

## Episode 8: Myth: Women don't negotiate

**Overview:** If women just negotiated more, maybe they'd close the gender pay gap, right? Think again. While some popular media has characterized women as just needing to step up and ask for more to change inequality, research shows that when they do negotiate, they often face backlash for going against gender norms. In this episode, we discuss how people of different social groups experience different responses when they try to negotiate – and how women negotiate in many different ways beyond just for pay.

### Featured Guests:

Dr. Hannah Riley Bowles, Roy E. Larsen Senior Lecturer in Public Policy and Management, Harvard Kennedy School

Dr. Angelica Leigh, Assistant Professor of Management and Organizations, Duke University Fuqua School of Business

**Producers and Hosts:** Carmina Ravanera and Dr. Sonia Kang

**Editor:** Ian Gormely

### Research Mentioned:

1. Meara, K., Pastore, F., and Webster, A. (2019). The gender pay gap in the USA: a matching study. *Journal of Population Economics* 33, 271-305.
2. Kugler, K.G., Reif, J.A.M., Kaschner, T., and Brodbeck, F.C. (2018). Gender differences in the initiation of negotiations: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin* 144(2), 198-222.
3. Bowles, H.R., Babcock, L., and Lai, L. (2007). Social incentives for gender differences in the propensity to initiate negotiations: Sometimes it does hurt to ask. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 103(1), 84-103.
4. Leigh, A. and Desai, S.D. (2022). What's Race Got to Do with It? The Interactive Effect of Race and Gender on Negotiation Offers and Outcomes. *Organization Science* 34(2), 935-958.
5. Toosi, N.R., Mor, S., Semnani-Azad, Z., Phillips, K.W., and Amanatullah, E.T. (2018). Who Can Lean In? The Intersecting Role of Race and Gender in Negotiations. *Psychology of Women quarterly* 43(1).
6. Shan, W., Keller, J., and Imai, L. (2016). What's a masculine negotiator? What's a feminine negotiator? It depends on the cultural and situational contexts. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research* 9(1), 22-43.
7. Bowles, H.R., Thomason, B., and Bear, J.B. (2019). Reconceptualizing What and How Women Negotiate for Career Advancement. *Academy of Management Journal* 62(6), 1645-1671.
8. Bowles, H.R., Babcock, L., and McGinn, K. (2005). Constraints and Triggers: Situational Mechanics of Gender in Negotiation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89(6), 951-965.
9. Negotiate WELL Case Collection. (2023). *Harvard Kennedy School*. Retrieved from <https://case.hks.harvard.edu/negotiate-well-case-collection/>

### Transcript:

**Hannah Riley Bowles:** Unfortunately, there is an over generalization from the evidence of women being less likely to negotiate for higher pay for themselves than men, to making that jump that women don't like to negotiate or aren't as good negotiators.

**Sonia Kang:** That was Hannah Riley Bowles and this is Busted, a podcast by the Institute for Gender and the Economy, otherwise known as GATE. On Busted, we bust prominent myths about gender and

the economy by teaming up with leading experts, like Hannah, to chat about what the research says. Today's myth (Sonia makes drum roll sound): women just don't like to negotiate. Let's get busting! I'm Dr. Sonia Kang, Canada Research Chair in Identity, Diversity, and Inclusion at the University of Toronto, and my pronouns are she and her.

**Carmina Ravanera:** And I'm Carmina Ravanera, Senior Research Associate at GATE, and my pronouns are she and her.

**Sonia:** So in this episode, we're gonna be talking about negotiation. Negotiating is super important for both our personal and professional lives. At work, whether or not and how we negotiate can affect the kinds of roles we get into, our salaries, benefits, the types of assignments we work on, and so much more.

**Carmina:** Today we're specifically talking about this idea that women would be able to close the gender wage gap and get into the leadership and c-suite positions they want if they were better at negotiating, better at advocating for themselves and being assertive about they want. This kind of thinking has been around for a while, but really took off and became super popular after Sheryl Sandberg published her book "Lean in" in 2013.

