

# Affirmative action and women essay example

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



In most of the developed world, women have achieved higher levels of educational attainment than men have. However, women still have not caught up to their male counterparts in terms of access to the top corporate jobs (Villevall 544). While discrimination most certainly plays a role in this lag, there is also research showing that, on the whole, women lack the desire for competition that seems to drive many men. Balafoutas and Suter have demonstrated that affirmative action policies can boost women's willingness to engage in competition without harming the chances that men with the requisite skills have to succeed. These policies also preserve collaboration between groups and individuals once the competition has come to an end. In many ways, affirmative action has achieved its fundamental goal, which was “to put a significant dent in the tightly controlled networks of privileged white male citizens who monopolized the good jobs and influential positions in American society”(West 608).

The traditional explanation that labor economists offer for the executive gap in women is the role that they play in their families or factors on the demand side such as employer discrimination. However, recent studies in behavioral economics have looked at new hypotheses. One of these involves a lower preference on the part of women for taking risks (Villevall 544). This reduced level of preference for risk could also explain why women are statistically less likely to create their own businesses than men are. Women differ from men in their particular attitudes about negotiation and other similar social situations, which can lead to the choice of occupations that do not have as many career opportunities as the fields that men choose (Bertrand).

Over time, though, one dimension continues to hold the attention of

behavioral economists: compared to men, women overall have different attitudes about competition. In gender-neutral tasks, men's performances appear to improve as the level of competition in the environment increases, while women's performances remain stable (Gneezy et al.). Similar behavior has been observed in athletic competitions. Boys tend to do better than girls when they are competing directly against another person, but not when they are competing alone, as against the clock or the measuring tape (Gneezy & Rustichini). These empirical results have led to research on the ways individuals self-select when they have the choice between payments based on absolute as opposed to relative performance. Women are much less likely to choose a compensation structure that is competitive, even after beliefs about performance, relative ability and risk preferences have been adjusted for statistically.

This gap in attitudes about competition appears to be culturally embedded. Women are much more likely than men are to compete in matriarchal societies, while patriarchal tribes do feature more male-based competition (Villevall). This gap between the genders appears around the age of five; at younger ages, there is no difference in terms of competitiveness. Girls from single-sex schools retain their competitive drive, in comparison to girls from coeducational learning environments (Sutter & Ruetzler). This does not rule out biological factors, however. In experiments in which word and math tasks were tested, women were less likely to enter competitive tasks if they were in the low-hormone phase of the menstrual cycle, even though fluctuations in hormone levels had no effect on their overall performance (Wozniak et al.).

If one looks at the lower competitive levels among women as a responsible factor in their lower performance within the overall labor market, then the research should spur the philosophy behind policy design for shattering the “glass ceiling.” Policy changes that boost the financial incentives that go along with competitive pay schemes, in relation to individual pay, or that permit individuals to select the gender of their possible competition would both encourage a great number of female competitors. This demonstrates that women are not refusing to compete en masse. Because these changes would also boost competitiveness among men, though, just these changes would do nothing to alleviate the gap in gender when it comes to competitiveness.

This means that affirmative action ultimately makes a more effective intervention than simple financial changes for everyone. Niederle, Segal & Vesterlund demonstrated that gender quotas can have significant results. They suggested a gender quota to guarantee equal representation for women in a tournament that involved a math task and choose only academic performance as the selector. Without the use of affirmative action, a competitor would win the tournament if his or her performance was better than that of a minimum of four of the other five members in the group. With affirmative action, there were two winners: the best-performing woman and the highest performer of the five other participants. This change resulted in a higher rate of entry into the contest for women; men entered this modified contest at a lower rate. The researchers attributed these changes to two distinct factors: quotas skew the probability of winning the competition in favor of women. At the same time, women’s confidence in the contest was

boosted, along with their probability of winning. A problem with simply changing the objective probability to advance out of this sort of situation could, in a professional setting, create an atmosphere of reverse discrimination, as men who would normally win these contests because of their high skill level could be passed by weaker women.

Balafoutas & Sutter look at three different types of affirmative action policies: quotas creating a forced gender balance for winners, two types of preferential treatment that give women's outcomes an artificial boost, and repeating a competition if there were not enough women in the initial competitor pool. Comparing these different competitive paradigms showed that men would compete twice as frequently as women when there were no interventions at all. However, the various interventions could reduce the gender gap or even reverse it so that there were more women than men entered. The changes in the ratio came from increased interest in high-ability women in taking part in the competitions. Because the most able men were not eliminated by women with lower ability levels as a result of the interventions, Balafoutas & Sutter found that these interventions cut the gap in competitiveness without reducing overall efficiency or creating real reverse discrimination.

The end result of this research is that affirmative can indeed lead to ensured fairness, as long as its primary effect is to entice women who are talented but timid into entering competitive situations more often. There is, of course, the problem that men who believe that affirmative action interventions lead to an unfair competitive environment may not be as willing to cooperate with female counterparts if they know that the competition was conducted under

an affirmative action intervention. However, research experiments such as that conducted by Balafoutas & Sutter have determined that, even when affirmative action interventions are used in competitive situations, the spirit of cooperation after the competition is not damaged.

The importance of the research presented in this article shows that it is important to look at the supply part of the equation – in other words, the relative numbers of both men and women who are entering the competitive situations which affirmative action was designed to remedy, at least from the demand side of the equation. It is important to analyze how both sides of the equation work in concert to determine ways to boost the competitiveness of women. The implications of this research are significant for human resources and management professionals going into the future. At least one concrete proposal that should start to remedy the competitiveness gap would be to modify compensation packages to suit the preference of even the women with the highest level of ability to enter competitive situations.

As Cornel West suggested, affirmative action originally was “ an imperfect policy conceded by a powerful political, business and educational establishment in light of the pressures of organized citizens and the disturbances of angry unorganized ones” (West 608). Because it is virtually impossible to manage all human interaction in a way that will please everyone and produce uniformly ideal outcomes, affirmative action, like other interventions, will occasionally come across as a hamfisted process. However, the more research that goes into this, the more management professionals can tailor solutions that fit different workplace situations ideally.

## Works Cited

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