



Negotiation Strategies



Research: When Men Have Lower Status at Work, They're Less Likely to Negotiate

They anticipate the same social costs that women do.

by **Hannah Riley Bowles, Bobbi Thomason, and May Al Dabbagh**

Research: When Men Have Lower Status at Work, They're Less Likely to Negotiate

They anticipate the same social costs that women do.

by Hannah Riley Bowles, Bobbi Thomason, and May Al Dabbagh

Published on HBR.org / September 08, 2017 / Reprint [H03VT1](#)



Paul Garbett for HBR

It's become a popular explanation for the gender-wage gap: Women are less likely than men to self-advocate for a pay raise. It has an appealing logic. If we can get women to negotiate more like men, then the gap will shrink. This is in part why there has been a surge in negotiation trainings for women. For example, in 2015, Boston Mayor Marty Walsh

launched a five-year partnership with the American Association of University Women (AAUW) to offer free salary negotiation workshops to women in the city of Boston. These trainings are now offered across the nation.

But our research and others' has shown that it's not for lack of skill that women don't negotiate salaries. We've also found that not *all* men feel like they can ask for more pay. Indeed, research on wage bargaining indicates that the potential to negotiate higher compensation is typically a privilege reserved for higher educated workers, and not even all of them — men included — negotiate for higher pay.

The clearest evidence for why women are sometimes hesitant to negotiate for higher pay is that they are more likely to face social backlash for doing so. It's not about women's inadequacies as negotiators, but rather about how society treats women when they self-advocate for higher pay. Numerous studies, including our own research, have shown that interviewers report being less inclined to work with a woman who negotiates for higher pay as compared to a woman who lets the opportunity to negotiate pass.

The reason for this backlash is that women are perceived to violate normative expectations of "communality," which means concern for others. It is a feminine ideal to put others before oneself and, consciously or unconsciously, we tend to prefer to work with women who fulfill that ideal.

But putting others before oneself is not only a social expectation for women; it's a general social prescription for anyone who has lower status (for example, less wealth and less authority) in society. We value more highly the contributions of low-status workers when they are

agreeable and serve collective interests. We have more patience for assertiveness and leadership from higher status workers

And, of course, not all men are “high-status” workers. The studies that have found greater negative social effects of negotiating for women than men focus on relatively elite workers (primarily white, college-educated, American candidates for management positions). Even though not all workers fit that profile, we have a tendency to generalize from these types of Western-elite samples that are most accessible to university researchers.

We wanted to explore whether *anticipated backlash also inhibited men from negotiating for higher pay* so we collected data in a part of the world in which men’s status as workers shifts drastically depending on whether they are seeking a job with a “local” or “global” employer: the Arab Gulf. A “local” employer might be a national company in Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates and a “global” employer would be one of the multinational corporations invested in the region. With local employers, local men (for example, Saudi and Emirati male nationals) tend to hold the highest status positions in terms of pay, authority, and social esteem. However, with global employers, local men are negatively stereotyped as workers.

Global employers in emerging markets express clear preferences for hiring employees with Western educations and work experience over local candidates. In interviews with hiring managers in the Arab Gulf and sub-Saharan Africa, we heard repeated statements like a “global perspective is very important” or suggestions that expatriates were “prepared to work much harder than your local guy.” In turn, local university graduates — even those who attended so-called reform universities with mandated English instruction and Western faculty to prepare them for the global business world — perceived themselves as

negatively stereotyped. As one student explained, “When I go for an interview, the first impression they have is that I am a local. I am lazy... This is the stereotype.”

Because local men have lower status with global employers than they do with local employers, we were curious whether they would express more inhibition about negotiating for higher pay if they received an offer from a global as compared to a local employer. We asked students — both men and women — in a reform university to explain how they would respond to a scenario in which they had received a job offer they wanted from a prestigious company but at a salary lower than they had been offered by another employer. We manipulated whether the offer came from a local or global company.

As is typically observed in U.S. studies, when the offer came from a local employer, the men were significantly more inclined to negotiate than the women. However, there was no gender difference in the propensity to negotiate when the offer came from a global employer.