**Sonia:** Yeah, even if I knew nothing about this, that seems like quite a stretch to me. That we're just a few negotiations workshops away from closing gender gaps in the economy. It's obviously not that simple. Who did you talk to about this myth, and what did you learn from them?

**Carmina:** So I learned a couple of major points that I really want to make sure we get across in this episode. The first thing the experts I spoke to emphasized is that it's a huge oversimplification to say that negotiating more will really close gender gaps in pay or ... anything else. One of the experts I spoke with is Hannah Riley Bowles, we heard from her at the top of this episode – she's the Roy E. Larsen Senior Lecturer at the Harvard Kennedy School and the co-director of the Harvard Kennedy School Center for Public Leadership and Women and Public Policy Program. And she debunked this magical thinking right off the bat.

**Hannah:** There is actually one really important confusion, and that is that you know, if women just negotiated for higher pay, they would close the gender wage gap. And that's flawed in so many ways, but one of the most important ways in which that's flawed is that the gender wage gap is much better explained by gender differences in the types of jobs that men and women are in, than by looking at how many women are paid for the exact same work. Gender differences in pay for the exact same work tend to be relatively small, although there are spaces where you do see differentials that are important. The real gaps are, a larger proportion of say the gender wage gap, is explained when you look at the types of jobs in which full-time employed men and women are occupied. Men dominate the highest paying jobs and the roles in which the women dominate tend not to be as higher paid.

**Sonia:** Right. Gender inequality and the wage gap are caused by so many different factors—especially the types of jobs that women and men tend to have. We've known for a long time now that work that is gender-stereotyped as "women's work," like care work, is less valued in society and ends up being compensated less, or sometimes not at all. And negotiation isn't going to change that.

**Carmina:** Exactly. So let's just forget that idea. The second thing the experts told me is that if women are not negotiating as much as men, it's not because they're just inherently less confident or they just don't want to ask. There's more going on than meets the eye. For example, I talked to Angelica Leigh about what the research has to say about women and negotiating. Angelica is an Assistant Professor of Management and Organizations at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business and has done some really interesting research on gender, race, and negotiation. Here's what she had to say...

**Angelica:** So on the surface, yes, research does support the idea that women initiate negotiations less than men. There was a meta-analysis done in 2018, which is a scientific method where researchers collect results from a lot of different studies that are on a similar topic or the same topic, and they

aggregate up to see whether they can - that patterns emerge across multiple studies that you wouldn't be able to see from one or two papers. And so what they found in this meta analysis is that on average women do initiate negotiations less than men. But this was qualified by a couple things. So first, when the situation was less ambiguous, meaning that it was expected for people to negotiate, and this was kind of a widely held conception, that it was appropriate to negotiate in this environment, the gender gap reduced. And they also found that the gender gap was getting smaller over the years. So this meta-analysis had papers all the way back to 1960 up to I think about 2016, and so that what they saw was this trend of this women initiating negotiations less becoming smaller and smaller over the years.

**Sonia:** Hmm, okay interesting. So Angelica says that some studies have shown that women may negotiate less, but that there are important caveats. When the context suggests that negotiation is normal, women are more likely to do it, and, overall, women have also been negotiating more over the years. Why do we think that is?

**Carmina:** Well, Hannah says that backlash has a lot to do with it.

**Hannah:** So the best explanation that we have for why women are less likely to negotiate for higher pay as compared to men is that they run into more resistance when they do so. So the way we've measured that is in terms of what we call the social cost of negotiating. We look at, for instance, how willing you are to work with somebody, and then we randomly assign you to whether you see a candidate who attempts to negotiate for higher pay, or a candidate who lets the negotiation opportunity pass, and what we look at is we ask them things like, how willing would you be to work with this person? How much would you benefit from or enjoy working with this person? Would you like to have this person on your team? And so what we find, and other people have also replicated, is that there is a disinclination to work with women who self-advocate for higher pay as compared to women who don't. And that that difference tends to be smaller for men. But that's where it comes from, I mean the gender effects really come from the experience of resistance. I talked about social resistance, that is like, I don't know if I want to work with this person. But then there's also forms of what you might call economic resistance or material resistance, where you attempt to negotiate and you just don't get as far. I mean you just, people aren't as open to what it is that you're asking for. And there's some evidence of that, field surveys and things, of men's and women's experiences attempting to negotiate for higher pay. So that's the main part of the story. It's not it's not coming from lack of confidence or you know, early on there was this idea of negotiation for women is like going to the dentist, negotiation for men is like playing a game, you know. I think that over time the evidence hasn't really borne that out, that it's really men and women are facing a different social situation, self-advocating particularly for higher pay. And that that's what explains the difference.

