The wage premium for working long hours has helped lead to the stagnation of the gender wage gap.

Why has the wage gap between men and women remained stubbornly persistent in recent decades? Using new research, **Youngjoo Cha** *argues that a major reason may be the rise of compensation for working long hours, or 'overworking'. She writes that while in the 1970s, workers who put in more than 50 hours per work experienced a per-hour wage penalty, by the end of the 2000s, overworkers earned about 6 percent more per hour than their full-time counterparts, and that the persistence of traditional gender roles means that men tend to overwork more than women. If the relative hourly wages for overwork had stayed constant over the last three decades, the gender gap in wages would be about 10 percent smaller than it is today.*

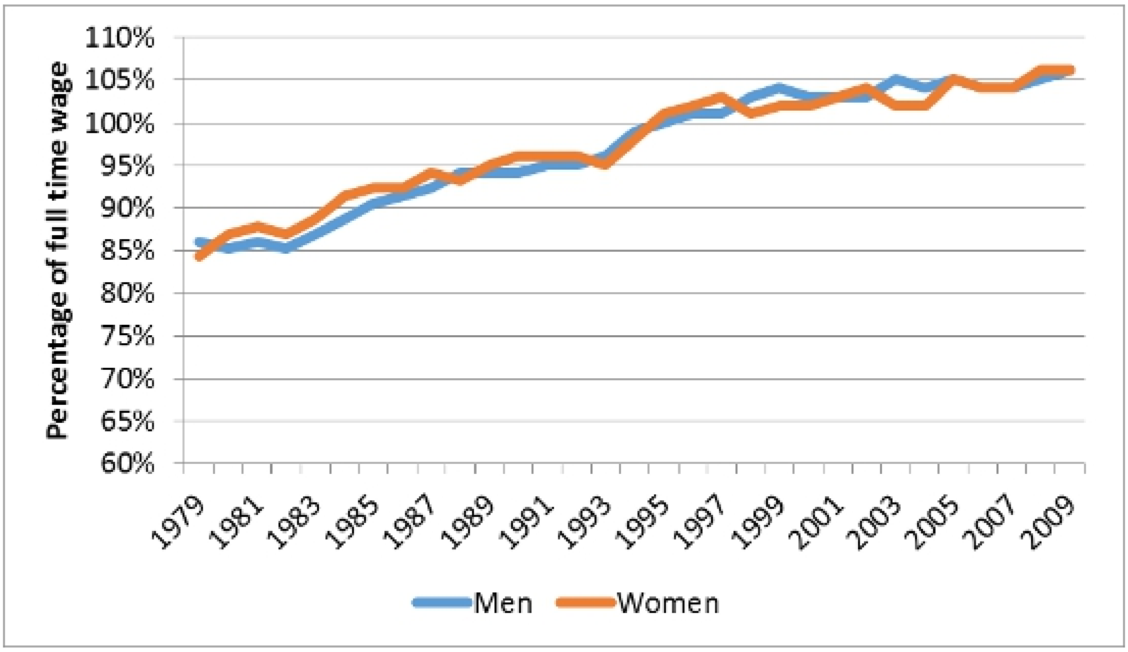
Over the past three decades, scholars have noted that the pace of closing the gender gap in wages in the United States has slowed. Why has the gap between men and women's wages been so persistent? In new research, Kim A. Weeden and I show that the gender wage gap in the United States has stagnated in part due to increases in the duration of the typical work week and in the compensation of long work hours.

The proportion of people who work long hours has increased over the past several decades. It is now fairly common to hear stories of investment bankers on Wall Street working 80 hours per week, and many professionals, such as lawyers, doctors, or high-level managers work extremely long hours. Our data shows that 13 percent of men and 3 percent of women worked 50 hours or more per week in early 1980s, but the percentage increased to 19 percent for men and 7 percent for women by 2000, when the number peaked. Interestingly, while the proportion of "overworkers" (defined as weekly hours of 50 or more) increased through the mid-2000s for both men and women, the trend was roughly parallel, meaning that the gender gap in overwork has remained remarkably constant over the past three decades.

