



23 SEP 2015 RESEARCH & IDEAS

Men Want Powerful Jobs More Than Women Do

by Carmen Nobel

While women and men believe they are equally able to attain high-level leadership positions, men want that power more than women do, according to new research by **Francesca Gino, Caroline Wilmoth, and Alison Wood Brooks.**

New research from Harvard Business School reveals a stark gap in the professional ambitions of men and women.

Having surveyed a diverse sample of more than 4,000 men and women, a team of social scientists reports a list of potentially controversial findings:

- Compared to men, women have more life goals, but fewer of them are focused on power.
- Women perceive professional power as less desirable than men do.
- Women anticipate more negative outcomes from attaining a high-power position.
- Women are less likely than men to jump at opportunities for professional advancement.
- While women and men believe they are equally able to attain high-level leadership positions, men want that power more than women do.

Published this week in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, their study is entitled *Compared to Men, Women View Professional Advancement as Equally Attainable, but Less Desirable* (pdf).

“EVEN IN THE MOST PROGRESSIVE, GENDER-BALANCED HOUSEHOLDS, ON AVERAGE, WOMEN SEEM TO THINK ABOUT A GREATER DIVERSITY OF PURSUITS”

While you let that provocative title sink in, it's worth noting that the research was conducted by three professionally ambitious women: Francesca Gino, a recently tenured professor in the Negotiations, Organizations & Markets (NOM) unit at HBS; Caroline Wilmoth, who is pursuing a doctorate in organizational behavior at Harvard, and Alison Wood Brooks, an assistant professor in the NOM unit. On the life side of the work/life balance, Gino is the mother of a spirited three-year-old son, and is expecting a second child; Brooks just returned to HBS from maternity leave in August.

In other words, these are the last people in the world who would try to thwart female ambition with scientific research. Still, when Gino presented the study at a conference a few weeks ago, the audience booed her.

“People were upset because they thought the paper suggested that we shouldn't offer women positions of power,” Gino says. “And I want to make it clear that, no, that's not what we're saying at all.”

Rather, she says, the researchers simply want to raise the idea that women and men tend to view power differently, and have different preferences about professional advancement—and to delve into why.

ABILITY VS. DESIRABILITY

The research began with the hypothesis that women have more life goals than men do, based partly on previous gender research and partly on personal experience and observation.



When asked to imagine receiving a promotion at work, women predicted a higher level of negative outcomes than men did.

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“We wondered if women may think about things that men don’t,” says Brooks. “You want to be an amazing employee. You want to be an excellent leader at work. But you may also want to dress well. And make sure your children are fed. And that the nanny got to the house in time for you to leave for work. And remember to check in with your close friends. And find time to jog three times a week. And so on. Even in the most progressive, gender-balanced households, on average, women seem to think about a greater diversity of pursuits.”

The researchers asked 781 working adults to fill out an online survey, listing their core goals in life. Indeed, on average, women listed nearly twice as many goals as men did. Among the goals that they listed, however, men reported a higher percentage of goals related to professional power.

Next, the team investigated whether women desired professional advancement less than men, due to having to juggle more goals. They recruited 635 men and women from the same professionally-ambitious demographic: the Harvard MBA classes of 2013 and 2014.

The participants considered a picture of an actual ladder, which represented the conceptual corporate ladder. Their task: to indicate their current position in their industry, their ideal position, and the highest position they could realistically attain.

In terms of their current positions, there were no significant differences between men and women among the newly-minted MBA grads. And men and women chose equally high rungs regarding how high they thought they *could* climb on the corporate ladder, if they ever wanted to climb that high. But when it came to the ideal position, women chose a lower rung on the ladder than men did, on average.

“It’s not a matter of thinking that high-level positions are more or less attainable for these men and women,” Gino says. “It’s just that they have different preferences.”

THE CONSEQUENCES OF PROFESSIONAL ADVANCEMENT

The next logical step was to suss out why women (even women with Harvard MBA degrees) may desire professional advancement less than men do. So the researchers asked 465 working adults to imagine accepting a promotion at work, and to predict the extent to which they’d experience possible resultant outcomes. Some outcomes were positive (satisfaction, money, influence), while others were negative (stress, tough tradeoffs, conflict with other life goals). “The idea was to capture all the possible things that might happen to people in high power,” Gino explains.

Overall, both men and women predicted the same level of positive outcomes. Yet, women predicted a higher level of negative outcomes than men did.

