



YOUNG WOMEN'S EXECUTIVE ROUNDTABLE

On the 11th July 2020, we launched the Girls in Charge Roundtable series, aimed at pioneering an interactive and personalised way to research the issues and worries affecting young professional women. We believe that our roundtable series will allow us to obtain valuable insights directly from the GC community, so that we can continually develop and personalise our teaching and workshops.

We launched our first roundtable, the Girls in Charge Young Women's Executive Roundtable, after being surprised by [graduate employment data](#) published by the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). The statistics showed that the gender pay-gap appears almost immediately after graduation; we decided to try and collect some anecdotal evidence which might help explain these results. As well as that, we were also surprised by statistics which suggested that the gender pay-gap became wider - with men earning more than women - during the COVID pandemic. We therefore decided to incorporate questions which might help explain this trend in the roundtable session.

At Girls in Charge, we appreciate that conducting in-house research will be most effective if our student leaders and members of our community can trust that the insights generated are robust and unbiased. We therefore chose not to share any of the statistics or information we obtained before the roundtable with any participants in the session.

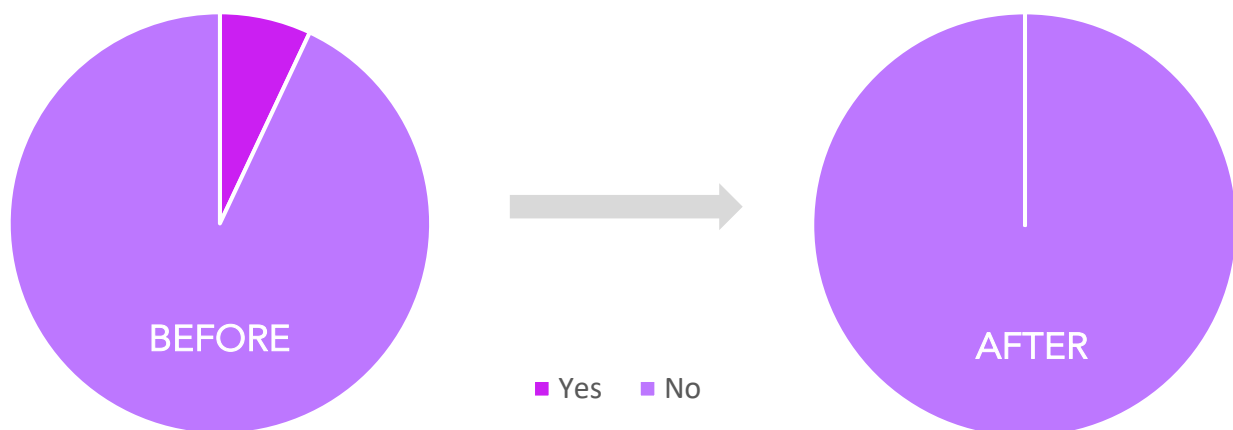
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PROCESS

