

If we truly valued caring, we would fix the gender pay gap^[1]

Opinion

Author: Toynbee, Polly

Source: The Guardian

Format: Article

Publication Date: 15 Dec 2015

AVAILABILITY

Read online^[2]

EXCERPTS

Money, money, money – that’s how we value each other. Pious praise for good folk helping others for low reward is flim-flam from the monied and powerful: people who are underpaid are undervalued.

Women are underpaid because the work they do is low status – low status because it’s work mainly done by women. Pay is the acid test of women’s worth: test all feminist advances in this hard cash crucible.

Today the Commons women and equalities committee starts taking evidence on the gender pay gap. Latest figures from the Office for National Statistics show the gap for median hourly earnings standing at 19%. Effectively, that means women stopped being paid from 9 November, the rest of the year working for free compared with men, according to the Fawcett Society.

When the Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) were passed, everyone thought that was it, done and dusted, as in *Made in Dagenham*. Pass a law and, hey presto, the world and its history is turned on its head. The 2010 Equality Act passed in Labour’s dying days conferred a stronger right to equal pay: progress has been glacially slow. This inquiry will explore why, and what’s to be done.

But we all know why. Caring, cooking, cleaning, childminding and all the jobs servicing a society that would fall apart without women’s work are despised because these things are what women do, and women are despised for doing it and for being women.

At its most extreme, the horrendous domestic violence statistics reflect that abiding social control and contempt. Images of a few powerful women do nothing much to up-end that essential truth. One woman prime minister was remarkable, as are all manner of “role models”. But their exceptionalism makes the point: only 34% of managers, directors and senior officials are women. And these top women suffer a bigger pay gap than women at the bottom: the finance sector has the widest gap.

More women reaching the tree-tops doesn’t reflect most working women’s fraught dilemmas: caring is the obstacle, so a disproportionate number of high fliers don’t have children.

One reason why women are paid less is that so many work part-time – 41% compared with just 12% of men. But why are part timers paid so much less an hour? For the same old reason: women are the ones who need part-time work, so they can be paid less.

Women over the age of 40 suffer the biggest pay discrimination: over-50s have a pay gap of 27% compared with men the same age. That’s not because older women are less qualified, but their skills and experience are wasted as they work below their potential because they need part-time jobs: a quarter of them are caring for elderly or disabled relatives. The big question is why can’t good skilled jobs be part-time too? If by law all jobs were advertised as a potential job-share, women wouldn’t be confined to low-paid work.

A bigger question is why is it still women who do most of the caring? And the even bigger question is why do we undervalue these essential jobs by paying people – men and women – too little, causing an inequality that stretches far deeper across class than gender? Women become down-classed in work. Feminism always was a revolutionary egalitarian project: no wonder Margaret Thatcher would have none of it.

That is why two early pieces of evidence to the inquiry come from the free-market thinktank the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), both rubbishing the idea that there is any problem.

Len Shackleton, economics professor at Buckingham University, refers to his book *Should We Mind the Gap?*, to which his answer is no. He sees no point in next year’s new regulation requiring large organisations to publish their average pay gap between men and women employees.

The gap is a statistical artefact, he says, and very little of it is explained by discrimination, because older single women do as well as men: the cause is “having children, caring responsibilities and other ‘lifestyle’ factors”. Women “choose family responsibilities” and “it is not clear what the public policy interest is in further measures to reduce gender pay differentials”.

Another IEA contribution, from PF Withrington, a civil engineer and member of its advisory council, argues that men are cleverer than women, and so are rightly paid more. “The age-old functions of men as the hunters and defenders and women as the carers cannot simply be discounted. We have evolved for those separate roles.”

Since women caught up in IQ tests long ago, he quotes Prof Richard Lynn’s work: “Women now come out the same on IQ tests because the questions which women find harder and which men excel at have been deleted.”

Lynn is the eugenicist who “discovered” in his study “Race Differences in Intelligence: An Evolutionary Analysis” that IQ correlates precisely with colour of skin in fine gradations – the paler the race, the cleverer. Similarly his 2005 work Sex Differences finds men are five IQ points cleverer than women. Published in the respectable British Journal of Psychology, he made headlines, “IQ tests: women just don’t get it” and the Sun’s, “The male of the species is cleverer than the female: it’s a no-brainer”. Lynn has been resoundingly refuted, not least in Nature where his work was called “utter hogwash”.

Don’t imagine these attitudes are ancient history. It’s worth remembering what’s out there in respectable academic publications, reflecting what bubbles beneath the surface. It would be astonishing if there wasn’t a huge pay gap with a downward pay spiral where underpaid women care for children and old people, taking in each other’s caring, unable to pay each other enough, causing the crisis in social care, in healthcare and in childcare. All that is despite women’s better educational results, despite 45 years of equality law.

MP Maria Miller, the Tory head of the committee, may not call for an equality revolution. But we could start with total pay transparency, so everyone knows who earns what and why. Make employers let in a trade union rep once a year to recruit, restoring some power to the workforce. As hospitals overflow for lack of home care, nursing homes close and the promised 30-hour free childcare can’t be delivered, we could reset the valuation on caring until as many men as women do it, at home and at work.

-reprinted from The Guardian

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: gender ^[4]

pay equity ^[5]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/15/12/if-we-truly-valued-caring-we-would-fix-gender-pay-gap>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/15/12/if-we-truly-valued-caring-we-would-fix-gender-pay-gap> ^[2]

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/15/valued-caring-gender-pay-gap-women> ^[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe>

[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/gender> ^[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/pay-equity>