

Job satisfaction differs between men and women after they're promoted to managers



The existence of a persistent gender gap in managerial representation, especially in upper-management positions, is widely [documented](#) and understanding its causes remains an important endeavour for researchers and policy makers in developed economies.

Why does the gender gap in high-level management persist? And what could organisations do to address this challenge?

Existing explanations typically focus on two aspects. Some argue that the main culprits are employers' hiring, training and promotion practices that systematically favour men over women. Others propose that the gender gap arises from individuals' career choices. The claim is that the number of women in high-management is low because they tend to avoid managerial career paths characterized by high work–life interference and conflict.

My research does not dispute these findings. Rather, I aim to understand whether there is more to this story than discriminatory practices and women torn between work and family. Specifically, I am interested in understanding what happens to women who do move into managerial positions and how satisfied they are with their managerial work experiences. A focus on job satisfaction after promotion is important because it could shed light on other reasons why women might be put off managerial career paths. Indeed, to the extent that women managers are less satisfied with their new work experiences one could expect that women are less likely to further consider top managerial jobs.

The conjecture that promotion to management might have less of a positive effect on women than on men is plausible and consistent with research showing that women in managerial positions have [more difficult organisational experiences](#) than men managers.

For instance, women are stereotyped as less competent leaders and, therefore, [less preferred](#) as [bosses](#). They are expected to be empathetic and kind and often encounter negative '[backlash](#)' when they display a more agentic management style. Overall, because women are perceived as less legitimate holders of leadership positions their authority in front of the subordinates is diminished and their work managing people becomes more difficult. Another factor with detrimental effects on women's managerial experiences is their limited access to support from high-status contacts, in part due to women's exclusion from 'old boys clubs'.

While these difficult experiences are well known to researchers, what I found to be less known is whether and how women's work experiences after promotion affect their job satisfaction. So in my current research I set to investigate the question whether women and men promoted to manager enjoy the same increase in job satisfaction following their promotion. Or not.

To answer this question I worked with very good [longitudinal data from Britain](#) that allowed me to look at both men and women promoted to management, in low and high-level managerial positions. In addition to being longitudinal, a feature that permits stronger causal claims, the data include rich information about virtually all main determinants of job satisfaction in the literature, including wage, promotion opportunities, flexible work patterns, number of children, work hours and hours spent on housework.

By including all these factors (and many others) we can be confident that potential differences in job satisfaction between promoted women and men are not only due to differences in wage, access to promotion, flexibility or hours worked. Of course these aspects are important, but the results of the analysis show that factors such as wage increase and access to promotion opportunities have a positive impact on the job satisfaction of women and men alike.

The puzzling result of the analysis was that, after controlling for the above conditions, one could see a clear, and widening, gender gap in satisfaction with work experiences in the aftermath of the promotion for both low and high-management positions. In the first year of promotion, men promoted to lower-level managerial positions were more satisfied with their job experiences. Women's job satisfaction remained flat. For subsequent periods, the story repeats itself: men continue to enjoy their managerial job experiences, while women lag behind.

An immediate gap in satisfaction was less evident for high-management promotions, with both women and men seeing a boost in satisfaction at the time of promotion. Unfortunately, this initial boost does not last. Beyond the promotion year women in high-management see a significant decrease in satisfaction, while the job satisfaction of men in high-management keeps increasing.

The results might lead some to conclude that women do not enjoy the complexity and authority that comes with high-managerial positions and that, perhaps, they should not be offered such positions. Such conclusions would misrepresent the findings. Rather, the downward slope in job satisfaction beyond the promotion year signals that something else is at work.

Based on the available data, it is not possible to point to the exact set of work experiences that would affect women's satisfaction with managerial work. What we can conclude, however, is that the unhappiness is likely to relate to things that happen at work rather than outside the work domain.

The results suggest a number of practical implications. The first one relates to the attention paid to job satisfaction surveys: while most mid- and large-size organisations conduct periodic surveys to assess staff satisfaction with their jobs, attention tends to focus on managed staff and less on managers. Moreover, gender comparisons, when performed, tend to include all staff. The results of my analysis suggest that organisations that aim to understand the existence or the danger of a gender gap in managerial representation should investigate gender differences in job satisfaction in greater detail, focusing on promotions to upper and lower managerial levels for women and men.

A second implication relates to the typical assumptions that organisations make when crafting gender-inclusive practices, that women need primarily more work flexibility to juggle work-life challenges. My analysis shows that although flexibility has a positive impact on women's (and men's) job satisfaction it does not explain away the gap in satisfaction between women and men managers.

Overall the robustness of the main results to a wide range of controls reinforces the argument that organisations should pay close attention to the actual experiences that women have once they reach positions of authority. To the extent that women managers have more difficult experiences than men, fewer are likely to seek further promotions.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the author's paper [Something to celebrate \(or not\): the differing impact of promotion to manager on the job satisfaction of women and men](#), *Work, Employment and Society*, 2017.
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