
“Nice Girls Don’t Negotiate” & Other Gender Myths



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Women aren’t worse negotiators than men. It’s just that their negotiation strengths and weaknesses are little understood.

It is widely believed that the gender pay gap – which the U.S. Census Bureau estimates at 77 cents on the dollar – is partly a negotiation-skills gap. In other words, one of the reasons women are paid less than men is that they don’t know how to ask for more.

There is some truth in this, but it is hardly the whole story. Rather than an innate incapacity, women’s worse negotiation outcomes are largely attributable to a set of gender-specific social and psychological barriers. Take these away and women can achieve results as good as, if not better than, men’s by leveraging their special strengths, according to research on the topic.

A Slanted Playing Field

First, let’s talk stereotypes. Despite the real progress that has been made in recent decades, there’s still a social stigma against women who ask for

more. Society hasn't yet got rid of traditional associations with the truly feminine; never-changing "niceness," "sweetness," and "friendliness." Women who adopt behaviours deemed more "aggressive" or "dominant", which are taken for granted if not encouraged in male managers, are often viewed as harsh or unlikeable. While men may also feel confined by their gender role, the dominant stereotypes are more likely to disadvantage women by leaving them limited options for seeking redress when they feel unrecognized.

Research shows that too often women start to believe these stereotypes themselves, and become accustomed to asking for less and giving away more. **One study** showed that Asian-American women who were asked their gender before taking a science exam scored lower than another group of Asian-American women who weren't asked that question. An explanation for the discrepancy might be that bringing up gender reminded female test-takers of the stereotype that women are bad at science and may generate performance anxiety that in turn reduces their scores. If taken to heart by enough people, stereotypes can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Innate Differences

But not all the constraints on women negotiators come from the outside world. Genuine facets of female psychology – based in science, not bias – are also likely to play a role. They boil down to two major challenges: negotiation as an exception and lower expectations. While these aren't true of all women they are fair generalisations we can extrapolate from the body of gender research conducted to date.

Women, on the whole, tend to expect a certain level of fairness in life that doesn't always play out in the workplace. Too often, they assume that options presented to them have already met standards of fairness approximate to their own. When entering a negotiation this leaves them vulnerable to manipulation in a way that men aren't. This perhaps can help explain why 20 percent of women never negotiate their careers, and why women, taken together, avoid negotiating twice as often as men do.

Women's lower expectations are reinforced by the cross-gender tendency to gather information from same-sex social networks. In preparation for a negotiation, women will tend to solicit advice from other women, who are also likely being paid less. This helps to keep the pay gap hidden, thus perpetuating it.

How Women Can Win

Enough about the problems; let's get to the solutions. There are three ways to get around the obstacles facing women in negotiations.

1. Reduce uncertainty

Women achieve worse outcomes when the boundaries of negotiation are unclear. When women come to the table armed with the pertinent facts about previous outcomes and standards they can fare just as well as men. Women should do thorough research (including venturing outside their social circles) to get a complete picture. They should also ask for outside input in shaping more ambitious yet still realistic goals. Setting up mock negotiations can also help women anticipate possible anxiety-producing scenarios and strategically shape questions to ask during real sit-downs.

2. Play to your strengths

The gender-psychology news for female negotiators is not all bad by any means. In a famous [study by Hannah Riley Bowles, Linda Babcock and Kathleen McGinn](#), women handily outperformed men when negotiating on someone else's behalf. It's when their own circumstances are at stake that the barriers tend to surface. There are several strengths women can bring to the table without openly transgressing gender roles. For example, women are generally more curious than men, which can be a great asset in forming an open and diagnostic line of questioning. This is an excellent and less confrontational tool for building advantageous relationships.

3. Manage all your labels

Gender isn't the only label that matters in a negotiation. Indeed, in the study I mentioned earlier involving Asian-American women, the subjects' scores were higher when they were asked about race instead of gender. And a group of women scored better on an English exam when asked about gender than when asked about race. While it's unfortunate society still seems mired in stereotypes, at least women, who are aware of all their labels, can use positive stereotypes to counteract the negative ones.

When Aisha (an executive I once interviewed) was called in to rescue her firm's relationship with an unhappy client, she drew upon her gender role to re-establish trust and communication with the client. On a different occasion,

as the only woman participating in a tense negotiation, she found herself constantly interrupted and ignored. She persuaded her counterparties to take a break to cool down, during which she brought up the topic of previous experience. Staying within her permitted gender role, she listened to the others recount their experiences then described her decade of experience in investment banking. When the negotiation resumed, Aisha's contributions to the discussion were taken with the seriousness they deserved.

The Future of Negotiation

To sum up, women are better able to create value in a negotiation but often struggle to benefit from that value themselves, while men are better at capturing value, but may do so at a higher social cost and risk breaking down the negotiation altogether. Women are not worse negotiators, but stereotypes help to create an environment that emphasises their weaknesses.

But this may be changing. As more women learn to overcome gender negotiation obstacles they may become better negotiators than men, who have never had to reckon with the role gender plays in this area. In addition, female-associated behaviours, such as supporting others, curiosity, cooperation, and convincing, are increasingly being regarded as important negotiation techniques for both genders.

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