



Unlocking the true value of women negotiators

Negotiation theory as catalyst for change in systems and organisations



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INTRODUCTION

Women are better negotiators than men, just not for themselves.

Women are better negotiators than men, just not for themselves. This quote made famous by the [Harvard Programme for Negotiation](#) summarises two prevailing truths: First, women are valuable negotiators. They are often better collaborators and listeners which are two key components to a successful negotiation. Second, the systems and organisations in which women negotiate are hindering women to personally benefit from this value. Women continue to face difficulties in claiming their rightful seats at negotiation tables and making their own intrinsic interests heard. Barriers such as intrinsically engrained societal gender roles are often the cause of the gender gap in negotiation outcomes which have encouraged women to be accommodating and relationship-oriented from childhood onwards.

The negotiation process has been extensively studied within academia.¹ However, what current research fails to address is that most of the institutional differences in reward for men and women are solidified outcomes of negotiation processes. This can range from compensation negotiations over promotions to which partner pursues a career. Negotiation plays a much bigger role than initially seen in things we tend to perceive as culture or institutional norms.

As a result, [&FLUENCE](#) believes that research on negotiation theory studies aspects such as gender differences in negotiated outcomes, their primary focus lies on the negotiators rather than the systems and structures in which people negotiate. Such a focus can have the effect of pivoting the discussion towards how to make women better negotiators or explaining why men get better results, quickly leading to a sentiment of ‘fixing the women’ and ‘blaming men’.

This article argues that a new approach should be taken that applies the insights of

negotiation theory to the structures and systems in organisations themselves rather than the people within it. By embracing core elements of effective negotiations such as focussing on interests over positions, viewing your counterpart as a partner rather than an opponent, and placing the focus on listening over talking, this can help foster environments that would help all professionals thrive, regardless of gender. Furthermore, by creating such conditions, this shift can contribute towards the elimination of the gender pay gap as well as increased overall gender equity. Therefore, we showcase the institutional shortcomings of negotiations in our current systems as well as **how negotiation theory can help to change the gender status quo**. We end by presenting ways in which you can start this conversation in your organisation and begin changing your systems, ranging from actions on organisational level like adjusting prevailing performance mechanisms and training your employees in negotiations to individual steps

It's worth noting that while the main focus of this argument is on the role of women in

unlocking their negotiation value, the displayed lessons ring true across the whole gender spectrum. Whilst the focus is placed on the position of women, the aim is to achieve more satisfactory and equitable negotiation outcomes, regardless of identity. Therefore, it can serve as a valuable tool for anyone's own ability to reflect on their current negotiation strategies as well as showcase a perspective of how to enable more diverse negotiations and negotiation tables.

1. SHORTCOMINGS OF OUR CURRENT SYSTEMS FROM A NEGOTIATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

The general perception within society still often associates negotiations with a conflict or a trade-off instead of the wider perspective as a mutually beneficial collaboration. This traditional perspective on negotiations centres on self-interest and power, disregarding the relational perspective of negotiations as well as its function as a platform for discourse and exchange. Furthermore, negotiations are often viewed as a process that only takes

place in formal settings such as salary negotiation or business deals. However, negotiation theory perceives negotiations to be more of an integrative process because every person conducts many negotiations on a daily basis in their work and private life. Negotiations make up a much larger part of our individual lives and organisational cultures than initially assumed. Thus leading the prevailing assumption of negotiations being short-term and conflict prone to have a much wider impact on broader human interactions.

1. 1 The role of gender in negotiations

Gender plays a role in negotiations before they have even officially begun. The term 'negotiations' has been shown to hold variable interpretation among different genders. Whilst men tend to view negotiations within the framework of asking, women associate them with a much more negative connotation. As a result, women are less likely to initiate as well as more hesitant to participate in negotiations than men are.

Gender norms significantly influence the systemic disadvantage that women face in

negotiations in comparison to men.ⁱⁱ Such gender norms are mainly shaped by stereotypes about the differences between the sexes, often referring to how a woman should present herself in social circumstances, interpreting behaviours of women differently as well as more general factors like culture and social structure.ⁱⁱⁱ As a consequence, women are globally perceived to be communal, a characteristic that is related to cooperation and relationship-building. This builds up the expectation that women should behave as accommodating and caregiving. Furthermore, women are often seen as emotional and in possession of good listening skills.^{iv} Men, on the other hand, are mostly perceived to be agentic, highlighting the power of the individual expressing power and influencing their environment. As such, the societal expectation arises for men to be assertive, competitive, and dominant.^v

