The Influence of Institutional Barriers and Personality on Gendered Occupational Choice

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Abstract

Men hold a disproportionate share of high-paying jobs, leading to an uneven distribution within the workforce. Possible rationalizations behind the formation of the occupational gap can be narrowed down to two factors: institutional barriers and personality differences. Accounts of prestigious organizations intentionally underrepresenting women in academic spheres, in addition to the persistence of societal norms can explain the observed distribution. Other perspectives insist that sex determines one's behavior in selecting a life-long occupation, where a woman's instinct to nurture and develop interpersonal connections leads them to choose fields that necessitate these characteristics. Compiling data from mainstream companies like Apple who seek to reduce the gap, we have determined that the implementation of gender quotas and DEI training can result in positive strides towards the elimination of the gap.

Introduction

For centuries, lucrative occupations have predominantly been held by men, while women have tended to dominate lower-paying professions. We refer to this uneven distribution among certain fields as the occupational gap. In this paper, we suppose two primary factors can explain this persistent trend: institutional barriers and biological predispositions. Institutions can be thought of as "rules of the game," where societal norms may impact an individual's behavior in a public environment. It can be the case that such cultural norms present greater constraints on working women in comparison to men. In contrast, biological predispositions can be regarded as one's evolutionary instincts that is determined by an individual's sex. Traditionalists espouse that one's biology plays a significant role in personality development, where it is simply the case that men are naturally attracted to occupations that women are not, and vice versa. Though both perspectives seem to clash, it is ultimately impossible to determine which factor is to blame in

the construction of the gap. Thus, we claim the gap is a result of both outlooks and must determine how to resolve the consequences of either. Overall, both institutional barriers and biological predispositions can be effectively diminished through the adoption of short-term gender quotas requiring more promotions go to women than men, paired with the implementation of diversity, inclusion and equity (DEI) training that not only presents individuals with practical behavioral solutions, but adopts the long-term use of nudge theory applications. This paper will essentially cover the rationalizations behind both claims that attempt to explain the gap between the sexes. We will conclude with sections that present feasible policy-oriented solutions suggesting ways the occupational gap can be narrowed in the future.

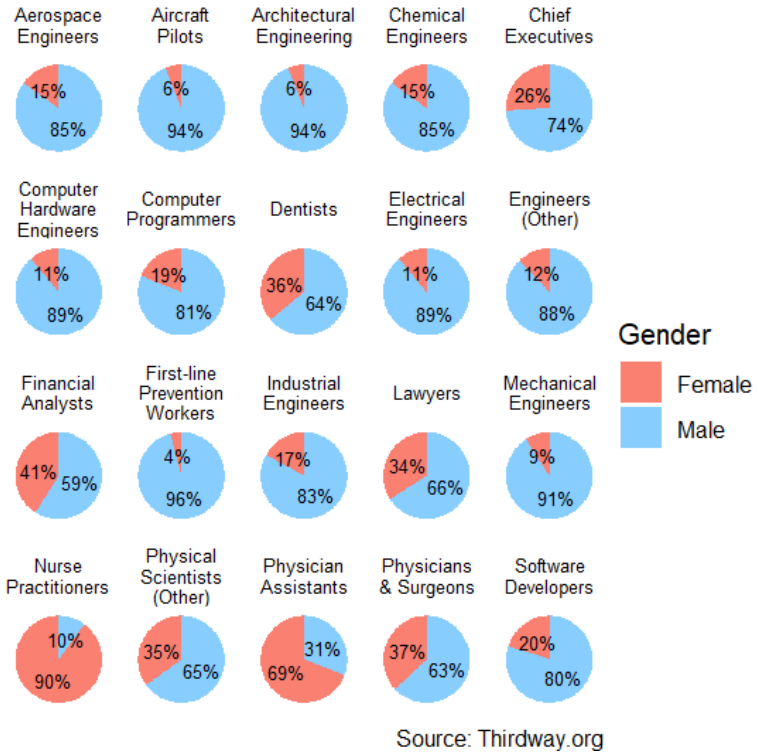
The Current Occupational Gap

Although men and women comprise approximately equal proportions of the U.S labor force, certain occupations continue to be predominated by one sex over the other. For example, engineering and computer science — two of the most lucrative STEM fields — remain heavily male dominated. Only 21% of engineering majors and 19% of computer science majors are women (AAUW, 2023). On the other hand, women dominate 23 out of 30 jobs in the bottom earnings decile, with overrepresentation in support roles, teaching, and caregiving (Liner, 2016).

