

Handout 5

Undervaluing Women's Work



The undervaluing of work traditionally done by women is a key strand linking together the causes of the gender pay gap, occupational segregation, women's unequal share in caring, and pay discrimination.

Stereotypical female work like the 5 'Cs' of cleaning, catering, clerical (admin), cashiering (retail) and childcare, is associated with low pay. The concentration of women in these jobs has led them to be low-skilled, low-paid and undervalued.

The undervaluing of women's work is often not recognised in historical assumptions around women's 'natural' skills which make them more suitable to particular types of work, such as caring, cooking and cleaning, therefore, requiring no formal level of skill. Furthermore, it is often held that the work women do is for 'pin money', to supplement family income and, therefore, does not require decent pay.

Equal pay is an important issue for feminist economic thinking because it encourages discussion of the value of women's work. For traditional economists, pay is primarily related to productivity and evidence of lower returns to women's productive characteristics suggests undervaluation.

Part-time work also increases the likelihood of undervaluing and discrimination. Women returners and mothers are particularly at risk from undervaluing, both because of childcare constraints and because of the career interruptions. This is not associated with motherhood per se, but rather with the low pay and status of the part-time jobs that mothers often accept to accommodate their caring responsibilities.

Most of the lowest paid occupations in the UK are dominated by women. It is estimated that simply being employed in a female-dominated occupation can reduce your pay by as much as 9%.

An example of the undervaluing of women's work was highlighted in a research study undertaken by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) in Scotland in 2005¹ [see next page].

1. 'Labourers of Love? The cost of undervaluing women's work', Equal Opportunities Commission, May 2007.

Undervaluing in practice: Classroom Assistants in Scotland

Classroom assistants are overwhelmingly female, many of whom are attracted to the role because it fits well with family life. There is evidence, however, that although schools and local authorities are benefiting from the demand for family-friendly employment, they are not offering fair rewards for the work that classroom assistants undertake.

An investigation carried out by the EOC found that all classroom assistants in Scotland are undertaking tasks that are measurably more demanding than the least demanding facilities-maintenance roles. The fact that the facilities-maintenance roles are better paid shows the low value placed on skills and responsibilities involved in classroom assistant work.

The work that classroom assistants do supports the learning process for children and young people, by providing both educational and welfare support to pupils, with the aim of improving the quality of their education. However, they are being paid considerably less than other jobs that require similar or greater levels of skills. Classroom assistants in Scotland are on the lowest local authority pay grades, receiving annual salaries of between £7,000 and £11,000, which is equivalent to an hourly rate of between £5.68 and £8.80.

In 2007, the EOC listed the reasons why undervaluation of women's work happens:

1. Market Failure

Low-paid caring jobs are not paid at the 'going rate' as reflected by the demand for the work. These jobs are paid well below the rate that they could command because the market is not demand driven. EOC research identified a distorting factor, which is particularly present in the public sector, that of employers who enjoy a degree of *monopsonistic* power in the labour market i.e. where they have power over the purchase of labour and can keep wages and employment below the level that a freely operating labour market would achieve. This may particularly affect some public sector jobs where the state is the primary or even the sole employer of that type of labour. Other drivers such as restrictions in funding from central government across an entire sector will shape the workforce pay and investment possible within those sectors.

2. Occupational segregation

The degree of job segregation and the type of payment systems that exist in workplaces are shown to account for a large proportion of the gender pay gap. Working in a female-dominated occupation is detrimental to a person's pay.

Women's skills also tend to be less visible and, therefore, less valued than men's. The impact of women's skills on productivity is harder to quantify in certain occupational areas. Women are also stereotyped as being prepared to trade lower pay for more job satisfaction.

3. Part-time pay penalty

Women often have to 'settle' for work in areas where they can work part-time so as to fit in with their caring responsibilities. This leads to undervaluing certain job roles and also the under-employment of many women.

4. Outdated views on the economic contribution of women

Pay structures attached to certain occupations still view the work done by women as being secondary to household income ('pin money') and therefore not requiring to be better paid.

5. Unequal rewards

It is not only unequal pay within particular workplaces that need to be tackled, there are wider economic, sociological and societal forces at play which keep the undervaluing of women's work a reality.

Solutions to undervaluing women's work?

It is not enough to suggest that women move out of these occupations into others; the undervaluing has to be tackled for the future and policy has to be able to drive forward the issue and not leave it to employers or the market as a whole. Possible solutions include:

- strengthening the link between skills acquisition and pay;
- tackling the issue clearly in the public sector where most of the undervaluing is dominant;
- promoting job evaluation techniques and pay systems that are free of sex bias; and
- reforming equal pay legislation and promote an ethos of equality, transparency and predictability in pay systems.