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**Article**

## "Many women just don't feel like competing against others": Seven questions for Johanna Mollerstrom

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Prof. Johanna Mollerstrom, Ph.D.,  
Head of the Competition and  
Consumers Department at DIW Berlin

## SEVEN QUESTIONS FOR JOHANNA MOLLERSTROM

# »Many women just don't feel like competing against others«

1. Ms. Mollerstrom, isn't the idea that women are less competitive than men a cliché? It is a cliché—but one that, on average, holds true. Of course, there are a lot of women who are very competitive and a lot of men who are not. But research clearly shows that on average, women are less inclined to compete against others than are men.
2. How did you study the competition attitudes of women and men? I use a standard laboratory experiment that had already been conducted many times. In this experiment, participants solve math problems in three rounds. In the first round, participants receive a payment per correct answer without competing against another person. In the second round, they compete against another person. For the third round, they can decide whether they want to be paid a small amount for each correct answer (as in Round 1) or whether they want to compete (as in Round 2), which entails the possibility of earning more. In the third round, fewer women and more men decided to enter into a competition.
3. Is it possible to compete against oneself instead of others? Definitely. This is what we have looked into and what's novel in this research. The gender gap when it comes to competing against others has been studied many times. We do that, too, but we also compare it to what happens when competing against oneself—that is, against one's past performance. In this case, we find that there is no gender gap: women are as likely as men to compete against themselves.
4. What do men's and women's differing attitudes toward competition mean for the labor market? Previous research has established that people who are ready to compete against others in the lab were also ready to do so in real life. These people pursue jobs, careers, or fields of studies that are potentially more lucrative but entail higher levels of risk and competition. What we find in the lab helps us understand what happens on the labor market and why there are fewer women in top positions, where competition is the most fierce.
5. Are men at an advantage because of their affinity for competition? It's hard to say. In the lab, we can see that women who are very good at solving these tasks would earn more if they were willing to compete against others. I think that outside the lab as well, women would earn more and go further in their careers if they showed more appetite for competition.
6. What is more conducive to good performance: competition against others or competition against oneself? There is no difference as far as we can tell—at least so far. Both forms of competition seem to enhance performance. But it's an aspect that hasn't been studied much and which I'd like to research further.
7. How can employers and companies make use of your results? Employers should be aware of one thing: even though women are more cautious, it doesn't mean they are not as capable as men. Very often, the appetite for competition is seen as a sign of competence. But one should keep in mind that there is a gender gap at play and that often, equally capable women just don't feel like competing. There is no gender gap, however, when it comes to competing against oneself. Employers could thus introduce incentives for employees to improve their own performance. Bonus payments could depend on this factor, for instance.

Interview by Erich Wittenberg



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