In uncovering these unproportional statistics, many political activists, corporations and those who generally promote gender inclusivity in the workplace have questioned why such an occupational gap has formed in the first place. To suitably address this question, it may be insightful to identify similarities between the occupations that men skew more heavily towards, in contrast to those that women opt for. The immediate, and arguably the most noticeable pattern appears to be that men tend to dominate higher-paying occupations in comparison to women. Observe Figure 1, which displays occupations in the top earning decile in the U.S as of 2017 and

the percent of which each sex comprises that occupation.

Figure 1: Proportion of Male and Female Workers in Each Occupation, 2017



Source: Thirdway.org

It is strikingly apparent that men dominate the majority of the highest-paying professions in the U.S as of 2017, with women taking the lead in only two of the twenty occupations listed: nurse practitioners and veterinarians. As a result, one of the more nuanced explanations for the gap's creation is the existence of institutional barriers. Douglass (2016) defines institutions as rules of the game in a society, or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction. Note that institutional barriers can be divided into subcategories: informal and formal barriers. Informal barriers can be described as unwritten societal constraints that stem from the persistence of traditionalist values. In a Harvard Business Review Podcast (2021), Claudia (Sassine & Hajj, 2022) (Panades, 2023)Goldin recognizes these constraints fall heavily on people typically tasked with caring for kids, the house, etc. With Western societies historically adopting the expectation of women to stay devoted to housework and taking care of the children — and being subservient to their working husbands (Nicioli, 2024) informal barriers

are said to disturb women more often than men. On the other hand, formal barriers refer to policies and laws that discriminate against subordinate groups and promote generational patterns of inequality (Panades, 2023). Take for example, the Family and Medical Leave Act that does not ensure an individual is paid for time off work due to familial obligations. Rodgers (2015) declares this law is why there remains a profound misunderstanding in the workplace of the toxic level of expectations and stress under which women are working.

To even the playing field, organizations need to invest in creating clearer paths to leadership, so all women have opportunities to rise to the top ranks (Kimbrough, 2022). One way to accomplish this is to instill gender quotas, which merely require a certain number of women to be present in a workplace (He & Kaplan, 2017). Advocates of affirmative action insist gender quotas will help minimize the gap, where quotas can increase the overall level of fairness in our society and may lower the risk of gender discrimination (Donald, 2024). Though the application of incentive programs may seem like a step in the right direction for women in the workplace, there remains to be contentious debate regarding its effectiveness, or the necessity of them at all.

Those who question the application of gender quotas generally suppose another factor is at play in the gap's creation: personality differences. That is, the occupational gap can be explained through biological predispositions between the sexes. A biological predisposition can be defined as a natural or inherent inclination or tendency of an individual to develop certain traits, behaviors, or conditions due to their genetic makeup or physiological characteristics (MedlinePlus, 2020). For example, concerning personality traits, women generally score higher on agreeableness and neuroticism than men. In terms of interests, women prove to be more interested in people, while men in objects (Sassine & Hajj, 2022). From early adolescence, girls report less interest in math and science careers than boys do (Cummins, 2015), and among

children identified as mathematically precocious, girls were less likely than boys to pursue STEM careers as adults (Lubinski and Benbow 2006).

