

Example of women as nurturers: traditional occupations and perceptions of women i...

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Women and the almighty dollar: why women make less than men and what can be done to change this income gap

Abstract

There are still men—and women-- who try to dismiss the existence of inequalities in the workforce, stating that there is no more need for feminism, and that society has achieved equality in the workplace. Nothing could be further from the truth—while advancements have been made, there is no doubt that there still needs to be a lot of work done to ensure that women are granted the same protections as men in the workforce. This is a discussion of the problems associated with the gender pay gap and the way society as a whole treats women in the workplace, including a discussion of the societal factors that lead to gender pay inequality. Today, gender inequality still exists in the workplace in a plethora of forms. Although some claim that the gender pay gap does not exist, a careful reading of the appropriate literature suggests that it does.

Introduction

Women face a number of troubling problems in the workplace, and there are few remedies available for women who want to alleviate their struggles. Growing up your parents might have told you, “ You can accomplish anything.” The sky is the limit, in that same breath your parents teach you how to be “ lady like,” soft spoken and modest. So with what you were instilled with, you work hard, get into college, work hard, and graduate with honors. You apply for several Marketing Internships. You turn two down and go for the one you know screams you. You do well, so well the firm offers you

a permanent job. You jump for joy! You run home to your roommate and that evening start to celebrate! Your roommate's boyfriend asks without any reservation or class "how much were offered?" At first you are taken aback by your roommate's boyfriend's crass, but because you were so proud of this accomplishment, one you have been working towards for so long, you tell him, only to be shocked when he mentions how much he got offered. Your roommate's boyfriend was another intern interning with you and was offered a job a month earlier. You ask him to repeat himself, as you thought, perhaps you misunderstood. He goes ahead and repeats himself. You hastily excuse yourself to the bathroom. You could hardly hear your own thoughts past the music blaring, the music playing in your celebratory party. You gain your composure and go back out there. Because, after all it is your party, and you must not show your discontentment, so you mingle and socialize, and don't think about it again.

Stories like this are not uncommon. Many women experience inequality in pay, compared, to their male counterparts. This issue doesn't just have one root problem. Only 33 percent of women believe they'll earn more than \$50,000 in their first job out of college, compared with 48 percent of men, according to the survey conducted online by job site Monster. I believe (partly through my own experiences growing up, and being a working class woman) that the way girls are typically raised has a lot to do with women's attitude towards work. According to Emily Peck of the Huffington Post, "Women have lower expectations than men, when it comes to salary. And that lack of confidence highlights a persistent and stubborn problem for women in the workplace" (Peck, 2015).

Some would argue that women have been an active part of the workplace for a very long time, and thus, there are just certain environments in which women feel more comfortable than their male peers. Women have long been shuttled into certain types of positions more readily than their male counterparts—teaching, nursing, and childcare have long been considered “women’s work,” and these positions have historically been primarily staffed by female employees (DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.). Although today it is not unheard of to see female doctors, engineers, and lawyers, women are still underrepresented in many fields (DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.). In addition, and perhaps more tellingly, men are underrepresented in fields that are considered to be “women’s work.” Many experts, including a number of Ph. D.’s like DiPrete and Buchmann (n. d.) argue that the underrepresentation of men in traditionally women’s fields is important because it demonstrates that there is still a lower value that is placed on something that is considered to be “for women” (DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.). While it is now societally acceptable for a woman to strive for something better, a man who enters a field like nursing is considered to be “lowering” himself to do the same kind of work that a woman does (Western & Rosenfeld, 2011). Until this balance can be normalized—until it is acceptable for a man to do things that are considered traditionally feminine—there will continue to be a wage gap between work that is considered traditionally feminine work and work that is considered traditionally male, regardless of the level of expertise it takes to complete the work (DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011; Peterson & Morgan, 1995). Deconstructing the idea that certain kinds

of work is more appropriate for women (and should, therefore, be paid less) is one of the first steps to reducing the gender pay gap in American culture. Normalizing each form of work as just work—rather than women’s work or men’s work—is the first step to addressing this problem.

Women in Science and Engineering

Women have long struggled in mathematics, science, and engineering—not because of any kind of deficiency in ability, but because there are long-standing issues associated with women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields (Beede et al., 2013). Indeed, even the Nobel laureate Sir Tim Hunt is not immune to prejudices on the topic of women in STEM professions: the BBC reports that “ Sir Tim, 72, who was awarded the Nobel prize in physiology or medicine in 2001 for his work on how cells divide, reportedly told the World Conference of Science Journalists: ‘ Let me tell you about my trouble with girls. Three things happen when they are in the lab: you fall in love with them, they fall in love with you, and when you criticise them they cry’” (BBC News, 2015). There is no way for women to work in an environment that treats them like they are too emotional to perform basic tasks; as a result, female involvement in STEM subjects is consistently much lower than their involvement in other professions (Austin, 2013; Beede et al., 2013). It is attitudes like Hunt’s attitude that leads to the normalization of sexism and misogyny in the workplace, and the de facto isolation of women as second-class workers that deserve less than their male counterparts for the completion of the same tasks (Beede et al., 2013). To address the problem of women in STEM subjects, there should be more

support given to women in these fields; women should have a way to offset the problems associated with sexism and misogyny by going above their immediate superiors and getting support regarding pay and protection in the workplace.

