

The impact of gender composition in teams on women's desire to lead

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In Sweden today, almost as many women as men participate in the labor force and more women than men obtain a university degree. However, the gender wage gap persists. An important explanation for the remaining wage difference between men and women is that women are over-represented in lower-paid industries and under-represented in higher positions in firms. Why do so few women reach the top to instead persistently choose to pursue educations and career trajectories with a lower earnings potential?

In this research project, we explore whether male-dominated environments in and of themselves may exacerbate gender gaps in terms of career progression. In particular, we ask whether being surrounded by many men has a negative effect on women’s desire to take on a leading role. Since men are more likely to advance to leading positions, the share of women in organizations tends to be lower at higher levels of organizational hierarchies. If women are adversely affected by being in the minority, this may turn into a self-perpetuating cycle whereby women become reluctant to enter, as well as prone to leave, male-dominated high-level positions.

We explore this issue in an experiment in which 580 participants were randomly assigned to work in either male-majority teams (consisting of 3 men and 1 woman) or female-majority teams (consisting of 3 women and 1 man). First, the participants solved a task individually. This initial performance offers a measure of individual ability. Next, the participants were randomly allocated to teams. The members of each team sat together in a separate room for 10 minutes to discuss the task and come up with a joint solution. After this, each team elected a leader. The leader was to decide, after receiving input from the other team members, on a joint team solution for another task. Before the election, all team members were required to indicate their desire to lead the group in the upcoming task on a scale from 1

to 10, where 10 indicated the highest possible desire to lead and 1 the lowest. The team members then ranked all other group members based on who they wanted as the team leader. The two team members who indicated the highest desire to lead became candidates in an election in which the candidate ranked the highest became the team leader.

We find a substantial and significant gender gap in terms of desire to lead. On average, women’s desire to be team leader is 0.56 standard deviations lower than that of men. The modal response for men is 10, thus indicating the highest possible desire to lead, while the modal response for women is 1, thus indicating the opposite.

Further, participants are significantly less willing to become leaders in male-majority teams than in female-majority teams, and this effect is primarily driven by women. On average, the stated desire to lead among women in male-majority teams is 0.46 standard deviations lower than that of women in female-majority teams. We thus find support for our hypothesis that women are less willing to lead male-majority teams than female-majority ones.

Neither the gender gap in terms of desire to lead nor the negative impact of male-majority teams on women’s desire to lead can be explained by a gender gap in performance. In other words, women are not less willing to lead in general, or in male-majority teams, because they perform worse on the task at hand. However, women, and in particular women in male-majority teams, believe that they perform worse relative to the other team members. In addition, they have less of an impact on the team’s decision-making process, are more swayed by others in the team discussion, and anticipate and receive less electoral support. Our analysis indicates that among these factors, low confidence regarding relative performance and low expectations regarding electoral support represent particularly important drivers for both the gender gap in terms of desire to

lead and the impact of male-majority teams on women's leadership motivation.

Our results indicate that a strong gender imbalance in the composition of a team or a workplace is not just a normative problem. In fact, it may influence individual outcomes and perceptions, how we allocate work tasks, recognize competence, and,

ultimately, team productivity. Our results thus confirm that existing structures may, in themselves, constitute a barrier to women's careers and that a strong focus on individual-level solutions may not appropriately address the remaining gender gaps in the labor market.

