Why did we take on the study of “the under-utilization of women’s talent”?

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When Jill and I were still PhD students at the Ohio State University, we read many studies on the reversal of the gender gap in education (because we both worked closely with Claudia Buchmann and we were very inspired by her scholarship). Since then we have been thinking about the question: women outperform men in school, so what happens next? In school, evaluation criteria are more quantifiable and transparent. At the same time, women are not bound by parenting responsibilities, so women’s talents and work ethic can be more easily translated into advantages (i.e., higher graders). However, can their talents, abilities, and various non-cognitive skills be translated into advantages in the workplace?

Our research finds that not surprisingly, men’s academic achievement in high school is positively associated with their future leadership responsibilities in the workplace. In other words, men with higher graders in high school later go on to supervise more people at work. By contrast, women’s academic achievement in high school is barely associated with their future leadership prospects. This gender difference is especially stark among parents. On average, men with failing grades in high school supervise more people at work than women who earned straight A’s.

Some people might ask: Are women born with little interest in being leaders? We find that when these same people were in high school, those with better grades were more likely to participate in student government (i.e., a form of leadership), for boys and girls alike. If anything, at almost every GPA level, girls were actually slightly more likely than boys to be involved in student government. Therefore, the argument that “boys are more interested in leading” is not true.

We also find that boys with excellent grades in high school were more likely than similar girls to obtain a college degree. This is perhaps because parents, teachers, and counselors are more likely to interpret high-achieving boys as exceptionally intelligent, whereas high-achieving girls are just hardworking (which happened to me throughout my childhood and I was almost gaslighted by this gendered framing of “intelligence”). Thus, boys with excellent grades may be especially encouraged to pursue higher education. Moreover, a college degree boosts leadership prospects for men (especially fathers) more than for women. Fathers with a college degree on average supervise more people at work than those without a college degree; but college degree does not seem to improve mothers’ leadership prospects. This gender difference in the leadership returns to a college degree is due in part to the gender segregation of college majors and occupations. Female-dominated majors such as education and nursing steer women into occupations that do not provide much room for promotion along the career ladders, but male-dominated majors such as finance and STEM offer more pathways into leadership positions in the workplace.

Additionally, after becoming parents, women are more likely to experience career interruptions and work-hour reductions. In other words, women’s career prospects are also dimmed by unequal divisions of housework and childcare responsibilities at home.
Many smart, competent, and hard-working women are unable to capitalize on their talents due to structural barriers and workplace discrimination. This reality not only hurts women but also represents a major loss for all workplaces.

You may ask: Why is it important for women to be leaders? Let me give an example in the pandemic context. In a policy brief, World Health Organization states: “Global Health is delivered by women and led by men.” Indeed, 70% of healthcare workers are women, and it is those women who fight on the front line to save lives, but 75% of leadership roles in the healthcare workforce are occupied by men. A direct consequence of women’s under-representation in leadership positions is that unique challenges faced by women are often neglected (e.g., the lack of menstrual hygiene items for frontline female healthcare workers).

When we were making finally revisions to this paper, Ruth Bader Ginsburg passed away. I was working on this research while kept thinking about RBG’s words: “Women belong in all places where decisions are being made.” We still have a long way to go before getting there.