotions are important for [leadership](#), this puts women at a disadvantage akin to running with "leaded shoes," according to the study, which is based on nearly 15,000 workers in the US.

The results, published in *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, tie the different ways women and men experience emotions at work to underrepresentation at every level of workplace leadership.

Little previous research on gender and workplace emotions

The study notes that, while the glass ceiling for women has been extensively documented, there has been surprisingly little research on gender differences in emotions at work. Understanding this is particularly important as emotions influence job performance, decision-making, creativity, absence, conflict resolution and leadership effectiveness.

The practical implications of the study are that organizations must provide support to women as they advance, including formal mentoring relationships and networking groups that can provide opportunities to deal with emotions effectively while supporting women as they rise within organizational ranks.

"It would be hard for anyone to break through a glass ceiling when they

feel overwhelmed, stressed, less respected and less confident," said Menges, who teaches at both the University of Zurich and Cambridge Judge Business School.

"This emotional burden may not only hamper [promotion](#) opportunities for women, but also prevent them from contributing to an organization to the best of their ability. More needs to be done to level the playing field when it comes to emotional burdens at work," said Menges, whose research often focuses on leadership, motivation and other workplace issues.

Women feel more 'overwhelmed, stressed, frustrated' at work

The study finds gender does make a difference for the emotions that employees experience at work. Compared to men, women reported feeling more overwhelmed, stressed, frustrated, tense, and discouraged, and less respected and confident.

Women reported greater negative feelings than men across all ranks. Although these feelings decreased for both men and women as they moved up in rank, the extent to which rank diminished negative feelings differed between the sexes. For instance, moving up rank did alleviate frustration and discouragement in both men and women, but it did so more for men than for women.

The study says that because women experience more negative and fewer positive feelings in climbing the organizational ladder, this puts women at a disadvantage in attaining leadership roles.

At the lowest levels of employment, women reported feeling significantly more respected than men, yet this reverses as people climb

within an organization, resulting in men feeling significantly more respected than women at higher levels.

The research used data from 14,618 adult US workers (50.7% male, 49.3% female) reflecting a diversity of race, ethnicity and industries, to test the following factors:

—Differences in the emotions that men and women experience at work.

—If gender interacts with rank to predict emotions.

—Whether the association between gender and emotions is mediated by emotional labor demands.

—If this relationship differs as a function of the proportion of women in an industry or organizational rank.

Feelings ranging from 'inspired' to 'stressed'

Emotions were assessed using two different methods. Participants used a sliding scale to indicate how often they had experienced 23 feelings at work in the previous three months. The items included ten positive emotions such as "interested," "proud" and "inspired," and 13 negative responses including "bored," "stressed" and "envious." Participants were also asked to report their typical feelings about work in open-ended responses about how their job had made them feel over the past six months.

In addition, to assess positional power, participants were asked to place themselves on a ladder with ten steps representing where people stand in their organization.

Inhibiting negative emotion is not the answer

The study concludes that simply smothering emotion in the workplace isn't the answer: Inhibiting negative emotions for a prolonged time increases burnout, and negatively impacts performance and personal well-being.

It recognizes there are areas of future research which include how gender interacts with other categories of identity, such as race and ethnicity, social class, and sexuality. Women of color face stronger glass ceiling effects than white women and have to simultaneously navigate bias and discrimination based on their gender and race.

The authors also suggest further investigation to establish whether women's negative experiences can impose an emotional [glass ceiling](#) because obstacles such as unequal treatment at work causes emotions such as feeling disrespected, which in turn can become an additional barrier to advancement.

More information: Christa L. Taylor et al, Gender and Emotions at Work: Organizational Rank Has Greater Emotional Benefits for Men than Women, *Sex Roles* (2021). [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-021-01256-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-021-01256-z)

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