

Gender Pay Gap

Liz Albert

What reasons are there for the existence of the Gender Gap?

My comments below are based on my own observations and my own experience of life as a working young woman in the public sector, then as a working mother, then in addition as a carer for my husband, and then, on top of all that, as a working carer at a distance for both of my ageing parents. Throughout my working career I worked full-time until the last 3 years when I worked part-time, having to 'wind down' to preserve my own health.

All my comments below are generalisations, and of course they do not apply to every woman and every man, or to every working situation. However, I do believe they are quite common realities.

I was fortunate myself to work in the public sector where pay scales were published openly, and were the same for men and women. However, a pay gap nevertheless arose because promotions so often went to men, including many situations where women and other men were equally competent or indeed more competent. This partly arose from poor selection processes which often favoured candidates who could talk a good game but could not deliver the goods in reality. And partly from stereotyping from men, and sometimes from women, seeing women with ambition as 'bossy', or as 'shrill', or as unnatural in some way. And also partly from women's difficulty in putting themselves forward, seeming to think they were not capable enough. They were often quite wrong to have these qualms. In contrast, I twice sought promotion and was selected, and both times I soon chose to go back 'down' to my original position. This was not because I couldn't cope at promoted level, but because I found distasteful some of the management responsibilities that were part of the promoted position. The worst aspect of this was that I was expected to pretend that I believed in top-down poor management decisions that were unrealistic and wouldn't work, and I was expected to communicate my 'belief' in these ideas to the people I led.

So I chose to put up with less pay, even though I knew I had the capability, in order to have a more congenial and more honest experience, which nevertheless required very hard work, and a great deal of long-term stamina, working at service delivery level. I think many women, like me, struggle with the structure of working environments where management skills are valued so highly, when in fact it is frontline delivery of service that is the most important and demanding aspect of the institution or service. However, this reality is rarely reflected in structures and pay. Status and high pay virtually always goes to those up the structure of management.

Work which women find more congenial is often in sectors where it is not so easy to measure skill with a numbers approach. Women often have skills, sometimes 'soft' skills, sometimes not, that are extremely valuable. These skills rarely are recognised and fairly rewarded. Men have traditionally made

all the decisions about work structures, selection policies, and so on, and men in positions of power more easily see qualities in other men as valuable. In addition, men candidates tend to be more confident and more competitive, rather than tending to hang back, as women can be inclined to do. Things are changing somewhat, but not far enough, and not quickly enough.

It is a kind of abuse that our society continues to so undervalue women's skills, and it is self-perpetuating in a subtle and complex way. There is so much focus on young women's bodies and appearances rather than on their personal qualities, and this often hinders their self-confidence. In one or two rare kinds of work, modelling, for example, or some expressive arts, small numbers of women may in fact experience positive discrimination. But for the great majority of women, their experience is so much more likely to be of negative discrimination, whether or not they are mothers. These days, anonymous abuse of women on social media, leaves no doubt at all about the extent of adverse stereotyping of women, and not all of it by men.

Women of colour experience a double-whammy, of course. Watch the current film 'Hidden Figures' for an excellent perspective on this. The film is set in the 1960s and 1970s, and there has been some change, but much of it is superficial only.

Things that could be done to improve things.

Stop secrecy about pay in the private sector, so that everyone knows what others doing the same job are being paid.

Invest in successful women mentoring other women in work, to build their self-confidence, and encourage them to make the most of their skills, for status and pay.

Fund research into broader, non-numerical ways of reflecting work skills for men **and** women, and ensure these approaches are put into practice.

Ensure a move away from destructive, insecure forms of employment such as:

- zero-hours contracts
- employment requiring 'full flexibility' – destructive exploitation for anyone, but especially difficult for single parents
- forced self-employment that is in reality a disguise for employers refusing employment benefits, and avoiding National Insurance payments

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