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Who's afraid of women at work?

The unease is cultural — but the effects of representation are measurable

'Did Women Ruin the Workplace?' The backlash triggered by that November 2025 podcast headline impelled *The New York Times* to replace 'women' with 'liberal feminism.' But the semantic change did little to calm the furore. More importantly, it did not address the underlying issue: the unease that still surrounds women's growing presence in professional life, especially in fields historically dominated by men.

Women are all too aware of that unease. In a viral trend on TikTok and Instagram last year, women began using the caption 'woman in a male-dominated field' alongside videos depicting them manspreading on public transportation, manipulating their dates, speaking condescendingly to their male colleagues, or offering unsolicited advice to men at the gym.

The joke landed because it required no explanation; women knew exactly what each other meant. But it also resonated because it offered a tongue-in-cheek outlet for women's frustration with their continued exclusion from some of the most influential — and, often, highest-paid — fields.

The question of what happens to workplaces, and to women, when more women enter male-dominated fields warrants deeper consideration than a provocative podcast episode or a relatable punchline. That is why economists, including us, have been seeking answers.

Women help women

At the University of São Paulo, students are assigned to course sections largely according to administrative rules, rather than personal choice, meaning that the gender composition of any given section is, in practice, close to random. This presented an opportunity for us to assess the impact of different gender combinations on outcomes. We tracked students into the formal labour market for up to five years after

graduation, using detailed administrative data on employment, experience, and wages.

The results were unambiguous. In course sections that included larger shares of women, female students were roughly nine percentage points more likely to be working in the formal labour market two and five years after graduation. For every ten percentage points the female share increased, the likelihood of this outcome rose by 11–14 per cent, relative to the average. Women with more female classmates also accumulated more labour-market experience: nearly six additional months over the first five years after graduation.

Women professors had a similarly powerful impact. A ten-percentage-point increase in the share of female instructors was associated with a six-percentage-point rise in female graduates' labour-force participation five years out, as well as with gains in top-end earnings. These effects were strongest in the sections where male students accounted for a larger share of the total. In other words, the presence of even a few women in male-dominated environments improves outcomes for the women who come after them.

This matters because the gender wage gap may have less to do with unequal pay for similar work than with who ends up in which jobs.

These outcomes partly reflect increased early labour-market engagement. Female students in less male-dominated course sections were more likely to secure internships and formal jobs during their undergraduate years. These effects persist well into early career, suggesting that the impact of small early advantages compounds over time.

This indicates that having female peers helps — or at least encourages — women to pursue a foothold in their field early, and research consistently shows that this progress tends to be self-reinforcing. Getting in sooner makes it easier to stay.

Similarly, having more female peers seems to bolster women's occupational ambition. Women with more female classmates were more likely to end up in higher-paying, male-dominated occupations after graduation. This matters because the gender wage gap may have less to do with unequal pay for similar work than with who ends up in which jobs. If having more women around shifts what feels possible — through information-sharing, normalisation of ambition, or simply not being the only woman in the room — the effects on careers and earnings can be substantial.

Female professors, for their part, serve as role models, offering visible proof that women do have a place in that field. In some of the most competitive occupations, such as consulting, the effects are especially pronounced.

But what about the anxiety reflected in that *New York Times* headline? The idea that workplaces are zero-sum — that every gain for women implies a loss for men — strengthens resistance to gender diversity. But our findings indicate that it is wrong.

Having more female peers did not lower standards or dilute ambition among men.

Male students' labour-market outcomes were essentially unaffected by the gender composition of their sections. Having more female peers did not lower standards or dilute ambition among men. On the contrary, men did better when more women were alongside them — outcomes apparently driven not by favouritism or referral networks, but by shifts in expectation, information, and opportunity.

This is no trivial finding. It implies that improving women's representation in higher education — such as by hiring more female faculty, adjusting class composition, and reducing extreme gender imbalances — offers profound across-the-board benefits, which compound over time and show up in labour-force participation rates, months of work experience, and wages.

Discussions about gender and work often morph into cultural clashes, driven by fear, ideology, or frustration. While those feelings will not simply go away, our research offers empirical evidence that should guide debate and inform policymaking. When you change the gender composition of a classroom, follow graduates into the labour market, and see how their careers unfold, the story shifts. You find that women who have more women around them do better. And the men around them do just fine, too.

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