The two sides of the dilemma generally conflict in their ideas here: do men dominate higher-paying jobs because there are institutional barriers barring women from pursin (Donald, 2024; Liner, 2017; Harvard Business Review Idea Cast, 2021)g them, or are men simply biologically more inclined to work within those fields? If personality differences are a primary factor in the emergence of the occupational gap, how effective will gender quotas be for closing it? In addition, what is the extent of both institutional barriers and personality differences that are responsible for this imbalance, and how can we devise strategies to minimize the consequences of either?

Conflicting Perspectives: Barriers or Biology?

We seek to explain why the observed occupational gap between men and women persists across the United States. A generally nuanced explanation for the gap, espoused predominantly by feminist activists and left-wing commentators, is the preservation of institutional barriers. Institutional barriers are mostly established within male-dominated professions, or fields where women are effectively underrepresented. Haack (2014) discusses the disadvantages women face primarily in international organizations such as the United Nations, which have historically low participation rates among women. She goes on to declare that women in governance and leadership positions in the UN are curtailed by glass walls. With “glass walls” being used as an analogy for institutional barriers, she goes on to explain how women’s voices appear to be considered illegitimate and easily discounted. Furthermore, it has been reported that the UN’s intellectual projects have failed to note any contributions made by women. Thus, women can look to these situations and as a result, face little incentive to participate in high-level research. Additionally, published contributions to research is a respectable achievement that significantly

increases the number of job opportunities offered to a candidate. If alike incidents continue to take place in governance positions across the country, then men will gradually obtain the upper hand in acquiring higher-level, and higher-paying positions. Thus, it is plausible that such occurrences can deter women from governance pursuing positions and play a considerable role in the creation of the occupational gap.

Like governance positions, the rate at which women opt for managerial positions has also historically remained low. The United States Government Accountability Office estimated that only 42% of managers in the U.S were women, which was less than the percentage of women in non-management positions (about 48 percent) (Costa, 2022). According to a paper published by Frontiers in Psychology, the way women naturally tend to handle positions of power in contrast to men can be used to explain the underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions. Women adopt prosocial uses of power, meaning that they engage in emotional labor, or the need to tend to the emotional needs of other people. Though this may foster an environment that optimizes employee's well-being due to the amount of support and empathy, it also imposes significant costs on the power-holding woman. It may be the case that women find leadership positions exceptionally unappealing given the intense demand of emotional availability. If women are biologically predisposed to handle positions of power in more prosocial ways than men, then it is plausible that leadership roles are generally unattractive to women given the emotional drainage and lack of equitable reward (Cowgill & Vial, 2022). Additionally, adopting a prosocial use of power generally conflicts with traditional norms and gender roles. Research obtained over the course of 50+ years with over 19,000 participants from the University of Buffalo has shown that sensitivity and concern for others—stereotypically feminine traits—made someone less likely to be seen as a leader (Biddle, 2018). Thus, the occupational gap can also be

a result of the adherence of societal norms, where leadership roles are traditionally reserved for dominant, and assertive figures.