**Carmina:** According to gender norms, women are expected to be nice, warm and caring, and not demanding and certainly not too confident in their own abilities and worth. So if women go against those expectation by negotiating and advocating hard for themselves, they are perceived as less warm and are liked less, to the point that people might not want to work with them anymore.

**Sonia:** Yeah. And why would you negotiate if you know you're going to be penalized for it? You'd want to avoid that as much as possible, especially when we consider how women face many other barriers to getting ahead at work. So it makes complete sense that women would be hesitant to negotiate, unless it's clear that it's acceptable for them to do so. They are acting risk-aware, not risk-averse.

**Carmina:** Absolutely. But Hannah also qualified that these findings are based on white, heterosexual women and men, and we need to take a more intersectional approach.

**Hannah:** Part of it, when you're just talking about men and women, you're very often just talking about white, heteronormative, well-educated, privileged classes of men and women. And there's growing research that I've done and others have done showing that men from historically marginalized groups encounter the same types of resistance that we've documented for quote-unquote women as compared to men. So again, that's another part of the myth, right. I mean you're really talking about what behaviors

are allowed for privileged groups that people from less privileged groups may be more discouraged from engaging in.

**Carmina:** Of course, I wanted to dig into that more, so I asked Angelica about her research on gender, race, and negotiations. Interestingly, Angelica's work was motivated by some of Hannah's research.

**Angelica:** The paper that looked at women initiating negotiations was actually one of the fundamental papers that got me thinking about the intersection of race and gender and negotiations. And as I was reading this paper it struck me that this idea that when a woman engages in negotiation that she's violating norms of feminine niceness, or she's going against norms of feminine niceness, just didn't mesh with my own experiences as a Black woman in the world. More simply, when I read this paper, I had the immediate reaction of, well, wait. When I walk into a room, people's first reaction or thought about me is not, "oh she's gonna be so nice." Maybe as they get to know me and we talk more and I smile and do some things, people might then decide that I'm nice. But if you see me, I show up at the negotiations table, you've never met me before, your first reaction is not gonna be like, oh my gosh, this woman is gonna be so nice. And then reading more research about race, the intersection of race and gender, and stereotypes about Black women in general, there has been research over the last two decades that has shown that Black women in particular, that the stereotypes or expectations of Black women are very different than those of white women. So Black women are stereotyped as being angry or domineering, whereas white women are stereotyped as being more communal and nice and things like that. And so that got me wondering, well, for Black women, if they come into a negotiation, this idea that a Black woman violating norms of feminine niceness, doesn't seem to hold.

**Sonia:** This is such an important insight. When we talk about gender differences in work or in the economy, researchers often don't look beyond just men and women. But – as we talked about in an earlier episode on intersectionality – it's crucial to take an intersectional lens in research and understand how people of all genders and different social locations will have different experiences. So, what did Angelica find?

