

# THE GENDER GAP QUESTION

Delaney Tevis | May 2015

When I was little, my parents told me I could achieve anything I set my mind to. My gender, my race, and my religion didn't matter. They told me that as long as I worked hard, I could make my dreams come true.

But I remember the first time I realized it wasn't true. I was in elementary school when I discovered my teachers always called on the boys to answer questions and hardly ever on me or my girl classmates. They didn't call on us because they unconsciously assumed we didn't know the answer. This wasn't overt sexism, but it is an example of the underlying societal structures which hold women back. Society automatically assumes that women aren't up to the job. And that needs to change.

Research shows that women outperform men academically across the board. But when we're out of school and in the workforce, women in top leadership positions are almost nonexistent.

Kathryn Fishman-Weaver is a University of Missouri doctoral student and a teacher in Columbia Public Schools. She says that in local high schools, women students have significantly higher core GPAs than men.

***Fishman-Weaver:*** *Senior males, general population, average cumulative GPA for core classes: 2.58 and for females average GPA 2.80. That's significant.*

According to the US Department of Education, the national numbers yield the same results.

You would think with higher GPAs, women would hold higher professional positions. But that's not the case. Out of the Fortune one thousand companies, only 33 are run by women.

Fishman-Weaver says even in the field of education, where most employees are women, the numbers follow a similar pattern.

***Fishman-Weaver:*** *So if you look at the superintendency, only 22 percent of superintendents are women. So go back to that 71 to 75 percent of public school teachers are women ... there is something wrong with that equation.*

Dr. Jeni Hart is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at MU. Some of her research focuses on the relationship between gender, tenure and promotion. She says while the gender ratios within the Assistant and Associate Professorships are becoming more equal, there is a greater problem.

***Hart:*** *Still at the full professor rank, 28 percent of all full professors are women.*

Dr. Hart's research shows women in academia don't get the same support men do.

***Hart:*** *One of the things I have found in my research, particularly about women in STEM, is that they are less likely to be tapped to go up for full [professor]. So there's really no time frame that suggests that now is the time you should go up for full professor, yet in a match sample I did with men, the men were saying "Oh yeah, my department chair said that it was time to go up for full" or "Have you considered becoming a department chair?" and women were not getting those same messages. So this clearly has implications for their long-term earnings, but*

*also their ability to be ... you know, to have an upward trajectory in the organization.*

I asked both women how they believed these problems could be resolved.

Fishman-Weaver says society needs to stop shying away from difficult conversations.

***Fishman-Weaver:*** *I think that we need to have open and honest conversations about the way gender discrimination plays out in our world and the unspoken structures that are contributing to the glass ceiling. Which right now seems to be this masked thing that we're not discussing honestly. And so we tell girls "Achieve at high levels and you can be anything you want," and the girls are achieving at high levels, yet they're not being rewarded with leadership positions, with prestige, with the salaries of their men counterparts.*

Dr. Hart also says the change needs to be broad and societal.

***Hart:*** *For me it is a matter of how do we change the organization so that everybody can be successful, rather than helping the individual woman be successful. Which isn't to say that I don't want women to have agency, I clearly want them to have agency, but I think this idea of collective action organizational change really is at the heart of what needs to happen in order for these problems to actually be addressed in a really sufficient way.*

Throughout my high school years I worked hard to earn a 4.0 GPA and soon I will be starting my college career at Harvard. I want to know that all of my effort is not going to go to waste. I want to be judged for my credentials and not for my gender. I believe that progress is possible, but it will take the conscious action of everyone.