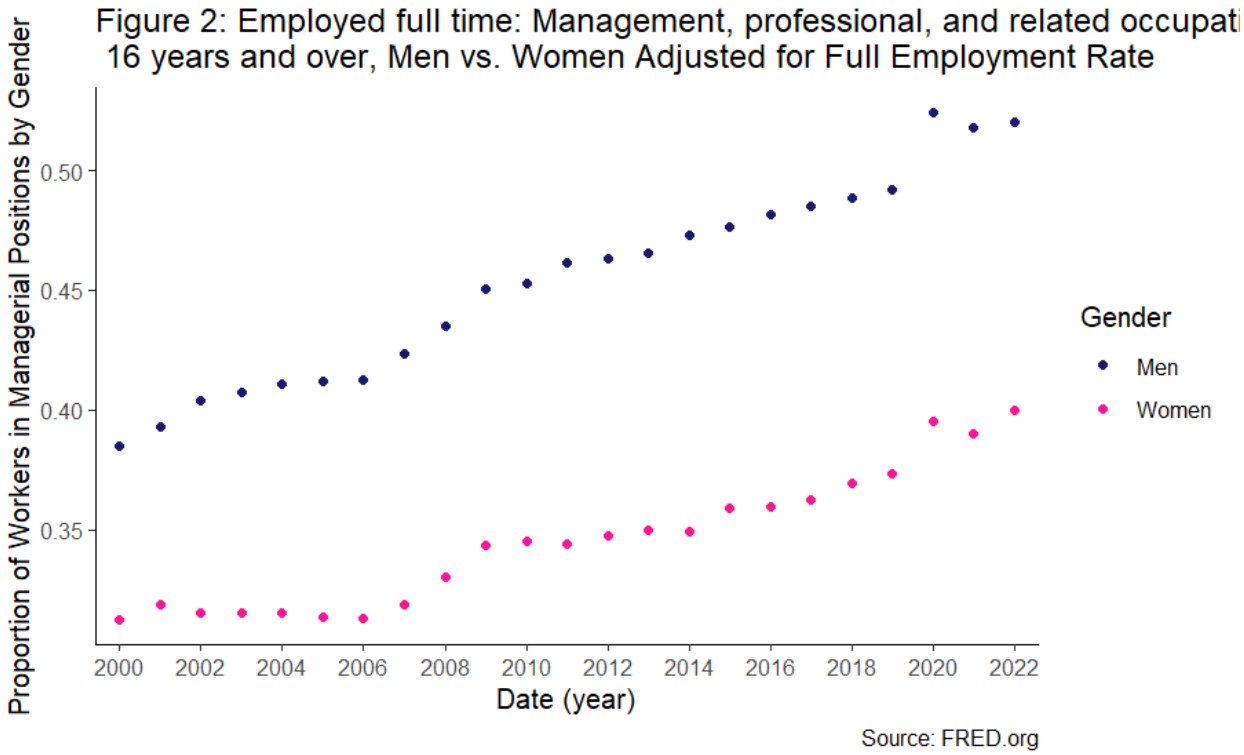
On the other hand, critics of social constructionism, traditionalists and other generally right-wing perspectives insist biological predispositions are to blame for the gap's creation. That is, personality differences between men and women can explain why the sexes opt for different occupations, and it happens to be that the occupations that attract men tend to be higher paying. Sex differences in both temperament and cognitive ability, which are products of evolutionary history, predispose men and women toward different occupations (Browne, 2006). If it is the case that one's genetics may incline them to pursue one occupation over another, then this begs two questions to ensure its validity: how exactly do men and women differ, and does this align with current occupational compositions? Firstly, modern day psychologists have concluded after decades of research that women prefer working with people much more than men, and men prefer working with things much more than women (Hedrih, 2022). This provides an explanation as to why men tend to dominate fields such as electrical or computer engineering, which require exceptional attention to mechanical "things," and little social content in comparison to female-dominated fields like childcare, cosmetology, or elementary school teaching. To highlight the impact of these evolutionary traits on personality differences, consider a study performed separately on male and female chimps, where each group was handed a stick, and their behavior observed. Results show females use sticks as dolls more than males do, often treating pieces of wood the way a mother chimp would care for an infant, whereas males often fought with sticks (Bower, 2011). These findings indicate the instinctive nature amongst women to nurture and see to one's well-being before anything else. Thus, one's biological predispositions may lead them to pursue an occupation that best aligns with their evolutionary instincts.

Notice the prior discussion of managerial roles and their attractiveness to women can be explained not only under the guise of institutional barriers, but also through the biological lens. To sum it up, we can explain the causes behind the managerial field's gender composition in two ways: women are naturally disincentivized from leadership roles due to biological predispositions to adopt prosocial power uses, or women are unable to advance in leadership positions due to the pressures of traditional norms making them appear unqualified. Deciding on which rationalization is correct is seemingly impossible to determine in most cases. Institutional barriers and biological predispositions are not mutually exclusive but interact in complex ways. It is pivotal to highlight once again that individuals will report on an anecdotal level. That is, one woman's experience will likely never be identical to the next. One individual may be the victim of explicit discrimination, while another may genuinely find such occupations unappealing in comparison to other fields. Thus, it could be more productive to recognize both factors instead of analyzing their impacts independently.