**Angelica:** So what we did in this paper is we actually looked at, across three different studies, the negotiation outcomes of Black women, white women, Black men, and white men. And what we found is that on average, Black women negotiators – when participants were paired up with a Black woman negotiator – they actually provided her with better deals, better pricing than that of white women and Black men. And so in our studies, what we found is that Black women, they were actually performing similarly to that of white men, in terms of you know, Black women – you're presented with a Black woman negotiator, you're more likely to present her with a better deal and things like that. I think more generally one of the largest implications of our paper is just the fact that most of the research on gender and negotiations and research on this topic has been going on, as I mentioned earlier, for decades. There's a long tradition of research of studying the influence of gender on negotiation outcomes. What our paper really does is it demonstrates that this, this research doesn't really apply to all women, and in particular, the findings of this work doesn't apply to Black women and likely doesn't apply to other women of colour. And so more generally there does become this question of the fact that, you know, if you think about negotiations classes in business schools, or even books that have been written, and trainings that are given to reduce gender inequalities in negotiations, well, a lot of that research and a lot of the tools and recommendations that people are given is really based on research that is primarily centred on white women. You know, a practical implication for employees and for Black women in particular is the fact that when you walk into a negotiation, people are not going to be expecting you to be nice. And so the barriers or the challenges that Black women may face are going to be different than those of white women. And so being aware of those, understanding that people are actually going to expect you to be a formidable negotiations opponent, is important to know, right. Because then the challenges that Black women may face, may be more so around people kind of putting up barriers to stop a Black woman from negotiating in the first place, right. So I believe that this negotiation opponent is going to be formidable, but I still don't really wanna give you more, so I kind of put up barriers to stop you negotiating in general. Or in the back end, I, you know, provide you with this better deal and you're actually able to be successful in the negotiation, but then there's a question of what are the consequences of that more long term, as people are interacting with you after the negotiation.

**Carmina:** So her research showed that Black women and men may have different outcomes when they negotiate compared to white women and men. And of course, that doesn't mean that Black women don't face tons of other disadvantages from this stereotyping, as Angelica mentions. But in general, it shows that we need more research about how people from different groups fare with negotiations. Hannah told me that there's a bunch of new and upcoming research on this topic. We'll put some links in the show notes.

**Sonia:** Amazing. So, we should caution that we can't understand women's and men's experiences with negotiation as all the same based on gender. It's really about what social roles are given more leeway to negotiate and more likely to be perceived as good at negotiating. So, men of colour might also be penalized for going against their social role expectations alongside white women. And other groups may be penalized too.

**Carmina:** Absolutely. Now, the third thing I want to point out to debunk this myth is that women do in fact negotiate – a lot! Not all negotiation has to be about pay. Here's what Hannah said.

**Hannah:** If I can just go narrowly to the question of do women negotiate...most of the research that shows that effect is pretty circumscribed. It relates to self-advocacy as opposed to advocating for others, and it tends to be, although is not exclusively, around pay. Unfortunately there is an over generalization from the evidence of women being less likely to negotiate for higher pay for themselves than men, to making that jump that women don't like to negotiate or aren't as good negotiators. So for instance, when we've done research on what do professionals, managers, executives negotiate at work to advance their careers, overwhelmingly men and women talk about negotiating their roles. Overwhelmingly. And yes, on the margins, men are more likely to recount negotiating their job offers and their compensation in particular, and women as compared to men are more likely to report negotiating for work flexibility to manage work-family conflicts

**Sonia:** What I'm hearing is that women aren't necessarily negotiating less, they're just negotiating for different things than men, and those things are often not talked about. Can we hear a bit more about what these issues might be?

**Carmina:** For sure. Hannah has done some really interesting analyses on different types of negotiations.

**Hannah:** Even just the word negotiation very often evokes in people bargaining over money, and what's really important to my mind is to think about negotiation much more broadly. Not just about dividing the pie, but coming up with solutions that meet both parties' interests. And once you start thinking more broadly about negotiation in those terms, and then you realize, let's get out of this conventional notion of just bargaining over your job offer, and thinking more broadly about – okay, how do you solve problems related to your career advancement, on the role, there's so many things that people are working through on a daily basis. The other thing is that they're not these 10, 15, 20-minute simulations that we typically put people through in negotiation classrooms, where you're just sitting across from somebody and you know all the issues and the options for resolving it. In a workplace environment these negotiations go on for weeks or months or even years, where you're talking to other people about what are the things that you would like to do. So we distinguish among "asking" negotiations as conversations over those standard things, your job offers or in some organizations, for instance, it's typical to talk after three years about what's your next job assignment or something. And then "bending" negotiations as negotiations where you know what you want isn't standard. And so I'd like to do something that's novel or unusual or unprecedented. And then there are negotiations that are what we call "shaping." So "asking" is asking for something standard for yourself, "bending" is asking for something nonstandard or unconventional for yourself, "shaping" is about saying I want to, I want to change the work environment. I want us to do work differently, I've got an idea for a new business unit or new set of, new way of organizing, or a new set of clients or organizational practices. We need to globalize. Those are "shaping" negotiations.

