

MORE CHANGE

# Deconstruct the Glass Ceiling

## A new social campaign sheds light on gender bias.

**L**et's say that you and a friend acquire a position for your dream job. You have the same abilities, skill set, speaking ability, and people like you both. You go out and celebrate this achievement, and the topic of your pay comes up. But here's where you find out that the two of you are different—while they're making \$46,000 a year, you're only being paid \$35,420.

This is the reality for most women in America. For the same job, the national average estimates that women are paid 77 cents for every dollar their male colleagues receive. In some states, this can be as low as 69 cents per dollar.

### The Gender Gap

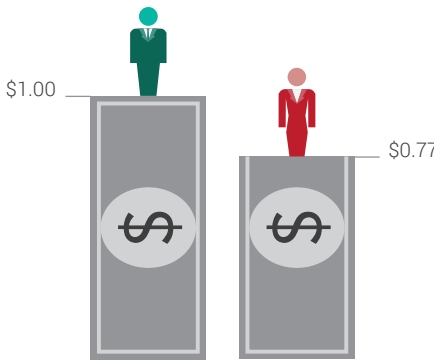
What is this discrepancy? It's called the "gender gap," the glass ceiling that keeps women from achieving the more prestigious positions that men have held for centuries. It's been holding women back since the agricultural revolution in the 17th century. It's the unconscious bias that society holds toward women, placing them into stereotypical roles and pushing them out of more prominent positions of leadership and power. Just having a male name increases your chances of getting the job. On the other hand, your chances are reduced by 70% if you're a mother.<sup>1</sup> Everyone has these unconscious biases, both men and women.

This isn't to say that there hasn't been any progress for women in the workplace. Women have come a long way since the 1600s in both education and role in the workforce. A report released by the White House clearly highlights the positive trends: from 2007–2008, women made up 57% of total undergraduate enrollment, constituting the same percentage of undergraduate degrees conferred. In 2011, women accounted for at least 50% of all workers within several industries: financial activities, education and health services, and leisure and hospitality.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, all of this progress still doesn't translate to equal pay or recognition in the professional world. Only 4.2% of Fortune 500 CEOs are women. And we can't help but ask, why? The millennial generation has legalized marijuana, pushed for gay rights, and elected an African American president all in the name of progress. It's the perfect time to push for gender equality. The Deconstruct the Glass Ceiling Campaign aims to bring the gender gap into the spotlight, raising awareness and exposing the roots of gender bias. We want everyone to come together, men and women, to learn to recognize the unconscious bias holding back our friends, mothers, sisters, and daughters.

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### The Root of the Problem

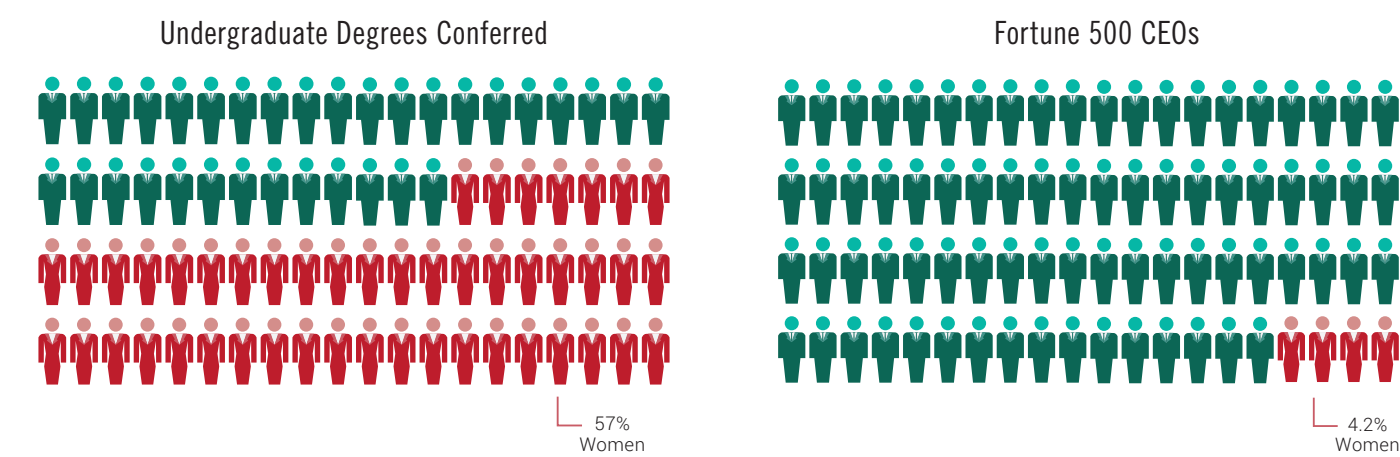
But why are women less recognized in the workplace? Recent studies have shown that women underestimate their own abilities and performance, while men will overestimate both even when the quality of their performance does not differ. Despite positive changes in the workforce for women, they still have less confidence in their abilities than men—a trait that holds them back from expressing opinions, proposing solutions, and negotiating salaries. By contrast, men will take bigger risks, reaching for their goals even when they aren't completely prepared. Women, who are more likely to be burdened with perfectionism, will only attempt to complete a goal when they are more than qualified and prepared.