Women in Leadership Positions

To explain the occupational gap between the sexes, we find that particularly leadership positions can be rationalized using both perspectives. We have presented research studies that explain why women may be disincentivized from leadership roles, but to fully accept the rationale, we must identify if leadership roles currently align with what the research is espousing. That is, what is the extent, if there is one at all, of the occupational gap between men and women?

Observe Figure 2, which depicts the composition of full-time managerial employees for both men and women aged 16 and older from the year 2000 to 2022.



Note that the full employment rate for each gender was accounted for proportionally to extract the most precise results. (Proportions were calculated by dividing the number of workers aged 16+ working full-time in managerial positions, by the employment level in full-time positions, 16+ for each gender). Despite the gradual increase in the number of full-time managerial employees for both genders since 2000, there remains a considerable gap between the two. In the span of just over two decades, men have consistently dominated managerial positions in comparison to women roughly by a matter of 0.07, peaking at a difference of 1.6 in 2020! Though it may appear at first glance that women are making great strides in obtaining positions of authority, they remain significantly outshined by men. However, note that both the evolutionary and institutional barrier perspective clash with these findings. If evolutionary traits — assumingly remaining constant overtime—were to blame, why do we see a gradual increase in employment for these jobs? Also, if institutional were the culprit, were there more barriers for

women in 2000 than in 2022? A solution to address both questions could be the implementation of gender quotas, which have become an increasingly popular method of addressing the legislative underrepresentation of women (Jones & Navia, 1999). If gender quotas are effective in attracting women to the workforce, the benefits they reap out of the occupation may be greater than the costs of how unappealing the job may be to them. Additionally, gender quotas could effectively dismantle various systems of institutional barriers by ridding of male-dominated environments. Thus, though the occupational gap in male-dominated fields like managerial positions remains significant due to personality differences and institutional barriers, the gradual increase in the employment of either gender can possibly be explained by the presence (or lack thereof) of effective gender quotas.

