



## Do we actually need to level the playing field?

Claire Fox calls for a cool head over the issue of gender equality – and specifically – pay

I write this on Monday 9 November, dubbed #EqualPayDay. We're told that's the date from which women are working for free for the rest of the year, due to an average gender pay gap of 14.2%. So apart from hoping I get paid for this article, supporting this campaign seems a no-brainer. However, after a day of outraged tweets, articles and broadcast features about how today's women are being treated as second class citizens by patriarchal villains, I've become sceptical. At the very least, the outlandish claims about a conspiracy of male chauvinists holding back women, needs to be assessed coolly.

In 2015 no one seriously argues that men should earn more than women for doing the same, like-for-like work, so why the exaggerated sense of grievance? Cheering on *Suffragette's* heroic laundry workers or *Downton's* kitchen maid Daisy for educating herself to escape service should remind us that today's equality landscape is very different to that of our fore-sisters in servitude. Today, girls consistently outperform boys at school and outnumber their male peers at university. Can't we dispense with the victim stories and rather celebrate the myriad opportunities we have in contrast to the dark days of institutionalised discrimination?

Of course, any disparity between men and women's wages is problematic, but if you look beneath the soundbites, a more complicated picture emerges. As councils should know more than anyone, even where there's a seemingly contemporary gender pay gap dispute, this is not necessarily evidence of widespread sexist discrimination. This is indeed a sensitive subject for local government, which now faces a swathe of historical equal pay claims. For example, Fife Council has just announced a large payout to 1,400 female workers after it reached an agreement with Unison over backdated claims which the union says may run into

millions. But even such woeful tales indicate how much things have improved.

The vast majority of claims are from former female employees who argue that they were earning less than men in comparable, but different jobs. Assessing such 'equal value' distinctions is an imprecise science, inherently subjective, especially when custom and practice was very different in the past. So local authorities are in the equal-pay firing line, but for historic inequalities regardless of today's more gender-aware job-evaluation processes.

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That things are improving is even indicated by the fact that #EqualPayDay changes each year as the pay gap changes. This year it's five days later than in 2014. And despite headline-grabbing statistics of a 14.2% gap, the picture is more complicated with some basic number-crunching. Ironically one stat that affects the figures is how the average is arrived at. The gap is skewed by more women than ever being in the very best paid jobs in society, where the largest gender differentials exist. As even the TUC admits, not usually the voice of the bosses, the largest gaps in pay affect the top 10% earners, hitting 45.9% for the top 5%, and reaching 54.9% for the top 2%.

Also, we need to note that there is a positive generational dimension to the stats. According to the Office for National Statistics, wage differentials for British women are small or even negative in age groups up to age 39. Meanwhile the Department for Culture, Media and Sport figures reveal that since

2009 median hourly earnings rose faster for women up to the age of 40 than for people in any other group. In that period, women aged 22 to 29 have actually earned more than men. Dr Joanna Williams notes in her excellent work on this issue, while 38.4% of women aged 30 to 39 work part-time compared with 8.4% of men, the gender pay gap for this group is actually *minus* 8.2%. So young women today earn more per hour than men for part-time work.

Of course, one explanation for why more women work part time is childcare, and undoubtedly having and rearing children disproportionately affects career choices and therefore pay. This is not the blatant discrimination my mother's generation faced, when women could be sacked for getting pregnant, when working at all was an act of defiance against social norms of housewives staying at home to look after the kids. Since then, women have campaigned for greater freedom to choose, demanding extended maternity leave and flexible return-to-work contracts, indicating that pay packets are not always the be-all-and-end-all of progress.

Some equality campaigning can belittle such choices. Commentator Christina Odone recently wrote about the pressure on her literary daughter to study three sciences at GCSE, as 'soft' subjects like literature pay less than jobs in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Worse, her choice was treated as 'betraying the suffragettes and Marie Curie', as though girls have a 'duty to master the "tough" subjects that have for so long been the preference and the preserve of men'. When endless campaigns insist that getting young women into higher paid jobs should be institutionalised policy, we risk treating female decisions as an inconvenience in the equality wars. Next year, I may give #EqualPayDay a miss! ■

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## soapbox



By Mark Rogers

As I write this, Europe and the wider world is trying to come to terms with the Paris tragedy. Initially, all I could do was join with millions of others and express my sympathy for, and solidarity with, the French. Like villages, towns and cities across the globe, Birmingham lit up its buildings in red, white and blue, held vigils and observed the Europe-wide minute of silence. #ViveLaParis went viral.

Expressing concern and grief for the bereaved and injured are, of course, natural human emotions. But so are anger and the desire for retribution. And almost as soon as the outpourings of compassion were expressed, so were the calls for revenge heard.

So, against a complex to backdrop of international terrorism, where does the local authority role fit into all of this? We don't make foreign policy. We don't provide intelligence or counter-terrorism services (although we do work with those who do). We don't even run schools anymore.

Notwithstanding this, it is clear to me that, as the appointed civic leaders, it must be our job to support and complement our elected leadership in using its community leadership role to provide information, advice, guidance and – above all – reassurance to all our citizens that the actions of a few must not diminish or unduly change the rest of us. Additionally, we can do something that central government can't easily replicate, reach out and reach in to every street, neighbourhood and community of our places, engage people in trying to understand and respond constructively to these troubling events, and work harder to comprehend and accept each other better.

What has happened in Paris creates an agenda for the whole of my city – for terrorism of the kind we have just seen is a threat to everyone. We must act with alacrity. Many urban areas in the UK are struggling to manage and mitigate a rhetoric that can too easily conflate the actions of a terrible few with the benign culture/faith/values of the many.

As we move forward from the terrible events of 13/11, councils across the land will be mobilising to bring the civic and the civil together to address openly and honestly what it is we need to do to ensure that peace and love defeat hate and war. ■

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