Not only did the proportion of those who "overwork" increased, financial rewards for working long hours have also increased. People who work long hours are often praised and well-recognized by colleagues, bosses, or their clients, and those who don't put in long hours at work, by contrast, are viewed less productive, less serious about their career, or less loyal to their employers.

Figure 1 shows that overworkers' wages increased at a sharper rate than regular full-time workers between 1979 and 2009. In the 1970s, workers who put in 50 or more hours per week earned *less* per hour of labor than comparably educated and experienced workers who *only* worked full time. This is not surprising if you think about salaried workers, who are not directly paid for overtime: those who are putting in longer hours at the same salary level than are their coworker will be paid less per hour. What is surprising is, though, that by the mid-1990s, overworkers started earning *more* per hour than their full-time counterparts, and that this wage premium for overwork has continued to grow since then. By the end of the 2000s, overworkers earned about 6 percent more per hour than their full-time counterparts. This means that overworkers may be rewarded indirectly—Working long hours puts them at the head of the line for a promotion or faster wage growth over time.

Figure 1 – Adjusted Mean Hourly Wages of Overworkers as a Proportion of Full-Time Workers' Wages

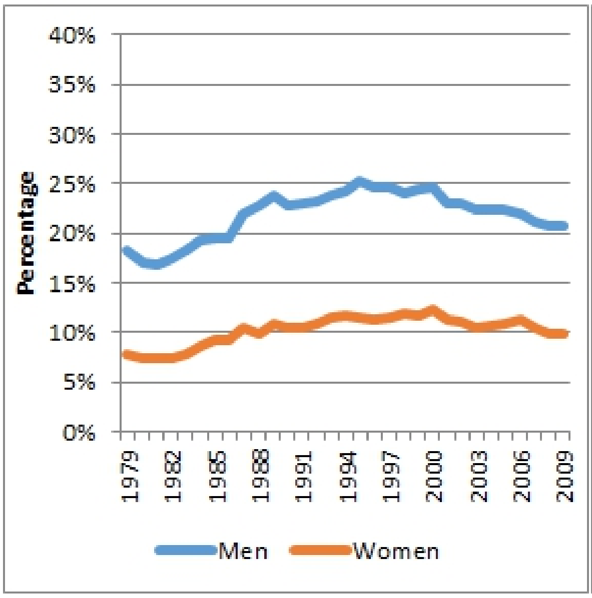


This increase in financial compensations for overwork plays a key role in stagnating the gender wage gap trend. In a counterfactual world where men and women are equally likely to put in long work hours, this won't affect the gender gap in wages. However, we know that this counterfactual scenario doesn't hold. In most societies, women's work hours are more limited because they usually have more childcare responsibilities or are spending more time on housework. As a result, there is a consistently large gender gap in who gets to work long hours. Because there are more men than women among overworkers, the increasing compensation for overwork raised men's wages as a group more than women's wages and widened the gender gap in wages.

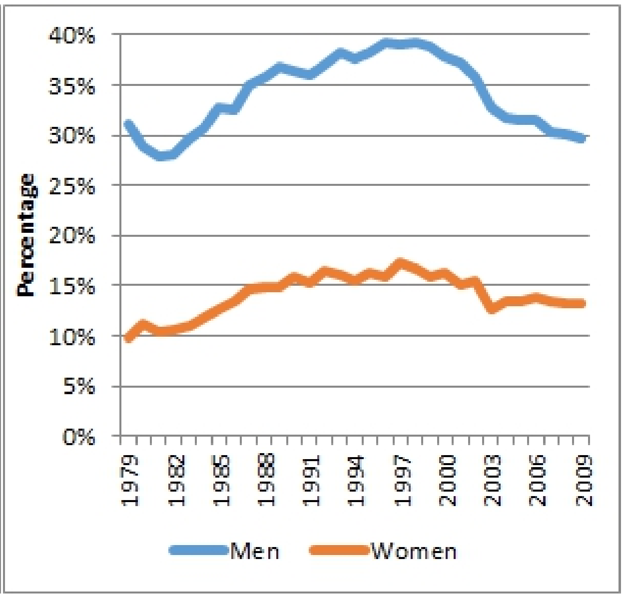
Our analysis shows that between 1979 and 2007 (the last year of data prior to the recession), if the relative hourly wages for overwork had stayed constant between 1979 and 2007, the gender gap in wages would be about 10 percent smaller than it is today. The rising relative hourly wages for overworkers on the gender wage gap trend was in fact large enough to essentially offset the pay equalizing effect of women's gain in educational attainment. This means that the gender wage gap didn't narrow as much as you might expect if gender differences in education and labor force experience alone affected it.