This develops in the formative years of elementary school, where young girls are rewarded for being neat, obedient, and well-behaved. During this time, girls are learning to achieve success and approval through quiet means while boys are starting fights and getting scolded. This process teaches boys to shrug off their failures and move on, making them resilient to their mistakes, lessons that girls aren't equally exposed to. By the time they come into adulthood, women will see their mistakes as a reflection of their character, while men will view it as a lack of effort on their part.<sup>3</sup>

### Some Perspective

The gender gap today is a relic of the past—it's outdated, and it's time to implement a new social standard. The work force has been male dominated since its conception. Glenda Drew, an associate professor of Visual Communication who teaches several coding classes at UC Davis, remarks that, "We live in a patriarchal society, it's deeply rooted in our history that women couldn't own land and therefore, all the factory owners were men. Men controlled production."

Some commentators are out there saying that the pay gap doesn't even exist. They say it's a myth. But it's not a myth. It's math.



Nicholas Palomares, a professor at UC Davis who examines the communication differences between men and women as the source of male and female stereotypes, comments that the workforce has “largely for decades [been] a very masculine domain and at some points only exclusively men.” He cites the late entry of women into the labor force as a main factor. “People tend to prefer simplicity in a lot of ways and also [...] there’s a preference for people to prefer symmetry.” The symmetry he’s referring to is the idea that men are strong and women are weak; men are unemotional and women are emotional. This complementary system puts men and women at disadvantage, splitting them into categories with exact definitions of how they should behave.

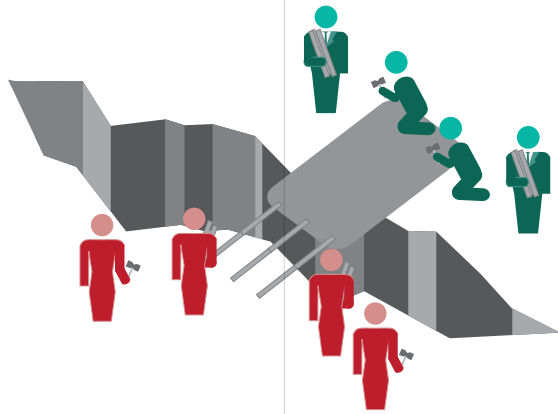
As for his work environment, Professor Palomeras hasn’t witnessed anything within his department. “Academia is different in that regard, especially at the UC level where [...] it’s not perfectly equitable but [...] it’s a bit more sensitive to those issues and [...] more transparent.” As for Professor Drew, she finds that there is gender bias present, but agrees that it’s much more subtle than other work environments. However, she has run into a few problems as a female professor teaching code— “I often find that male students in my class have an issue with it [...] not always, but it will happen to me at least once a quarter. [...] It’s such a boys

field [...] In general, there’s an underlying level of mistrust like ‘How can I be teaching boys about code?’”

Another professor who would rather remain anonymous also had difficulty addressing an incident involving male faculty, “The situation was a problem, but the person [in charge] wasn’t going to see it as a problem because it was three women basically complaining about it. So [...] the women in this position [...] have to spend more of their time to fight their problem than any man would have to do at that time.” This isn’t uncommon in the workplace; despite policies addressing job security, wage discrimination, or sexual harassment, women will often end up having to go to court before they can get anything to change.<sup>3</sup>

**Looking Toward the Future**

Luckily, there’s a lot we as a society can do to avoid gender bias. Firstly and most importantly, recognizing the bias. Professor Palomares advises, “With most biases, as soon as you become aware of it and you don’t just take it for granted or abide by it unknowingly, [...] you’re more likely to avoid the bias.” Secondly, education. If we can start exposing unconscious gender bias earlier, we can stop it earlier. Professor Drew agrees, “We’ve made so much progress as a society [...] that’s how you close the gender