By applying such gender stereotypes to what society still views as a **'successful'** negotiator looks like, the gender differences in negotiation become visible. Research shows that a successful negotiator is often linked to agentic characteristics such as being a good

problem solver, assertive and knowledgeable.^{vi} As these characteristics fall under the masculine gender stereotype, it is more challenging for women than men to be successful negotiators. For many female negotiators, this results in a 'catch 21' where they face the expectation to behave in line with their feminine stereotypes of caretakers, listeners and cooperators, while striving to be perceived as a successful negotiator conforming with stereotypically male characteristics. Additionally, many women are penalised when adopting masculine characteristics. Women negotiators who use assertive negotiation techniques often face backlash for violating expected gender norms, being labelled as 'bossy' or 'sassy' instead of 'confident'.^{vii}

Due to our society being based on systemic gender expectations, women are often only perceived to be better and more successful negotiators than men when they negotiate on behalf of others instead of themselves.^{viii} However, this remains a hotly debated topic^{ix} as it aligns with the traditional gender stereotypes of women being more

communal and focused on overall benefits rather than their individual needs.^x

In an effort to become better negotiators, women often adapt masculine characteristics to adhere to the current norm of a successful negotiator. This often plays into the common false beliefs on negotiations, regarding them as a conflict or zero-sum game. However, in our perspective of negotiations as a collaborative communication, women bring clear advantages to the negotiation table by being better collaborators, building trust and relationships as well as being good listeners. If this perspective on negotiations would be more prevalent, it would represent an important step towards women's negotiation value being more widely recognized as well as a way forward to overall systemic change.

Negotiations are at the heart of many important gender issues, ranging from the gender pay gap over unpaid labour division to female visibility. Every person negotiates multiple times per day. However, most of us remain unaware that each of these big or small negotiations represents a building

block in the achievement of professional and personal milestones. As Susan Coleman, who established the United Nations' first programs on negotiations, has stated:

'Negotiations are the roadmap to getting what you want.'^{xii}

Therefore, negotiations can represent a valuable steppingstone in the pursuit of gender equality.

If the world continues at its current pace, it will take more than 100 years before the gender pay gap is closed.^{xiii} To achieve gender equality and close the gender-pay gap, it is vital to focus on changing the system rather than women. This message has been reiterated by many, from the UN Secretary-General to scholars and advocates for women's rights. However, what is less discussed is who is responsible for changing the system and how this can be approached. With a goal like system transformation, the responsibility cannot lie with a single person, gender or group, but is rather a joint responsibility as a society. As men have for a long time had a more prominent position in society in comparison to women, they need

to equally recognize and act on this responsibility.

Fortunately, there are currently many great political developments underway that support this system transformation from an institutional side. In 2022 the European Parliament adopted binding pay-transparency measures to close the prevailing gender pay gap of 14% in the European Union (EU). Additionally, the EU is currently developing a new transparency law that will make it easier for employees to compare salaries and expose any existing discrepancies in their organisation.^{xiv} This has already been implemented in Canadian universities where **pay transparency** laws decreased the gender pay gap by 20-40%.^{xv} While new legislation is not a 'silver bullet', it surely will be a significant step towards unlocking the untapped value of women overall and in specific during salary negotiations. Research shows that this path, if implemented in organisations, can have a significant impact on reducing the gender pay gap and allowing for parties to have a more equitable stand in salary negotiations.^{xvi}

1.2 Shortcomings in organisations

Studies have shown that most women will only apply for a job if they meet 100% of the listed qualifications for the role. On the other hand, the majority of men will apply if they fulfil only 60% of the job criteria, giving them a plain numerical advantage in their job search.^{xvi}

Once the formal hiring process begins to set in, evidence demonstrates that women already face bias in the **interviewing stage**. Claudia Goldin and Cecilia Rouse from the University of Harvard used blind auditions to show a bias towards hiring men in the music industry.^{xvii} A similar pattern was identified at universities where male candidates for research assistant positions were more likely to be hired over female candidates.^{xviii} The underlying problem here is that hiring managers have a tendency to choose employees that they can identify with, therefore maintaining a preference for candidates that look and behave like themselves. Therefore, if a company is prevalently white and male, this hinders the chances for women and other minorities to get hired. Such an example could recently be

seen in a picture taken at a high-level CEO lunch that enraged the world by not having a single women or otherwise visible minority at the table. These leaders represent some of Germany's most significant business entities and therefore also hiring cultures. This is by far not the only example of such a kind, with high-level representation in the business and political sphere still more often than not being on par with our societal standpoint. Without improved representation in high-level positions, the overall hiring process on any level will continue to face difficulties in effectively diversifying.