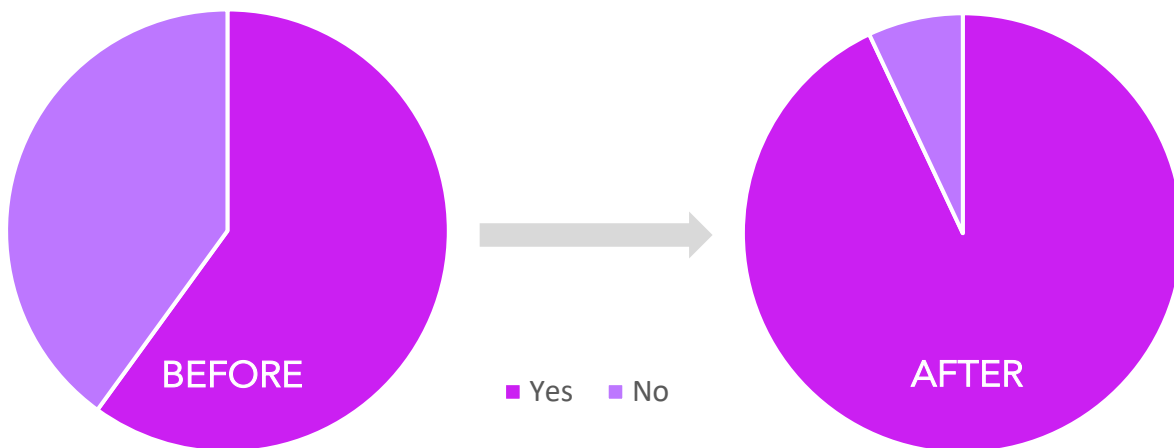
We launched this roundtable with a poll of general yes/no questions regarding our participants' feelings towards the gender pay-gap and graduate employment, following which we began discussions in two groups, led by Habiba (GC Director of Projects and Outreach) and Maggie (GC Co-Founder). After the discussions concluded, we ran the same poll again to see if any changes occurred. We were extremely impressed (but absolutely not surprised) by the depth of discussion and thought demonstrated in these breakout groups. The session progressed as we discussed each starter poll question one by one, and we aimed to allow the conversations to progress in their natural forms with minimal guidance.

“DO YOU BELIEVE THAT MEN AND WOMEN ARE OFFERED EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN GRADUATE JOB EMPLOYMENT?”



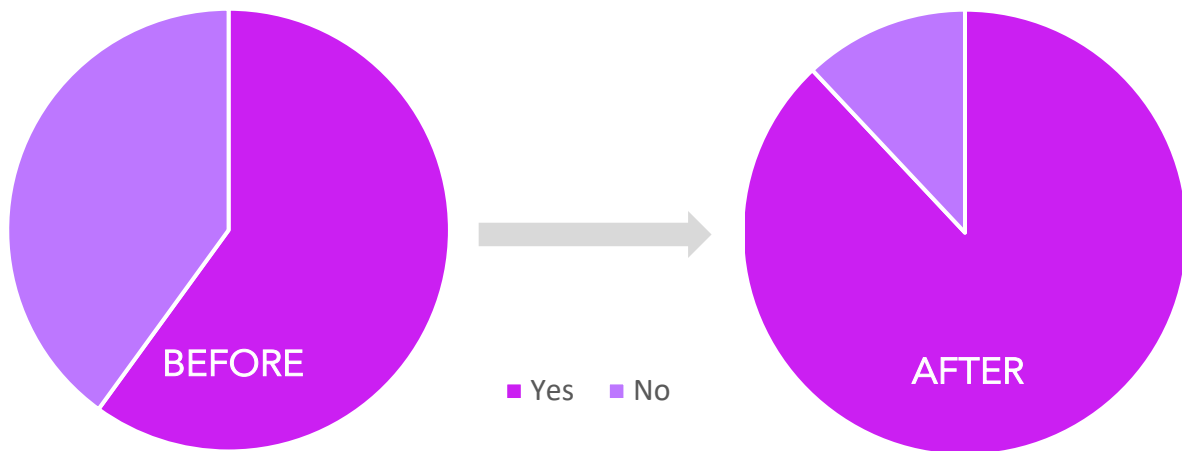
We opened the poll with this question. The starter poll yielded a result of 93% no and 7% yes. When participants began discussions about this question, several participants agreed that employment was unequal, and success is based on “who you know”. Participants also suggested that they believed low income can be detrimental to university students’ morale and motivation to work hard. Overall, we observed a general consensus among our participants that socioeconomic inequality is a significant contributor to the gender pay-gap, that large-scale soft-skills training provision to young people would help close this gap but mostly, that the impact of socioeconomic inequality on the gender pay-gap is a domain which demands much deeper discussion and exploration. After the discussions ended, we repeated the starter poll and the result for this question changed, with 100% of participants voting no, all in agreement that unfortunately, men and women are not offered equal opportunity in graduate employment.

