

Women, men have different motivations for competing, says expert on gender wage gap

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Mary L. Rigdon, director of the University of Arizona Center for the Philosophy of Freedom, challenges traditional stereotypes and makes a compelling business and ethical case to close to close the wage gap between men and women. Credit: Center for the Philosophy of Freedom

Mary L. Rigdon, director of the University of Arizona Center for the

Philosophy of Freedom and an associate professor in the Department of Political Economy and Moral Science, has spent years studying gender competitiveness and women's equity. Her work challenges traditional stereotypes and makes a compelling business and ethical case to close the wage gap between men and women.

A nationally recognized expert in her field, Rigdon has conducted her research in collaboration with Alessandra Cassar, a professor of economics at the University of San Francisco. The pair investigated a longstanding question: If accumulating wealth and reaching high status affords [women](#) valuable benefits for themselves and their children, why do economists keep claiming that women are less competitive than men?

Their answer: Women are as competitive as men, just motivated differently. Rigdon and Cassar found that women are more likely to compete if given the option to share their winnings. But why do social incentives motivate women to compete? Is it the ability to divide winnings, or the ability to repair relationships after competition ends? Rigdon and Cassar are designing their next experiment to better understand why different incentives close the competitiveness gap.

Rigdon will discuss her research on March 12 at this year's South by Southwest festival at the UArizona Wonder House. A full list of this year's Wonder House speakers can be found on the university's [SXSW website](#). Ahead of her presentation in Austin, Rigdon discussed her research and how she plans to share her work with the entrepreneurs and "change-makers" at SXSW.

Q: When you look at previous work by economists and labor researchers to explain the gender wage gap, what about their answers stand out as incorrect, and how did that lead to the development of your own

work?

A: I became interested in this research about five years ago when we kept hearing from economists this idea that women are less competitive and less risk tolerant than men. If you think about jobs that are highly competitive, they tend to be the ones that pay well. So, if women are less competitive, they will self-select away from those kinds of opportunities and those kinds of jobs, and will be less likely to ask for promotions, which we know bring pay raises. The idea is that this can help explain why there is a persistent [gender wage gap](#).

If you say that women are less competitive than men and that explains the wage gap, this is where we started to have a problem. Alessandra and I started focusing on motivation to see if that could be a factor impacting the way women and men compete, because if it's about changing behavior, then the burden is on women instead of talking about changing the system. Based on our research, I believe that we need to stop telling women that it's their fault and start thinking creatively about changing workplace incentives to take advantage of women's unique attributes.

Q: How and why do men and women express their competitiveness in different ways?

A: Our work is motivated by the idea that females are as competitive as males, but they exhibit it in different contexts. Rather than having a lower desire to compete, women are motivated by the social nature of the incentives as a reflection of their different evolutionary and cultural constraints.

To men, the principal benefit to winning competitions and achieving high status, besides uncontested access to resources, is the greater reproductive opportunities that such resources afford. For women, the

benefits accrue differently: Power and status are important because of the benefits they provide to their offspring. This difference is noticeable in western traditional gender roles where men are viewed as securers of resources, and women are viewed as distributors of those resources to members of the family.

There are hidden costs to winning that women specifically face. For women, occupying powerful positions in society does not seem to translate into attracting higher-quality men. Women in high executive positions and political appointments are more likely to get divorced than men, receive [negative reactions](#) from their spouses, and report lower marital satisfaction. For men, in addition to the reproductive benefits, high status secures male allies. For women, high status may alienate other women, hence appearing less competitive may be a crucial element for securing allies.

In our work, we show that offering women monetary incentives with the option to share closes the competitiveness gap. The added social element doesn't change men's behavior at all, and neither men nor women really use the option to share. This answers some questions about the wage gap: Women are just as competitive as men when we look for it in the right way. But it raises some other questions. We don't yet fully understand why social dimensions to incentives matter to women and not men.

Q: Why is it important that we better understand topics like gender competitiveness and equity?

A: Closing the gender wage and opportunity gap can build a better society. Today, [white women](#) on average earn 83 cents for every dollar earned by their white male peers. It's even worse for women of color: 67 cents for every dollar for Black women and 57 cents for every dollar for Hispanic and Latina women. It is estimated that women experience \$513

billion in lost wages per year because of this stubborn wage gap.

There are all kinds of issues with a lack of pay equity. The average woman worker loses more than \$530,000 over the course of her lifetime because of it, and the average college-educated woman loses even more—nearly \$800,000. Additionally, it causes resentment among workers who are paid different rates for the same work. Women must work an extra three months to get paid the same amount of money as men. March 14 is called Equal Pay Day for this reason. We needed to better understand why there is a gender [wage gap](#). Just saying that it's because women are less competitive is not empirically accurate.

Q: What are you hoping to accomplish with your appearance at Wonder House?

A: South by Southwest is a place where change-makers gather, so taking our message and the data behind it to them can be a catalyst for change. Our commitment to women's equity personifies the values of the University of Arizona, and I am proud to be able to share our research at the Wonder House.

You can create such a positive impact if you get these kinds of people in a room and give them the science and the evidence. They are ready to hear a call to action, and to be that impact.

My tagline is that we need to change the system, not the women, because continuing to reinforce a false gender stereotype of women as being less competitive has real economic costs for talented professionals who are unfairly penalized in hiring, compensation and performance evaluations.

Provided by University of Arizona

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