The Efficacy of Gender Quotas and DEI Training

I. The Success of Gender Quotas May be Short-Lived

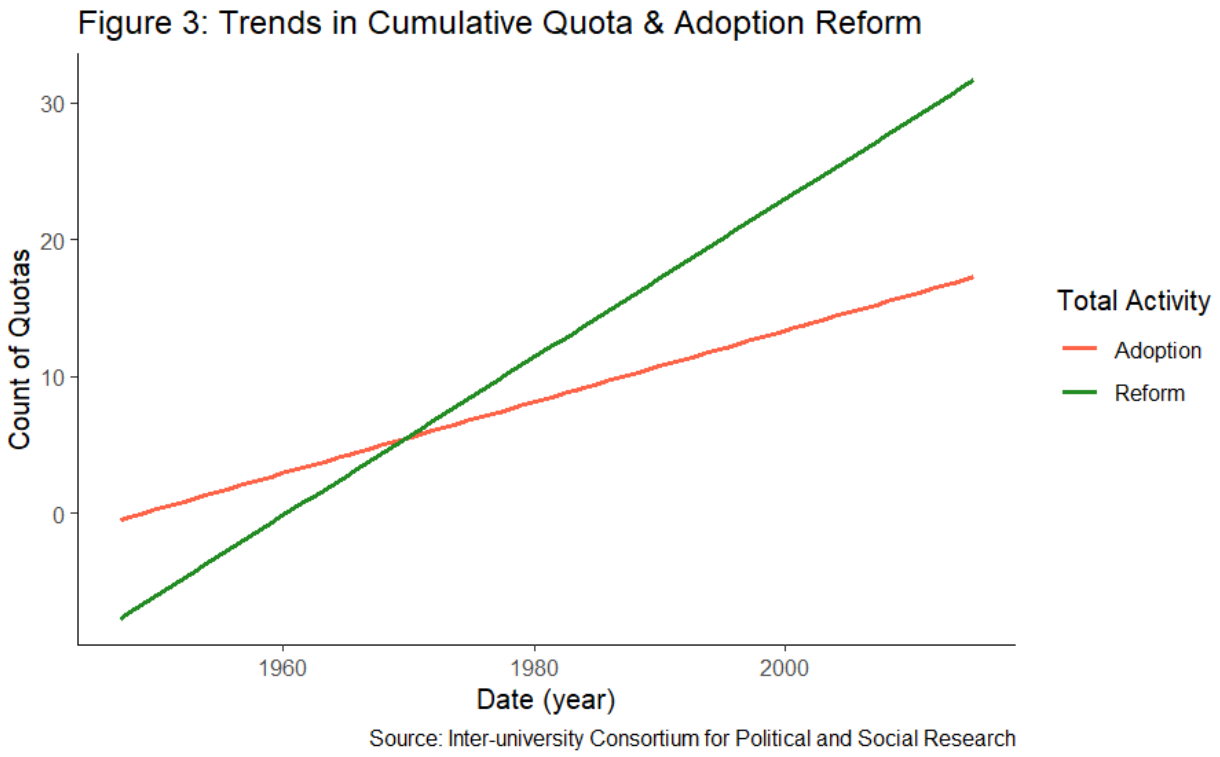
Those who espouse the existence of institutional barriers in contemporary society have collectively established one effective solution to the occupational gap: the implementation of gender quotas. Gender quotas are arguably one of the most popularized and widely adopted measures to address the issue of gender inequality in the workplace. Some of the leading and most influential companies are beginning to champion for gender inclusivity in male-dominated professions. For example, Apple openly recognizes on a global level—like the trend follows in the U.S—that men significantly outshine women in the tech industry with 75.1% of all tech positions afforded to men. As a result, Apple has proudly announced an increased rate of hiring more women and minorities. Furthermore, Apple committed to Diversity Network Associations (DNA) that offers resources to help minorities develop strategy, coordinate events, and connect with leadership (Apple, 2024). In response, proponents of gender quotas consider such steps as

minor improvements in equality, where quotas for women help reverse sexism. They may seem radical, but they are no less radical than resigning ourselves to permanent inequality (Rosenblum, 2019). To complement this stance, research suggests that by introducing time-limited quotas—requiring that the majority of promotions go to women, quotas changed the number of women at upper levels of the corporate hierarchy in the short term, and in turn decreased the gender biases against women rising through the company ranks (Nordell, 2024). That is, if sex discrimination thrives in male-dominated environments, then implementing quotas that effectively make it impossible for men to outnumber women in the workplace will limit the frequency of gender biases.

However, note that such quotas must be time-limited, otherwise women will end up completely dominating the corporate hierarchy. As a result, critics of gender quotas argue that even if quotas do work, it will only be a matter of time before disparities return. As Nordell (2024) puts it, when societal biases were still a persistent force, disparities eventually returned, and the impact of the intervention was short-lived. Thus, though it may be the case that gender quotas can temporarily lessen accounts of sex discrimination, what can corporations do to ensure that biases are put to bed for the long-term?

II. What Metrics Make for an Effective Quota?

The debate regarding the efficacy of quotas is especially contentious because researchers disagree on the metrics that make for an effective quota. For one, Hughes (2019) theorizes an effective quota is a quota with institutional features that should influence numeric legislative representation. With this approach, compiled data from various countries across the globe has depicted a questionable trend for the adoption and reformation of gender quotas observed in Figure 3.



One striking observation is that upon the adoption of quotas, reform almost immediately followed—and at a far greater rate. This graph demonstrates that implementing quotas has grown as an increasingly popular solution to addressing gender inequalities. However, since the number of reforms to current quotas are far greater than the adoption rate, this suggests that quotas in the long run may incur unexpected costs that necessitate the reforms.