The overwork effect was especially pronounced in professional and managerial occupations. These occupations are an example of what Lewis Coser calls "greedy institutions", which require undivided attention, loyalty, and time commitments from their members, and the norm of overwork is deeply embedded in organizational practices and occupational cultures. Indeed, Figure 2 shows that the takeoff in overwork was more pronounced in these occupations. By the end of the 1990s, 18 and 8 percent of professional men and women, and close to 40% and 10% of managerial men and women worked 50 hours or more per week, compared to 10 and 3 percent in other occupations. The size of the gender gap in overwork is also the greatest in managerial occupations, and the smallest in "other" occupation group.

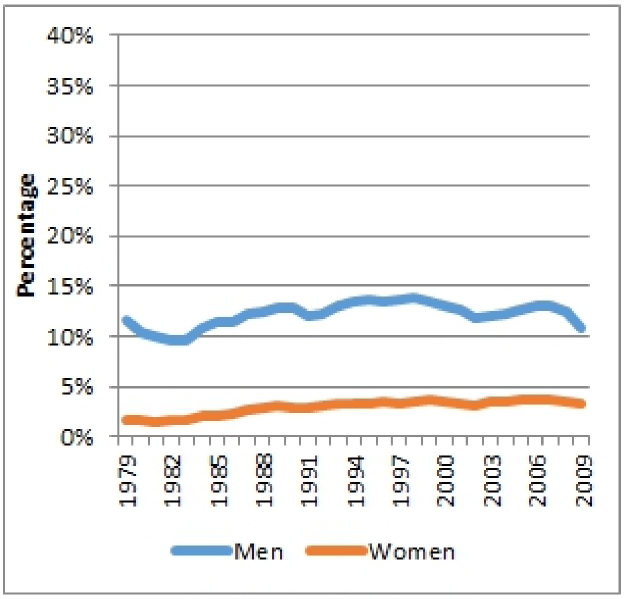
Figure 2 – Proportion of Men and Women Who Worked 50 Hours or More by Occupation Group