**Carmina:** What's super interesting here is that many of us don't think of negotiation in these broad and far-reaching ways. And her team also found that women actually engage in these different types of negotiations all the time.

**Hannah:** What's really important is when we went out and talked to men and women about their negotiations, in blind coding afterwards, we realized that women were reporting more "bending" negotiations than men. Which is kind of really intuitive and doesn't fit with this idea that women don't negotiate. And we dug a little bit deeper into what those negotiations were about. And they were about two things. One, as you might expect, work-family stuff. So a lot of these, particularly for senior women, they were getting to a level where people just hadn't been, you know, the people at their level hadn't been dealing with work-family stuff. And so they were coming up with creative solutions like, I will lead this unit but I need to be remote X weeks during the year to take care of my dad or something like that, right. The other place though, which was super interesting, was women negotiating non-traditional career paths. So for instance, everybody who has led this unit has been an engineer. You don't actually need your engineering training to lead the unit. And so someone might come up and say listen, I'm not an engineer but I've got you know, IT expertise that's relevant to the next stage of development of the unit, I've got cross-functional team experience. I know the business, you know, XYZ. Give me this opportunity even though I don't exactly fit your model. And so those are really important ways in which women negotiate, not only to advance their own careers but in many important ways, to change the landscape of work to make it more gender-inclusive.

**Sonia:** We can really see how the misconception of negotiation as just asking for more pay is leading to this idea that women don't ask enough. But according to the research, both women and men do a lot of different kinds of negotiation, whether it's to "bend" the way things are done at work, as Hannah says, or even to shape the organization to make it better for workers in general.

**Carmina:** Yeah. And it was inspiring to hear about her research showing that when some women are negotiating, they may be achieving outcomes for women who come after them.

**Sonia:** So we've covered a lot of different topics here. First, it's clear that gender inequality in workplaces, or the gender wage gap, isn't simply caused by women not negotiating enough. Second, if women don't want to negotiate, it's not because they just don't like negotiating -- it's likely because they are risk-aware -- they know that they might be penalized for violating expectations about how they should act, so they avoid doing so. But women of colour, as well as men of colour and non-binary people, may face really different outcomes that we need to research more. And finally, people negotiate in a lot of different ways. Women may be less likely to ask for higher pay, but there are many other types of workplace negotiations, and women are involved in those all the time.

**Carmina:** Right. So a question that comes to mind for me here is: what might organizations do to reduce that unfair backlash to members of specific social groups who negotiate? Here's what Angelica had to say.

**Angelica:** Situational ambiguity has always been kind of found to be an important moderator of the effects in negotiation. So basically when there are stronger cues that suggest that it is okay to negotiate here, then the barriers and inequities that tend to crop up are reduced in those situations, right. So for organizations, if they are you know, making it more explicit that people can negotiate for various packages or employment or promotions, things like that, even resources, then it becomes more of an acceptable thing for people to do. And so I think on both sides kind of making the things that you can negotiate for more prominent and shared, right. But I think the big challenge around all of this is that from an organizational standpoint if they did this, this would mean that the employees would be able to, you know, in general, their employees would be extracting more value from them, right. And so then it becomes a question of whether organizations would ever really do this.

**Sonia:** So if people don't know that they can negotiate or even that they are expected to negotiate, they're much less likely to do it -- especially if they are from groups who may be anticipating backlash. To make things more fair, organizations can let everyone know about negotiation norms, about what's up for

discussion vs. What's set in stone.. At the same time, as Angelica said, maybe they're not super incentivized to do that if it means that they can prevent employees from getting more out of them.