III. Diversity Training in the Long Run

If the persistence of societal biases contributes to the short-lived effectiveness of gender quotas, perhaps a policy that addresses these biases will help ensure that sex discrimination is regulated in the long run. This question prompted some of the most influential companies to require diversity training for their employees. Namely, companies like General Mills, Verizon Communications, and Mastercard are just a few prime examples of those prioritizing diversity training initiatives (Peachman, 2024). Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) development

activities and training programs are meant to increase employees' awareness of inequality and bias, and influence how they behave towards each other (ATD, 2024). Some types of DEI training include unconscious bias (UB) training, allyship training, and bystander communication training. For one, UB training does more than increase awareness of bias and its impact. It teaches attendees to manage their biases, change their behavior, and track their progress (Gino & Coffman, 2021). However, the few sociologists that have conducted research on the effectiveness of prejudice reduction strategies—like DEI training—claim that diversity training is likely the most expensive, and least effective, diversity program around (Dobbin & Kalev, 2018). Dobbin and Kalev (2018) have found that short-term educational interventions in general do not change people, while several other studies find that asking people to suppress stereotypes tends to reinforce them. It seems conventional UB training falls short in many ways, but is there room for reformation? Further analysis of conventional DEI practices suggests that only 10% of training programs gave attendees strategies for reducing bias. This is akin to a weight-loss program telling participants to step on a scale and leaving it at that. Thus, a more successful UB model may be one that gives individuals concrete tools to change their behavior. In one longitudinal study, Delvine (2017) finds that participants were more likely to report noticing bias and to label it as wrong, and, two years later, were more likely to confront bias in others. Therefore, it appears that structural changes to conventional forms of DEI training have long-lasting effects on its influence.

IV. Nudge Theory

DEI training has produced long-lasting positive effects when participants are given explicit ways to tackle their unconscious biases. However, the ability for companies to instill DEI training in the long run, as opposed to one or two short lectures per year is extremely costly. For reference, a single instructor-led training session can cost anywhere between $500 to

$10,000 (The Nova Collective, 2024). Are companies—especially smaller, and less developed ones—truly expected to keep up with these expenditures indefinitely? It seems as if the solution lies within a theory constructed by Richard Thaler, a professor of economics and behavioral science at the University of Chicago. Thaler's (2017) nudge theory suggests that you can positively change other people's behavior (or your own) by using motivational techniques most people respond to – such as the need to fit in with social norms. In short, by implementing small motivational reminders, individuals are observed to adopt content more effectively, especially over long periods of time. Whether it be with the help of eLearning modules—which will be less costly than reserving in-person lectures—or daily inspirational emails, it is clear that consistent reminders can functionally reshape the way DEI is implemented.

V. Resolving the Gap in the Long-Term

Short-term gender quotas that require more promotions to be offered to women than men in male-dominated professions in congruence with DEI trainings that adopt nudge-theory measures can effectively narrow the occupational gap in the most cost-efficient way. For DEI training to have impacts in the long-term, they must offer explicit behavioral techniques to diminish one's unconscious biases.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, this paper has discussed two primary factors that contribute to the creation and persistence of the occupational gap between men and women. We offer the idea that both institutional barriers and personality differences can explain why men consistently dominate high-paying professions. First, institutional barriers actively disincentivize women from pursuing positions historically dominated by men as a result of societal norms. Second, personality differences can clarify why some occupations may seem unattractive to women, in contrast in

men. Thus, we seek to answer the question that if the gap is a result of both institutional barriers and biological predispositions to some extent, what can companies do to resolve the uneven distribution? Research suggests that the application of short-term gender quotas in congruence with DEI trainings executed with nudge theory techniques can ultimately narrow the occupational gap. My reservations regarding the efficacy of gender quotas were initially pessimistic. However, studies examining their effects in the short-run exhibit promising results for women like me, pursuing professions that are male-dominated.

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