Once a candidate has advanced to the hiring stage where **compensation negotiations** take place, women continue to be disadvantaged in comparison to men. Glassdoor, which collects and compares salaries from employees worldwide, found that:

two-thirds of women will take the first salary offer presented to them,

with the percentage of men significantly lower.^{xix}

This continues to prevail the gender pay gap for which in the Netherlands a women earns 85.4 cent to each euro a man makes.^{xx} This can lead to women earning the equivalent of 300.000€ less over the course of their working life.^{xxi} This asymmetry continues when it comes to non-financial compensation such as flexibility in working hours, adjustment to part-time, working from home as well as travelling requirements or maternity leave, despite evidence that these all represent important organisational levers to promote gender equity in the workplace.

These patterns continue after the hiring process as studies have found that for every 100 men who are promoted to management positions, only 86 women advance to management.^{xxii} Furthermore, women have ask for raises and higher compensation at an equal rate to men, however are significantly less successful.^{xxiii}

1.3 Beyond the workplace

A key negotiation taking place in many households and families is that of unpaid labour. This term refers to any type of work that does not receive direct remuneration and can cover aspects from childcare over housework to volunteering. Modern society still often adheres to a gendered labour division with women disproportionately affected. In developed countries, they perform over two hours of unpaid labour more a day in comparison to their male counterparts. In the Netherlands, the picture looks very similar with women contributing on average 7 hours more per week.^{xxiv} Whilst this is unequal from a labour perspective, research has also shown that the disparate distribution of housework makes the partner carrying a high load significantly more susceptible to mental illness. Unequal distribution of unpaid labour at home has an influence on professional performance, making the employee more susceptible to burn-outs and depression as well as having the potential to impact overall workplace performance.

Therefore, debates on the gender pay gap, which are rooted in salary negotiations and equal compensation, cannot be approached as solely an organisational issue. Instead, the negotiations women have with their partners and families need to be just as much centred in the discussion of gender equity.

2. HOW NEGOTIATION THEORY CAN HELP CHANGE THE STATUS QUO

To be able to properly frame this approach to the subject of gender inclusion and negotiations, we must again acknowledge two common assumptions about negotiations. First, negotiations have typically been understood as two people on opposite sides of a table arguing about salaries or purchasing prices. However, negotiations can represent more than this classic example.

Everyone negotiates everyday – whether it is about a salary, buying a new car or who will do the dishes;

many interactions can be labelled as negotiations.

Second, negotiations are typically depicted with the respective parties as enemies pitted against one another. Therefore, it is often defined as a communication between two or more parties aimed at reaching agreements on their perceived divergent interests.^{xxv}

However, this representation is misleading. While the parties perceive to have different interests that cannot all be achieved at the same time, they are in fact working towards one common goal: every party wants to fulfil their interest. However, no matter what the respective party's interests are, no party can meet their needs without some level of cooperation from the other.

As such, framing the negotiation process as a conflict is more likely to be a hindrance in coming to an agreement than enable it. Instead, parties should look at the negotiation as collaborative communication, where everyone involved can help to “enlarge the pie” of available options to create further value.^{xxvi}

At the heart of collaborative communication lies the goal of finding an outcome to meet each party's respective interests instead of solely considering their individual positions. This can begin by framing the negotiation as tackling a common problem. Therefore, even once the process reaches difficult or contrary territory, it remains possible to separate the people at the negotiation table from the issue at hand, allowing everyone to continue working together instead of against each other. Another important aspect is to find different possibilities for 'win-win' outcomes. This allows the actors to pivot if an agreement cannot be reached on a specific issue by discussing other mutually beneficial concerns instead of cutting the dialogue entirely. Additionally, by measuring negotiation results against commonly objective criteria, underlying assumptions and biases that may be held by the negotiators can be circumvented. By pursuing negotiation theory from this point of view, better dialogue and understanding is fostered that is specifically important for collaboration on gender issues. As such, an increased focus on negotiation techniques and styles can strongly benefit women, as

well as other marginalised groups. This applies not only for asserting value in the professional sphere, but also to navigate all further non-professional situations that have an influence on success.

The goal here is to shift the approach to negotiations for every involved actor by changing the environments where they negotiate to ones that everyone, regardless of gender, can flourish in. The basis for this is a change in negotiation culture, from self-interest and power demonstrations to one based on win-win outcomes, empathy, and good listening. By establishing such contexts, women and other minorities would be in a better position to assert their value and interests, thereby igniting organisations and systems into becoming more equal and equitable.

3. IGNITING SYSTEM CHANGE – WHAT CAN ORGANISATIONS DO?

Every large-scale transformation has been ignited by many singular actions. This also holds true in the case of negotiations. For

every negotiation guided by the insights of negotiation theory, the needle can be moved on how we view negotiations within organisations and as a society and what they represent towards a more equitable future.