The researchers yielded similar results when they repeated the exercise with 204 mid-career students in the Executive Education program at HBS—men and women who already occupied powerful positions at work, and who had taken the initiative to enroll in advanced leadership courses. Even among these women who were actively climbing the corporate ladder, there was a relatively larger negative association with power compared with their male counterparts.

And when the researchers surveyed 516 Harvard undergraduates, the results held steady. Asked to imagine receiving a high-power job opportunity upon graduation (a likely prospect for many of them), young women listed a higher proportion of negative outcomes than young men did.

AVOIDING JUDGMENT

In the conclusion of their study, the researchers note that their findings are “descriptive, not prescriptive.”

“Based on these data, we cannot make value judgments about whether men and women’s differing views of professional advancement are good or bad, rational or irrational, at any level of analysis (e.g. , for individuals, for organizations, or for societies),” they write.

But they hope to break new ground with the idea that even if the CEO suite is a viable option, it’s acceptable to pursue other goals instead.

“The findings in the paper could be construed as anti-feminist, but one could also argue that they represent true feminist ideals,” Brooks says. “It’s fascinating that women have more goals than men. At this point in Western culture, women are pursuing more things. It’s empowering to have a long list of goals, and to try to pursue them all. We hope our findings encourage men and women to be more aware of their own goals and preferences, and respectful of others’.”

In the next stage of the research, the team plans to find out the point in life at which men and women start developing differing views about professional advancement—or, rather, when boys and girls start developing differing views.

“We might have to go much younger than college undergraduates,” Brooks says. “Maybe even younger than high school.”

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COMMENTS

 **Bennie Alexander** 1018 days ago
Men have the responsibility to bring money to home for his family. The women's responsibility is to take care her husband and her family. Modern world IT changed everything and all are equal before job and money. In IT field women are getting promotions faster than men especially considering the immigrant workforce or H1 visa group in US companies


Like Reply 1 reply

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 **Cheryl Knepper** 880 days ago
Wrong! I have figured out that's it's even more important for women to provide than men to provide. Anyone truly objective can figure out why too.


Like Reply

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 **Ian** 1191 days ago
The literature on evolutionary psychology would add clarification to these findings. Further, in my own State in Australia, the public sector initiated an affirmative action policy with a target of 30% women in senior positions. Finding competent women to fill the roles was not difficult. Yet the policy failed. The promoted women lasted, on average, six months before resigning, finding the new executive culture too 'blokey' and toxic. Instead, they initiated or joined small consultancies providing services back to the same group they left.


Like Reply

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 **Ruth** 1198 days ago
The question has also a cultural dimension. Men in Southern Europe are likely to have more goals than men in the US. For instance, they probably assign more value than US males to time with family and friends. In this part of the world, making money is certainly a less important goal for everybody, men and women, than it is for US citizens. Rich people are less admired than they are in the US. These perceptions enable people to have a variety of goals, and certainly an important one is to live long and enjoy life.


Like Reply

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 **pat** 1455 days ago
It is all about our gender roles and getting to appreciate them as individuals. Women will bring to life the next generation, and are thus called to set aside time to do exactly that. Men may not be required to take the maternity leave etc but their role is there though of a different nature. Each of us should play their role joyously with no excuse or regret.


Like Reply

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 **Nargis Dustmatova** 1589 days ago
there is nothing new to this research and study. it stated a common well known fact.


Like Reply

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 **asb** 1604 days ago
What about this study is new? Don't women already know we are taxed while trying to pursue our careers in a gender biased world? Don't we already know that we think about other life quality issues? That we have to somehow manage maternity leave perceptions and risk losing career ground because we also care for children? Read how The Economist slanted these findings. This will be used as justification for why women aren't ready for the ceiling to break. Why don't we spin these results and ask, "So why aren't men taking a leave of absence to raise children? Why don't they risk being seen as a risky investment over time because of family obligations? They make more money? Why?"


Like Reply

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 **Anon** 1610 days ago
This boing sound Gino received from the audience is the same ugly sound alumnae who pursue adventures far wide of the C-suite hear from HBS.


Like Reply

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 **Class of 81** 1611 days ago
I read this and was saddened at the realization that the results likely reflect women's expectations of what they can realistically achieve and not what, if given a level playing field, they would actually like to achieve. We learn quickly in our business careers how rare it is for women to be promoted to the highest levels when the promotion criteria becomes subjective and the men invite only men to join the club. Women are not less ambitious. Women are adaptive and when they see pathways blocked, they re-assess and find a way to move forward.

Like Reply

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 **Tommie Tmk** 1618 days ago
I want to ask these why is it that when women want to accomplish their ambitions there social life is at stake- they don't want to have children , they don't want to get married etc. But a man's success is strongly tied with social life success like is he married

, does he have kids, a family man? Women might be fighting for what they are not designed for.