In a second study, we wanted to see how these reform university students would perceive a recent university graduate who negotiated for higher pay in a local as opposed to a global employment context. So we flipped the scenario and the students read about a recent university graduate who was responding to a desired job offer with a second higher salary offer in hand. We randomly assigned the participants to read about a male or female local university graduate who either did or did not negotiate for a compensation match with the second offer.

Again, when the offer came from a local employer, the results mirrored those typically observed in U.S. studies: The participants reported being less willing to work with a woman who negotiated as compared to a

woman who didn't. In contrast, there was no effect for men negotiating with a local employer.

However, when the offer came from a global employer, there was no gender difference: Participants reported being less willing to work with the candidate who negotiated as compared to a candidate who let the opportunity to negotiate pass — regardless of gender. Women experienced backlash regardless of the context while local men only experienced it in the global employment context, suggesting the participants thought it was fine for a local man to negotiate for higher pay with a local employer, but not with a global employer.

When we looked at what explained the backlash toward women negotiating for higher pay in the local- and global-employment contexts and toward men in the global-employment context, we found similar but not identical results. As previous studies had found, a scale of perceived communality or concern for other (“puts people first”) played a role. Evaluators were disinclined to work with a local woman who negotiated and a local man who negotiated with a global employer because they perceived them to be lacking in concern for others.

However, we observed two other perceptions that explained the backlash toward the women only. Evaluators were less inclined to work with a local woman who negotiated for higher pay because she appeared more immodest and materialistic. Modesty is a stronger cultural imperative for women than men in the Arab Gulf, and men are expected to be the household breadwinners. Women's pay is assumed to be for their personal consumption rather than a meaningful contribution to household income.

These findings are important for two reasons. First, they reinforce the notion that hesitation to negotiate for higher pay isn't just something

about women that needs to be fixed. Women *and* men sometimes hesitate to negotiate when they anticipate that their claim to higher pay could result in negative social consequences. Second, these studies emphasize that negotiating for higher pay is a privilege. Granting more social permission to higher status people to raise their compensation through negotiation only contributes to inequality.

What advice is there for workers who fear backlash if they negotiate?

We have not yet studied effective negotiating strategies for negatively stereotyped male workers but the good news is that the strategies that work for women are similar to what negotiation experts in general would advise as good negotiating advice.

We suggest an approach we call the “I-We” strategy. The “I” part is figuring out what is most important to you, considering more than pay as you contemplate any job negotiation. For instance, it may be more important to your long-term earning potential to ensure that you gain the right kinds of work experience or mentorship or that you have access to opportunities for professional development than that you secure a slightly higher salary.

The “We” part is about finding a way of explaining what you want in terms that your employer will perceive as legitimate and mutually beneficial. As you prepare, ask yourself: What information or arguments would help them understand that it’s appropriate for you to negotiate? How could they see that it’s in their own or the organization’s interests or consistent with company values to grant your request?

Do your best to understand your negotiating counterpart’s motivations and constraints. This isn’t always easy to do, so it’s helpful to talk through your negotiating arguments with someone who can give you honest and informed feedback on what is likely to be persuasive.

When you make your pitch, make it clear that you have been considering and care about their perspective. If they believe that what you are asking for is legitimate and that you genuinely care about their perspective, you are more likely to leave the negotiation with a good deal and a good relationship.

Feeling hesitant to negotiate for higher pay isn't always about lack of skill or confidence. Sometimes employees are hesitant to negotiate because they are assessing the social risks of appearing too self-centered or overly demanding. Preparing an I-We strategy helps negotiators both advocate for their career advancement and cultivate organizational relationships. If you can do both, you shouldn't hesitate to negotiate.

This article was originally published online on September 08, 2017.



Hannah Riley Bowles is the Roy E. Larsen Senior Lecturer in Public Policy and Management at Harvard Kennedy School, where she co-directs the Center for Public Leadership and Women and Public Policy Program. Hannah has won multiple awards and been featured in major news media around the globe for her teaching and research on the role of negotiation in women's leadership advancement.



Bobbi Thomason is an assistant professor of applied behavioral science at Pepperdine Graziadio Business School. You can follow her on Twitter [@bobbithomason](#).



May Al-Dabbagh is an assistant professor of Social Research and Public Policy at New York University Abu Dhabi. She is a specialist on gender and globalization in the Middle East and has conducted research on the topic using a combination of social psychology, public policy, and feminist lenses.