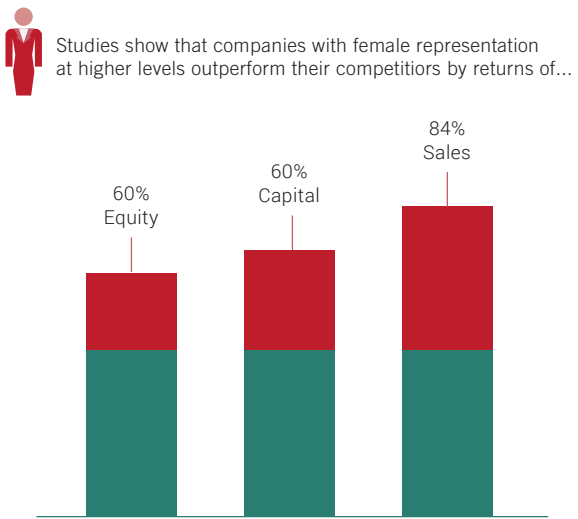
gap, and that’s through education. [...] You do have to know your statistics sometimes but how you say them and use them, you can do it tactfully.” Most women go through their careers not realizing how much more their male colleagues are being paid. Putting out statistics like earning 77 cents to a dollar is just the beginning of exposing gender bias.

Professor Palomares has more specific advice for men, “Don’t expect women to be timid or docile or typical female [...] There’s all sorts of types of people and just because you’re male doesn’t mean you’re going to be strong and assertive and domineering and things that are part of masculinity.” Femininity is associated with being quiet and obedient, something that most career-driven women aren’t. Women who assert themselves risk being disliked simply for speaking up or giving unsolicited opinions, something that men do all the time in the workplace without consequence. When it comes down to it, assertive women risk having their very character called into question, not just their abilities or competence. Men who aren’t threatened by such women help promote gender equality by allowing women to freely advance through their career without judgment.

Of course, it’s not easy to eliminate this fear of assertive women. It’s very easy to see the gender gap as a benefit for men, as Professor Palomares explains: “A problem with actually encouraging men to address the bias in certain ways because in a sense it could be received as them actually doing themselves a disservice rather than keeping the status quo and benefiting from it [...] it’s important to for men to be aware that just because you’re female doesn’t mean you’re necessarily going to fall into the expectations of femininity.” But let’s be honest here; granting women equal pay and representation does not take away any benefits from men. In fact, studies by Catalyst have proven that companies with female representation at higher levels outperformed those with less female representation by 84% on return on sales, 60% on return on invested capital, and 46% on return on equity.<sup>1</sup> With those kinds of numbers, we should be scrambling to get women on our executive boards.

For women, there’s also many things they can do to keep themselves from falling victim to gender inequality. Professor Drew advises women to arm themselves with knowledge and be confident in themselves— “know that there’s a whole movement behind you to make you strong when you’re feeling weak and knowing how to access that.” Professor Palomares agrees, “It’s important in particular for [women] to be aware of it, for them to try to behave in a way that doesn’t allow them to [...] succumb to it.” He also encourages women to negotiate their pay, something that often doesn’t cross their minds.

The movement toward gender equality has been getting stronger; there’s a whole community behind it with zines, magazines, blogs, and other publications pushing for the recognition of the glass ceiling that has been in place for too long. Magazines such as *Bust* and *Bitch* bring the spotlight directly on the advances that women are making in society,



boasting a readership of upwards of 80,000. Books such as *Lean In* by Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg (of the popular TED Talk “Why We Have Too Few Women Leaders”) share personal stories while offering practical advice to help women address unfair gender differences.<sup>4</sup> There’s a whole network of support for this movement, and it’s growing every day.

Even President Obama has spotlighted the gender gap. During a ceremony celebrating National Equal Pay Day on April 7, 2014, he addressed the issue, “Some commentators are out there saying that the pay gap doesn’t even exist. They say it’s a myth. But it’s not a myth. It’s math.”<sup>5</sup> He’s also recently signed two executive orders addressing the issue, one preventing federal contractors from retaliating against employees who discuss their pay with each other. (Pay secrecy is one of the easiest ways to keep women in the dark about the pay discrepancy.) The other directs the Labor Department to adopt rules requiring federal contractors to provide compensation data based on sex and race, so that companies can’t hide their inequitable practices. But these are just the small steps. As always in politics, there are many people who oppose the changes and regulations regarding wages.

As long as unconscious bias persists in our society, the gender gap will also persist. It’s time for women to be as recognized and distinguished as their male colleagues; it’s time for men and women to push for equality. We work best when we work together, and that’s all we’re really hoping for here—the chance to work together for a better future. ●

Sources

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