3.1 Changing the rules of the game: Performance mechanisms & enlarging the pie

Organisations must integrate insights more effectively from negotiation theory into the way they organise themselves and engage with their employees. A kick-off point for this is by changing the overall organisational culture such as by reevaluating what and how a **successful working performance** is viewed. By creating a company culture in which success and dedication at the job is equated to working over contractual hours or having continuous and flexible availability, this places a strain on employees that have pressing commitments in their personal life such as the care for children or elderly relatives. Broadening discussions with your workers of either gender on their underlying interests rather than their positions can represent a good starting point. This can include expanding negotiations past the

height of their salary towards what they require to combine their job with caring for elderly or children is a good starting point. By explicitly or implicitly promoting performance mechanisms based on negotiation theory's insights and communicating those expectations to the employees, any party regardless of gender is given the best initial situation to have equal chances of pursuing a career while at the same time balancing the labour of their personal lives.

Another measure that both organisations and individuals can utilise in negotiations as a tool to further gender equity is to take up a negotiation's mindset of '**enlarging the pie**'. This refers to no longer seeing the financial compensation as the only component to discuss, but rather viewing negotiations as a bigger part of the puzzle than just salary. Therefore, other beneficiaries, such as flexibility regarding the working-location, travelling or extra holidays, should always also be on the table as aspects to consider.^{xxvii} Research has proven that the implementation of flexibility policies and more specifically work-life

policies are one of the most significant drivers in decreasing the gender pay gap. By utilising this approach, a contribution is made to shaping more effective and equitable working conditions in comparison to taking a ‘one work style fits all’ approach.

3.2 Involving all stakeholders

System change requires all actors, regardless of gender, to play an active role. However, to this day conversations surrounding gender equity in organisations are still mainly held with and by women. Therefore, a key step to changing negotiation systems is to onboard a wide range of stakeholders and transform them into allies.

To effectively engage with your stakeholders, many principles of negotiation can still serve as guidance. Undergoing transformation and having external environments change rapidly is often met by many humans with refusal. **Igniting a dialogue** with not only your supporters, but also the critics within the organisation, and truly listening to their concerns can foster an understanding for where an initial rejection

stems from. It is also valuable to continuously engage from a mindset of mutual benefits: a shift in negotiation culture towards better understanding and collaboration will disadvantage nobody but add value for all involved. By approaching the conversation from the viewpoint of highlighting what they stand to gain, initial critics can be shown different viewpoints.

Once all stakeholders have been onboarded and the guiding principles of effective negotiations are widely understood, it lies with all to integrate them into their interactions and negotiations. Furthermore, especially for stakeholders in historically more privileged positions such as men, it is not only important to foster an awareness and understanding for the issue, but enable themselves to become advocates for the cause. This also extends to reevaluating negotiation tables throughout the organisation and system: Who is not represented at these tables? Which perspective are we missing? What can we do to improve that?

3.3 Personal change & development

Both organisations and individuals can take active measures to reframe negotiation culture from being win-lose situations to **win-win situations** to improve the quality of the agreements reached.^{xxviii} This can be achieved by implementing understandings of negotiation theory as provided by the Harvard Program on Negotiation. Vital in the changing approach to negotiations are to focus on interests instead of positions, separate the people from the problem, and look for opportunities that would benefit everyone involved.

A possibility for both organisations and individuals to achieve this shift of negotiation culture is through taking part in negotiation training.

Research has shown that even a basic, short-term training can result in a salary increase of 2% - 5% and is especially beneficial for women.^{xxix}

For trainings that are specifically tailored to women negotiators, these benefits are set to increase further.^{xxx} By empowering women to become better advocates for themselves, advise them on how to mitigate gender differences in negotiations and make use of their personal strengths, the rigged playing field perpetuated by gender biases can be equalised.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The current discourse on negotiations fails to be inclusive to everyone at the table. Instead of changing the way in which we negotiate, the focus is placed on altering women or blaming men. Organisations can proactively circumvent this by **incorporating more of negotiation theory's insights** into their culture. This can take on a variety of different approaches such as laying a greater focus on listening to employees, thinking in interests rather than positions and presenting creative and explorative propositions that build new and mutually beneficial ways of doing business. Without implementing these lessons from negotiation culture, organisations will continue to struggle in building working

environments that give everyone equal chances and allow them to thrive. The gender pay gap and gender inequality will not be solved by simply looking at it as a problem to fix. Even if the difference in remuneration would be closed statistically, the underlying reasons of why it occurred to begin with will remain and be unresolved.

This article argues that by changing the systems and culture as well as the way organisations perceive negotiations, it can help in diminishing those underlying conditions that initially created inequality.

Changing the narrative from negotiations as an arm-wrestling match into a chance to build long term and mutually beneficial

relationships is a chance to create value together as well as redefine the values that organisations are built on. Creating such a culture does not come with drawbacks, but only presents possibilities for positive development and increased equality.

Only by involving everyone - organisations and individuals - we can change the systems and organisations in which we negotiate, to unlock the true value of women negotiators.



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