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Attacking Gender Bias—One Negotiation at a Time

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By Suzanne de Janasz

The gender wage gap often starts at the salary negotiations table. By teaching our students the right skills, we can help make that gap disappear—for good.

- Cultural biases can influence women to negotiate less aggressively than their male counterparts for salaries, assignments, promotions, and other career benefits.
- Although women often become more confident negotiators later in their careers, by then they often have missed out on a range of opportunities.
- By exposing students to imaginative exercises in our negotiations courses, we can make them aware of the effects that gender bias can have on their careers and teach them the skills to counteract it.

Another 136 years. That's how long it will take for the world to achieve gender equality, according to [current rates of progress](#). But it's encouraging to see that business schools worldwide—including my home institution, the George Mason University School of Business in Fairfax County, Virginia—are increasingly committed to accelerating the disappearance of the gender gap. And negotiations, one of my fields of specialty, is a key part of that mission.

The gender wage gap is partly attributable to differences in how men and women negotiate, **as research extensively shows**. Such findings jibe with a persistent pattern among the executives and MBA students in my classes: Men negotiate more frequently, more readily, and with a lot more (earned or unearned) confidence than their women peers.

Naturally, this contributes to gender inequality in how women are compensated (monetarily and otherwise), as well as how often women are promoted to senior management positions or appointed to boards. It also affects their perceptions of fairness and satisfaction in their lives and careers.

More than lack of competence or skill efficacy, it is bias in the workplace, combined with fears women harbor about facing backlash or rejection, that contribute to gender inequality in business. Both factors prevent women from negotiating as effectively as their male counterparts, or at least from negotiating to receive the compensation and opportunities they deserve.

Negative past experiences with sexism and cultural indoctrination act as inhibitors—for women, each of these experiences act much like a hot stove—they know that if they touch it, they'll get burned. Women of color are subject to even greater pushback for "aggressive" behavior, which may explain why they are subject to an even larger wage gap than their white women counterparts.

If business schools are to promote gender equality, we need a new approach to teaching negotiations. In our courses, we must equip women with the skills and self-assurance to ask for what they want, and get it, while overcoming any blowback due to cultural biases against assertive or "unladylike" behavior.

We must address not only the act of negotiation itself, but also the entire complex of gender bias that surrounds it.

Early-Career Versus Late-Career

My call to action is deeply rooted in research suggesting that gender norms in negotiations can be circumvented. For example, I recently worked with Terri A. Scandura, professor and Warren C. Johnson Endowed Chair at the Miami Herbert Business School at the University of Miami, **to survey 149 professional men and women** on their negotiation behaviors.

We were particularly interested in the concept of "**peacocking**," which refers to using spoken or nonverbal language to signal mastery or credibility. Assuming they have the experience or ability to back it up, negotiators can use peacocking to show they are not to be trifled with.

In our research, we expected that our male respondents would report far more willingness to engage in peacocking than the women in our sample. And they did. However, a closer look at the data suggested a more nuanced dynamic. Early-career men—those with less than 15 years of experience—were more comfortable strutting their stuff than women of the same cohort. Among the late-career contingent, though, women peacocked more than their male peers.

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Our research is ongoing, and until it is peer-reviewed, we're reluctant to draw grand conclusions from it. But the surprising pattern does seem to require explanation. Perhaps women in their early careers are more likely to fall in line with gendered expectations—or worse, fall prey to **imposter syndrome**. Perhaps this tendency dissipates once women have a prolonged string of career accomplishments and concomitant confidence. Or, perhaps once they become familiar with how sexism operates and fed up with the status quo, they consciously choose to defy socially assigned gender roles.

Whatever the reason, it seems that time and experience erode the influence of cultural biases on women's career potential. Sadly, by the time women feel ready to deviate from prescribed paths, the damage to their careers (and lifelong earnings) may already be done. As Beverly DeMarr of Ferris State University and I mention in our book *Negotiation and Dispute Resolution*, a 7,000 USD difference in starting salary for a 22-year-old worker can have a startling long-term

financial impact. Compounded at a conservative increase of 3 percent per year, that difference will result in 649,000 USD of lost income by the time that worker reaches age 65.

It might take women time to build the confidence to overcome gender bias and negotiate for the salaries they deserve. Unfortunately, 15 years is too long to wait to start leveling the playing field.

Breaking With the Norms

Equality-minded negotiations professors can enable women to overcome this gap by teaching them how to negotiate effectively for higher salaries, workplace benefits, and other positive career outcomes as early as possible in their careers.

One way to achieve this goal is by engaging younger age groups. If we introduced core negotiations concepts and skills to high school students, they would hopefully be seasoned and poised self-advocates once their careers began in earnest.

To that end, in fall 2022, I am holding a workshop with a group of leadership-oriented female high-school students in northern Virginia. This will mark my first time teaching these skills to such a young crowd. If the experiment is successful, I hope to broaden this outreach to other local high schools.