“DO YOU EXPECT THAT THERE IS A GENDER PAY-GAP IN GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT?”



Our second question yielded a result of 60% yes and 40% no. At GC, we expected that the propagation of structured graduate employment programmes in most sectors would lead to decisive planning for equal pay for men and women. The discussion which ensued revealed that most of our participants agreed. They believed that the gender pay-gap begins to open up once people begin to climb the professional ranks and negotiate salaries. The worry was expressed by some that the pay gap is negatively impacted by women’s comparatively lower self-confidence, leading to a diminished likelihood of more confrontational salary negotiation. Participants added that “Asian culture” sees a “widespread use of ranking people based on their ability in and out of the workplace”, they believe that “this could embed a culture of comparison which can further diminish women’s self-confidence and therefore fuel income discrepancies between men and women”. This observation was widely agreed with but fuelled a debate as to how we might be able to improve the situation. The contradicting ideas which were posed mainly advocated for either top-down (policy) action or bottom-up (personal) action. For example, some participants suggested that the lack of self-confidence professional women battle would be best curbed with more female representation in top positions, such as by introducing requirements for women to serve on company boards of directors. Others argued that “you can’t get what you don’t ask for”, arguing that proactivity and confidence in presenting ideas (becoming memorable) are (stereotypically male) qualities that women should aim to develop. After the session, the results of this poll question changed to 93% yes and 7% no.

“DO YOU EXPECT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TO AFFECT THE GENDER PAY-GAP?”



The third segment of the discussion yielded a poll result of 60% yes and 40% no. Here, some participants expected the gender pay gap to shrink, rather than grow, as a result of the pandemic. The reasons provided included optimism that generalised appreciation for “work from home” culture would increase, greatly enabling women to work from home in the future and perhaps therefore lessening the barrier of childcare/familial responsibility to a successful career. Participants also communicated that after time in the zoom-workplace (due to the much slimmer chances of catching a casual chat with the boss before a meeting, for example) hard work might be more easily measured in terms of quality of employees’ work output rather than membership of a “boys club”. However, other participants were not as optimistic as Zoom meetings continue to silence women in male-dominated industries, where the “fairness” and “balance” of the meetings are heavily dependent on existing company culture and the person chairing the meeting. After our session, the results of this poll question changed to 88% yes and 12% no.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The point of all this is to address the all-important question of how we can resolve issues pertaining to the gender pay-gap in our future (hopefully post COVID) world. We are struck by just how many questions this discussion has sparked. Rather than feeling discouraged, however, we at GC have since spent countless hours at the drawing board to ensure our future roundtable sessions facilitate a cutting-edge and meaningful exploration of the many elements and issues surrounding the success of professional women. To this end, the participants of the Young Women's Executive Roundtable contributed a richness of ideas regarding the avenues which need a deeper dive, including the impact of cultural differences, socio-economic backgrounds, and role-models on the gender pay-gap. To the question of positive action towards professional equality for men and women, participants also inspired us with a wealth of suggestions for policy, education as well as proactive and skills-based strategies we could collectively apply to diverse areas, which we hope would give a decisive, upwards boost to women in workplaces across the board.

Although we had to be bearers of the news that the graduate gender pay-gap opens up far earlier than we expected, and that the pay-gap did, in fact, widen during the pandemic (despite our collective expectations and hopes), it is precisely our mistaken expectations which bring us the most optimism. We believe that the immediate way forward will be for people across the globe to make a serious attempt at highlighting the pay-gap closing opportunities in place, both by exploiting the inherent fixed structure of graduate job schemes to ensure equal pay, and by ensuring that the meritocratic advantages of the temporary zoom-workplace are not forgotten once the WFH days are over. We greatly look forward to diving much more deeply into the issues which surround and affect the fight for fairness in the professional world in future discussions and thank everyone who took part in our first ever GC roundtable and helped bring these valuable insights to light.



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