(a) Professional



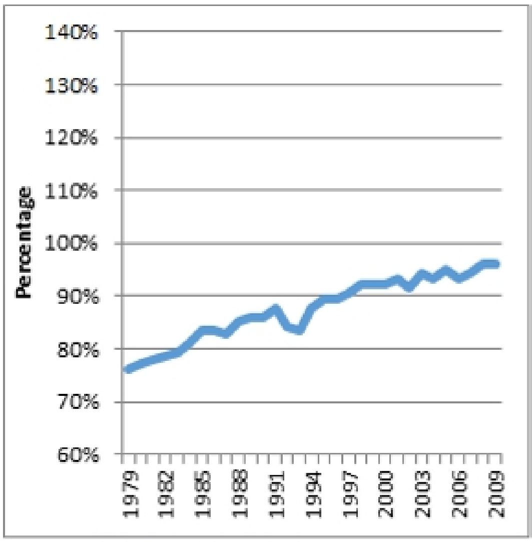
(b) Managerial



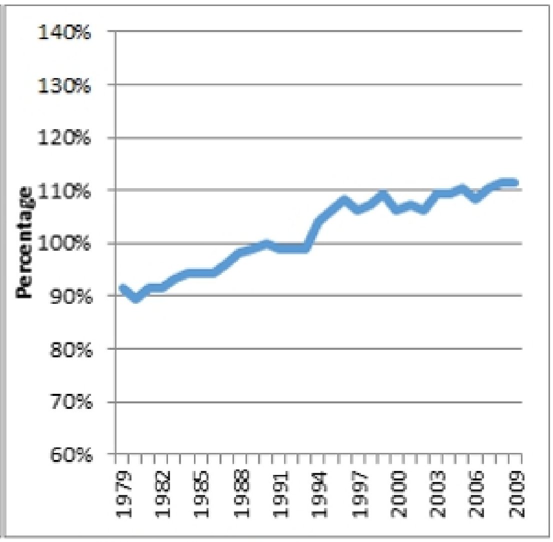
(c) Other occupations

The increase in hourly wages for overworkers relative to those who work standard full-time hours is also more pronounced in professional and managerial occupations. Figure 3 shows that hourly wages for overworkers were lower than hourly wages for full-time workers in all three occupation groups in the early 1980s, with the overwork wage *penalty* especially pronounced in the professions and management. This wage penalty for overwork is not surprising, given that professionals and managers are typically salaried but work the longest hours. What is surprising is the astonishing growth in relative hourly wages for overwork in these occupations during this time. By 2009, professionals' wage penalty for overwork decreased to 4 percent from 24 percent in 1979, and overworking managers earned 11 percent *more* than their full-time counterparts by 2009, up from a 9 percent wage penalty in 1979.

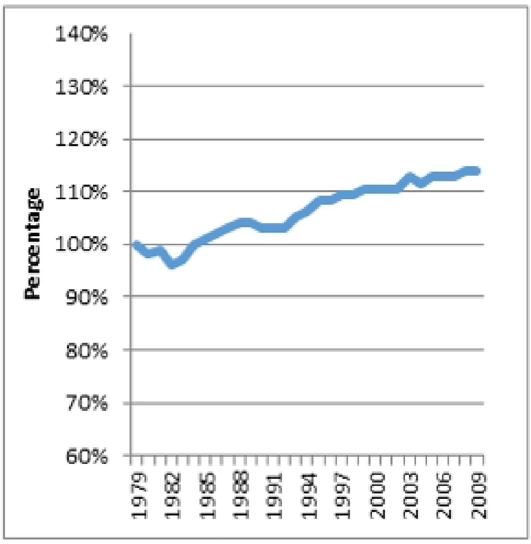
Figure 3 - Adjusted Mean of Overworkers' Hourly Wages as a Proportion of Full-Time Workers' Wages, by Occupation Group



(a) Professional



(b) Managerial



(c) Other occupations

This sharp rising hourly wages for overwork relative to full-time work in professional and managerial occupations, combined with the greater prevalence of overwork and the particularly large gender gaps in overwork, exacerbated the gender wage gap more in these occupations than in other occupations. If compensations for overwork had remained constant, the gender gap in wages would have declined by 20 percent percent more in managerial occupations and 30 percent more in professional occupations, compared to 10 percent in other occupations, than it actually did between 1979 and 2007.

All these findings suggest that overwork, particularly rising wage returns to overwork, is an important source that slowed the convergence in the gender wage gap over the past 30 years. To be sure, there have been many pay-equalizing factors, such as women's rising educational attainment and increase in women's continuous work experience. Unfortunately, the effect of these pay-equalizing factors have been offset by practices and norms that encourage overwork culture in the workplace and slowed the progress towards closing the gender wage gap.

This article is based on the forthcoming paper 'Overwork and the Slow Convergence in the Gender Gap in Wages in in the June issue of the American Sociological Review.

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About the author

Youngjoo Cha - *Indiana University*

Youngjoo Cha is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Indiana University. Her research interests are in gender, labor markets, and inequality. Her current projects examine the effects of the rising “overwork” norm on many forms of gender inequalities, and explore how characteristics of the changing economic environment (e.g., increased job mobility and flexible work arrangements) affect labor market inequality between men and women.