When teaching female MBA students and early-career executive education participants, I try to call their attention to self-presentation habits that make women appear unsure or overly agreeable—such as choosing not to ask clarifying questions or using self-limiting statements like *“I may not be the best person to answer this, but....”* If we can teach young women to avoid these habits, as well as increase their confidence through strong data gathering and preparation, they will be more likely to advocate for what they want and deserve.

Imaginative exercises can be useful here, too. Research has shown that women tend to fight harder on behalf of others than they do for themselves. With this in mind, professors could ask each female student to complete a mock exercise in which she negotiates for a salary increase first for herself, then for a friend. When she compares her physical attitudes and word choices in each scenario, she could discover a wider range of self-presentation styles than she thought she had.

Professors also could ask women to imagine themselves as men while practicing negotiations. The aim is not to make women think they need to be more like men. Rather, the aim is to enlarge their possibilities of self-presentation as women, by inviting them to access the “masculine” parts of themselves that cultural bias encourages them to keep hidden.

By becoming stronger, more outwardly confident negotiators, early-career women will be more likely to achieve important career goals such as better salaries, assignments, and promotions—despite cultural bias. They also will be better able to manage conflict with greater confidence and comfort.

Seeking Opportunities to Negotiate

However, the approach described above only indirectly addresses the larger issue. If we do not go further, we are missing an opportunity to use negotiation to address—and eventually eliminate—the bias itself.

Though classically seen as a zero-sum game, negotiation is far more valuable when used as a method of collaborative problem solving. In this way, it can be a tool for evolving more equitable alternatives to biased norms and unlocking potential within women and other disadvantaged groups.

Let’s take a practical example. It’s well-known that women, pressured by cultural norms to be people-pleasers, are much more likely to take on “non-promotable tasks” (NPTs) in the workplace. In other words, when there’s a thankless chore to be done—whether it’s planning a birthday party, refilling coffee supplies, or taking notes during meetings—chances are the employee stuck with it will be a woman.

NPTs drain women’s most precious resource: time. But research shows that women are often afraid to turn down these tasks because they fear that ignoring the social expectation may hurt their careers or damage their likability.

Women are often afraid to turn down “non-promotable tasks” like refilling coffee supplies or taking notes during meetings because they fear that doing so may hurt their careers.

Too often, people will accept a disappointing status quo as fixed. As I write in [an August 2021 article](#) in the *Harvard Business Review*, we need to train students of all genders not to walk away from these unfair arrangements, but to view them as opportunities to negotiate.

In the case of annoying NPTs, women could negotiate shared responsibility by establishing simple rules in their offices, such as “Whoever celebrates a birthday is responsible for planning the next birthday party on the calendar.” By practicing their skills on the small stuff, women prepare themselves to negotiate areas that are more consequential for their careers, such as salary, task allocation, and leadership assignments.

Our domestic lives also are full of opportunities to negotiate fairer outcomes between men and women. For example, studies show that even women [who outearn their husbands](#) end up doing most of the housework and child-rearing. The infamous, exhausting “[second shift](#)” is arguably just as threatening to women’s career outcomes as gender bias at work, and it has been shown to be largely responsible for [the Great Resignation](#). Here, too, women and men can use their negotiation skills to find fairer solutions for all.

This journey can begin in the classroom—if we use the right tools. For example, Joy Schneer, a professor of management at the Norm Brodsky College of Business at Rider University in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, has developed a questionnaire that asks MBA students how they envision their future personal and professional lives. Most of the time, their answers reveal an interesting paradox: Many male students profess to believe in gender equality, yet they still expect their future wives to sacrifice career for family. Needless to say, the female MBAs have very different plans in mind.

The questionnaire makes the implicit perceptions held by men and women explicit. The ensuing class discussion tends to get real quite quickly. Negotiations professors could use similar questionnaires as lead-ins to role-playing exercises in which students are paired up as life partners who then must work out an equitable division of labor for their hypothetical household.

A Vital Life Skill

Effective negotiation skills are so much more than vehicles for self-advancement. They can provide a safe, productive framework for having difficult conversations—the ones we tend to put off the most, for obvious reasons. Avoiding these conversations may provide a person with an initial sense of relief, but over time, this avoidance could develop into deep resentment, burnout, and missed career opportunities.

In the case of gender equality, we have recently seen instances of backlash from men who feel attacked by movements like [#MeToo](#) or who might be thinking twice about mentoring women in the workplace. While not all men will embrace change, they are more likely to do so when it comes in the form of a respectful negotiation in which all parties have a voice.

There is no safer space to practice this vital life skill than in a negotiations classroom. Imaginative negotiations professors have an indispensable role to play in helping their business schools build a brighter and more equitable future for leadership.

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Authors



Suzanne de Janasz

Jointly Appointed Professor of Management and Conflict Resolution, School of Business and Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution, George Mason University

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