

Only a social revolution will close the gender pay divide

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This year marks the 50th anniversary of the sewing machinists' strike at Ford's Dagenham plant. In 1968, 187 women left the production line to protest against the fact that they were paid less than their male counterparts doing similar work, bringing car production grinding to a halt. Their strike eventually led to the 1970 Equal Pay Act, landmark legislation that enshrined the right to equal pay for equal work, described by its architect, Barbara Castle, as "self-evidently just and right". It has now been illegal for employers to pay differently for work of equivalent value for 48 years. But the gender pay gap remains intractable. New figures last week showed that there are almost four times as many men who earn over £100,000 a year than there are women. Three-fifths of the low paid are women. They still earn, on average, only 82p for every pound earned by men and at the current rate of progress it will take decades to close the gap. A toxic mix of factors is responsible, including outright discrimination, the fact that women still carry most responsibility for caring and the over-representation of women in lowerpaid sectors. This has allowed gender reactionaries to cherry-pick data to argue that the gender pay gap is simply a product of women's choices: they opt to do more caring within families; they choose not to go into the highest-paying careers such as engineering and finance.

This is disingenuous rubbish. First, the statistics show that outright discrimination remains a stubborn presence in workplaces across Britain. The pay gap between men and women without children remains far from insignificant, at 12%. Experiments show that employers judge men and women differently, with female job applicants regarded as less competent and deserving of lower pay. Some of this discrimination is conscious; some will be implicit. Research suggests that the majority of us harbour sexist instincts that we unthinkingly act upon. Men are more likely to ask for a pay rise than women, but women who do so are regarded negatively.

The weight of societal expectation is that it falls to women to fulfil caring roles. Some may happily choose to take a step back from their career for their families, but many will feel they have no choice, that it falls to them to juggle the responsibilities of working and family life or it won't happen at all.

Not only do we still as a society expect women to pick up caring responsibilities, but women's careers get punished as a result of them doing so. The pay gap between working mothers and fathers is far higher than for childless men and women: women experience a penalty for having children, while men get a fatherhood bonus.

Some of the pay gap between mothers and fathers is explained by the fact that so many working mothers go part-time after having children; analysis shows that working part-time after having children holds back women's earnings and career progression. Some of this may well be as a result of women working parttime being denied the opportunity to develop the skills needed to progress; some will be that they are shut out of, for example, networking opportunities that take place outside of their office hours.

But some of the pay discrepancy will also be as a result of the extra discrimination faced by mothers and pregnant women in the workplace. Research suggests that fathers are regarded by employers

more favourably than childless men; for example, employers tend to allow fathers to be late for work more frequently than childless men and mothers.

And the fact that women are overrepresented in low-paid sectors, despite now being more highly educated than men on average, is a product of structural injustice, not choice. As a result of both conscious and implicit bias throughout the education system, fuelled by pervasive gender stereotyping, women remain disproportionately shut out of top jobs in science and engineering. It is no coincidence that work that is seen as “feminine” – caring and cleaning – remains some of the most undervalued and underpaid work in our economy.

Gender pay reporting – mandatory from this year for every organisation with more than 250 employees – is an important step forwards. Without transparency, discrimination remains hidden. But it is not enough. We need to encourage men to play a greater role in family life, for example by giving all men a longer period of “use it or lose it” paternity leave in the first year of their child’s life. We need to ensure that opting to work part-time does not result in women choking off their career progression. And we need to ensure that more women pursue careers in highly paid industries, while improving pay and working conditions in female-dominated jobs such as caring and cleaning.

The last 50 years have shown that there is a long way to go before we achieve what is “self-evidently just and right” for women. It will require radical cultural and social reforms, from eradicating the effects of implicit bias to creating a society in which it is possible for mothers and fathers to share their caring responsibilities equally. Only then will gender equality truly become a reality.