Abstract

A prominent finding in the literature on gender competition is that women are less inclined to compete in comparison to men. In this paper, we conduct a laboratory experiment to examine the importance of the perception of the sex of potential competitors on men’s and women’s decision to enter a competition. Specifically, we test whether women have a weaker preference to compete per se, or rather they just shy away from competing against men. The results support the latter hypothesis. When given the possibility to choose a competitor’s sex, or when being surrounded only by female participants, women’s percentage of competition entry is high and similar to the figures commonly reported for men. Moreover, only women are sensitive to the different cues we provide concerning the sex of potential competitors, and their competitiveness is largely driven by their beliefs in other women’s competitive attitude. Our findings have important policy implication for the labor markets and educational programs in which women are under-represented. They suggest that persuasive references to recent female applicants and/or hiring of female staff while advertising a position could be more effective to promote women’s participation than on-going interventions highlighting women’s under-representation.