Like Reply 1 reply

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Lois Huang

1614 days ago

Or maybe they're fighting for what society has "not designed" them for.

Remember. Rules get rewritten, and each generation improves where the last one left off.

Like Reply

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dre

1620 days ago

Guess what. No matter how many studies you do or surveys you give out, there is no way to read anyone's mind. There is also no way that every woman has the same thought. And not all men are the same. So any study suggesting the thinking process of either gender is just a waste of everyone's time.

Perhaps more men aim at the more powerful positions out there because they're used to getting what they want. So it doesn't seem like that big of a risk or a longshot. Women, on the other hand have to work twice as hard to get the same thing, and maybe sometimes women just don't think it's worth it. I don't blame them.

Like Reply

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Klaus Barth

1621 days ago

Men's have their aspirations of growing fast in their Life . They do have the social responsibilities to be taken . And with bigger aims they tend to have their status high no matter whatsoever and even Men don't bear a women to get over him !!

Like Reply

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Deepak Singh

1621 days ago

I agree, the preference given to women for the powerful jobs like the complete Human Resource niche is captured by women who decide any organization's manpower.

You may also like to read: <http://aadhaarcarduid.in/>

Like Reply

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John Werneken

1623 days ago

Simple. Females are more risk-averse, nurturing and nesting. Males are of a more predatory nature, protecting and providing. In most cases.

Like Reply

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Linda

1623 days ago

Very interesting study. Thank you for pointing out that women don't judge themselves as successful by necessarily being at the top in a business. More power to women that they can be successful by having goals outside of work. They choose to have a life and not make work their life.

Like Reply

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PAAS

1623 days ago

It would have been interesting for the research authors to have made contact with the most vociferous "boomers" and find out more about their backgrounds: to discover where they had been cheated out of opportunities relative to men; their upbringing-environment regarding male and female role models; and what turned them into strong feminists? That might be an interesting anti-dote to the debate. Peter A. Arthur-Smith (peter@ileadershipsolutions.com)

Like Reply

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Anonymous

1623 days ago

There are those of us (men) who are in tune with the so-called feminine side of things and we are perceived as weak, also.

Like Reply

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Fellow female academic

1623 days ago

I hope people don't take this to mean that this is how all men and all women act, though. This describes the statistics of the populations, but we shouldn't hold individuals to these mean properties. Also, this doesn't imply that there is something inherently different about men and women— it could be (and I suspect it is, at least largely) a difference due to socialization. I like others' comments that we should also ask why (on average) women perceive more negative outcomes of higher power positions. Is it because (on average) women are faced with more negative outcomes due to bias? Is it because (on average) women are just more aware of the negative outcomes (to all, regardless of gender) of power and weight them more heavily than do men (on average)? It's not just about prioritizing having kids, either— don't forget other goals as the article mentioned, such as interpersonal relationships in general. Why was the first non-job goal that the researchers mentioned about dressing well?

And then the next two were about kids, and then things not related to kids? I understand kids are important priorities for those who have/want them, but we already emphasize that priority so much for women— what about the other priorities that women have that compete with work, such as having multiple interests, wanting to maintain/build friendships, participating in community work, ...?

Like Reply

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Inga Wisniewski

1624 days ago

This article points out the freedom of choice women take upon themselves in modern society. In my opinion, it is the next great step in feminism, Woman decides by herself and acts according to her inner goals and aspirations. This indicates a higher degree of internal freedom: the career advancement choice was not not dictated by society but came from within. She had chosen to be/stay herself and act according to her personal goals.

Like Reply

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Another thought

1624 days ago

You might also consider changing the negative outcomes by better work situations. These might include less gender discrimination to begin with and better working hours so that women and men could pursue other life goals while excelling in the work place.

Like Reply

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Aude Scheibli-Roumegoux

1625 days ago

New? Surprising? Experienced women understand that in general, women tend to be more interested in results rather than status, in progress rather than posture. But little is done in Corporate America to nurture such non masculine ambitions. Lao Tsu says that when the best leader has accomplished their job, everyone else says they have done it by themselves. A woman who adopts men standards and values will succeed like a man, and earn a position of power. A woman true to values closer to her femininity will succeed by influence without much authority and little recognition...Classic story...Good questions would be: Is power necessary for an organization to succeed? What would success look like in a world dominated by the feminine rather than the masculine? In the HERMES Study (1967 to 1973) described in "Culture's and Consequences" by Geert Hofstede, cultures across the globe are compared using 4 dimensions, the Power Distance Index, the Uncertainty Avoidance Index, the Inviduality Index and the Masculinity Index. If we were to map men and women using these 4 dimensions, we might get a glimpse into unlocking the true value of gender diversity in Corporate Leadership, avoid an edge fund manager turned "all powerful" CEO increasing a drug price by 5,000 folds and feeling perfectly justified about it and maybe, move into the era of "Public Benefit Corporations" in which profit is no longer the end all be all...