**Carmina:** Yeah. That's why I also asked our experts about what employees should think about or do when they're negotiating. Obviously we shouldn't put the onus on women and other marginalized groups to ensure that their organization is fair to them, but Hannah told me that since negotiation can be such a powerful thing that can bring about change, both in individuals' lives and structurally, it's important for employees to be able to do it.

**Hannah:** My research looking at how women negotiate within organizations...they're doing really important work surfacing where the barriers are within organizations. And so I would love to really encourage work from the bottom-up as well as the top-down, to encourage those negotiations for everyone to achieve their, you know, professional aspirations and their work life aspirations.

**Carmina:** And she told me about a helpful acronym that her team developed, called SURE. You can find more details and resources from the Harvard Kennedy School by looking up the "Negotiate WELL Case Collection" on the Harvard Kennedy School website. We'll put that link in our show notes. But basically, "S" stands for "Start with your goals" - think about what you want to achieve before you negotiate, not just moneywise, but also your work-life situation, your role ambitions, and so on. "U" means "Understand what you negotiate for." Are you asking for something standard? Are you bending, asking for something exceptional? Or are you shaping, trying to get people bought in to making larger changes? Think about that and how the person you're negotiating with may need to, in turn, negotiate for your ask. "R" is reducing ambiguity. Understand what is negotiable, and what knowledge you need to be effective in your negotiation. Also make it known what you aspire for. Finally, "E" is "Enhance your negotiation through relationships and enhance your relationships through negotiation." That means tapping your network for support and advocacy, while also negotiating in a way that allows you to get what you want while maintaining those necessary relationships. Think about your negotiation as strategic--and whether you're taking others' interests into account.

**Sonia:** Right. Understanding what you're negotiating for, your goals, and what your justification is, will be super helpful in those conversations – as well as understanding that negotiation can help not only the people doing the negotiating, but also others in an organization as well, including those from marginalized groups.

So let's bust this myth that women don't negotiate, once and for all. If someone was to say to me that women aren't getting ahead because they're just not negotiating, what should I tell them?

**Carmina:** I loved Angelica's suggestion for what she would say to bust this myth.

**Angelica:** If someone said to me, I was at a bar and someone was like, oh you study gender and the workplace? Well, women just aren't getting ahead because they aren't negotiating more. My response would probably be, well would you go into a negotiation if you knew that people were going to treat you poorly? And you were going to be looked at as super demanding, and this was going to impact the ways your managers evaluated you and the projects you got, your promotion and job performance? You would think twice about doing this behavior as well, right. And so I would challenge that person to, instead of looking at the quote-unquote woman as the problem, to think about the barriers that exist. And all of the psychological things that stop, that lead people to treat a woman who rightfully comes and asks for more, poorly. The myth-bust I guess here is really not that women don't want to negotiate, it's that they avoid being treated badly. And who doesn't want to avoid being treated poorly?

**Carmina:** And remember that research still needs to investigate how different groups experience negotiation differently. In terms of debunking the myth that women's lack of negotiation is what leads to gender inequality in the workplace, here's what Hannah had to say.

**Hannah:** More broadly, I would say that the explanations for the gender gaps in pay and leadership or authority are much more complicated than asking for opportunities. I think asking for opportunities is a

wonderful way, an important way for women to have agency in closing these gaps, but again, I think that the pay negotiation conversation needs to get sidelined, relative to the conversation about roles and work life balance. I mean what the newest evidence on the gender wage gap shows is again, it's occupations. But then a lot of those occupational differences are associated with the cost that women differentially pay for negotiating for more flexible work.

**Carmina:** And to add to this, women do negotiate, but it's often for different things than just asking for pay or asking for a different role. Negotiation can encompass many types of interactions, like changing how an organization works, or even making it a fairer place to be.

**Sonia:** With that, make sure to subscribe so you don't miss our next episode of Busted! Make sure to join us then.

**Carmina:** Until next time, happy mythbusting!