Like Reply

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Shelmina Abji

1625 days ago

I am not surprised by this research at all. I was a Vice President at IBM when I left last year. While I had a very successful career, being there for my children and having a personal/professional balance was always more important... No contest... And now, in hindsight. I am so glad that I made that conscious decision early in my life as I was a single mom when my kids were 2 and 4... Today they are 24 and 21 and I am thrilled that they were always my priority.

Like Reply

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Julia

1625 days ago

Indeed, a hardly surprising outcome as long as the norms as to what constitutes success in power positions continue to be defined by men. Women would not necessarily identify themselves with this definition of success, which would make these positions "less desirable", but then put in this context. Also, as long as we as a society at large continue finding it acceptable that fathers should care less (or not at all in the worst case) about feeding their children in time, then it is a logical consequence that women will continue experience more stress as they step up to different responsibilities in life, and do it all alone. And then make their choices.

Like Reply

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Julia

1625 days ago

Indeed, a hardly surprising outcome as long as the norms as to what constitutes success in power positions is determined by men. Women would not necessarily identify themselves with it, which will make the power position "less desirable", but then put in this context. Also, as long as we as a society at large continue accepting that it is okay for fathers to worry less or not at all about feeding children in time, it will be a logical consequence that women will experience more stress as they are assuming more responsibilities in life. And make their choices.

Like Reply

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temafrank

1625 days ago

Let's look at the actual outcomes. I suspect that women in powerful positions do typically experience more negative consequences than men do. Women are still judged on more than just their job competence (e.g. Is Marissa Mayer right or wrong to take a short maternity leave?), they still get more criticism than men if they try to be tough but also if they try to be empathetic, they still have to put up with comments on their physical appearance and clothes, they are less likely than men in high-power positions to have a spouse, and even less likely to have a stay-at-home spouse who is devoted to making their life work smoothly.

Like Reply 1 reply

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VMB

1625 days ago

Absolutely! Not only do women still have to work twice as hard, for three-quarters of the pay, but, once they receive that pay, be it dollars or power, the pay is a devalued currency because women do not have the same socially sanctioned opportunities to spend or invest that pay as men do. To give a crude example, women can't buy trophy husbands.

Further, to address the research, I believe it's not just that individual women have more diverse goals (a softball criterion), it's that women as a group/the parts of society that are traditionally feminine encompass a more diverse, deeper, broader set of social, political, moral and spiritual values than do the compartmentalized, limited values expressed in power-position "success."

Like Reply

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Just Another Idiot

1625 days ago

Hardly surprising results but it's interesting that the negative response to the research seems to be about interpreting the results as meaning women are inferior to men for not wanting professional power instead of women have a superior grasp on what it means to have a diverse and fulfilling life and are more willing to trade some professional success for a better life. Nobody gets to have everything.

Like Reply

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DLB

1625 days ago

This is ridiculous. Instead of polling people recently out of school, why don't you get into the workplace, and poll people in the mid-manager, VP, SVP, EVP and CEO positions. Very disappointing, Harvard.

Like Reply 2 replies

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Carmen Nobel

1625 days ago

DLB: One of the studies did focus on mid-career professionals who already had high-power jobs. "The researchers yielded similar results when they repeated the exercise with 204 mid-career students in the Executive Education program at HBS—men and women who already occupied powerful positions at work, and who had taken the initiative to enroll in advanced leadership courses. Even among these women who were actively climbing the corporate ladder, there was a relatively larger negative association with power compared with their male counterparts."

Like Reply 1 reply

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DLB

1625 days ago

Your study is too biased around your own environment (those recently out of school, those in the Exec Ed program at Harvard, etc.). Suggest you step outside your collegiate vision of reality, get out into "real" corporate America, and talk to women who do not have a goal of having children, but instead JUST want to be successful businesswomen. Only then will you find equal footing in your comparison with male execs, which would make this data relevant.

Like Reply

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Liz

1625 days ago

Could it also be women understand the difficulty of balancing power at home. Power and authority also mean pressure and responsibility at home. Lower support levels at home have a real impact in being able to take on more power positions in the office.

Like Reply

2