Wage Secrecy

Wage secrecy is an issue that disproportionately affects women over men (Peck, 2015). Wage secrecy is an issue in American society, and in some other western societies; propriety suggests that individuals keep their pay grade secret, and it is considered rude to ask others about how much they get paid and how many times they have been promoted in recent years (DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011; Peterson & Morgan, 1995). Keeping wages secret is undoubtedly something that benefits employers much more than it benefits employees—when employees are not aware of the unfair nature of the wages paid in their company, they have no reason to be distrustful or angry with the company (DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011; Peterson & Morgan, 1995). There have been multiple studies that suggest that wage secrecy is bad for all employees, not only women; however, because women have a tendency to be on the lower end of the pay grade, they are disproportionately affected by wage secrecy practices within an organization (DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011; Peterson & Morgan, 1995). Wage secrecy is an outdated concept that only furthers the amount of inequality that a business can perpetuate secretly within the structure of the organization—in short, it allows wage

discrimination and the perpetuation of the gender pay gap (DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011; Peterson & Morgan, 1995). Normalizing an environment in which pay is transparent would solve almost all the problems associated with wage secrecy.

Negotiation and Pay Practices

Women have a tendency to choose lower salaries than their male counterparts when they are trying to negotiate for a fair salary (DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.). Because women lack the same conviction as their male counterparts when it comes to negotiating their salary, they will sometimes settle for a lower salary than their male peers—and wage secrecy makes it impossible for women to even find out about these inequalities in the workplace (Peck, 2015; DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011; Peterson & Morgan, 1995). Teaching young girls and women to advocate for themselves is part of the solution to this issue. Part of the problem, according to the literature, is that women are not taught to be firm and to understand their worth from a young age; as a result, when they must negotiate for a salary, their upbringing keeps them from arguing for what they're worth, and propriety keeps them from wanted to ask for more, in case they seem to be greedy or unethical (Peck, 2015; DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011; Peterson & Morgan, 1995).

The Mythological Death of the “ Glass Ceiling”

Perhaps one of the most pervasive myths is that gender inequality is gone from the workplace. Although women are in a better place than they have

ever been before in terms of opportunities in the United States, there are still inequalities in the workplace, and the glass ceiling—that invisible barrier to ascent—is still firmly in place in many companies in the United States (Oostendorp, 2004).

Some will claim that in the 1980s, women in the United States smashed through the glass ceiling, and in some ways they did—however, today, there are still fewer women on the boards of major Fortune 500 companies than men; they still hold fewer public offices, and they still receive fewer promotions than their male counterparts and peers with the same experience and education levels (Oostendorp, 2004; Peck, 2015; DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011; Peterson & Morgan, 1995). The glass ceiling still exists today, and this is part of what is keeping women from closing the pay gap: they have trouble getting into the highest-paying positions within their respective companies or organizations (Oostendorp, 2004; Peck, 2015; DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011; Peterson & Morgan, 1995; Cohen & Huffman, 2007). The fact that there are exceptions—even notable exceptions—proves the rule: these women are extraordinary for doing something that is considered ordinary for men in the business world.

Legal Protections for Women in the Workplace

Today, there are some legal protections available for women in the workplace. However, there are only a certain number of these protections that are designed to protect women specifically—many of the protections against discrimination in the workplace have been put there to protect

minority groups of all kinds (Western & Rosenfeld, 2011). The formation of unions have given women more power in the workplace, because they have allowed women greater amounts of control over the wages that they are paid; however, the formation of unions has done nothing to alleviate the other issues that women face in their struggle for pay equality. For instance, today, a woman cannot be fired for becoming pregnant, but it is still commonplace for managers to hire a man instead of a woman in a high-risk or high-power position because of the fear that she will become pregnant and unable to work (Selmi, n. d.). Although it is no longer acceptable to openly discriminate against anyone in the workplace, instances of workplace discrimination still occur at an alarmingly high frequency (Oostendorp, 2004; Peck, 2015; DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011; Peterson & Morgan, 1995).

Women in Education

In a strange and potentially hopeful turn of events, in the United States today, more women than ever are entering tertiary institutions (BBC News, 2015). However, despite the fact that more women than ever before are attending tertiary institutions, women are not receiving the same caliber of job as their male counterparts (Oostendorp, 2004; BBC News, 2015). This problem is twofold—first, there are problems that are associated with the fields of study that many women choose. As previously stated, women tend to shy away from STEM courses, often because of life-long indoctrination and distaste for the levels of misogyny within these fields of study; however, STEM subjects are subjects with the highest pay out of college or university

(Austin, 2013). Women even have a tendency to get better grades than their male counterparts, and yet they are not often able to get the same type of job when they leave academia—this suggests that there are real discriminatory practices in place in the hiring and salary negotiation processes that exist today (Oostendorp, 2004; Peck, 2015; DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011; Peterson & Morgan, 1995).

The role of women in education is a complex topic, because as women fill up universities, these universities desire them less as students, and their male counterparts begin to be favored; this could, potentially, widen the wage gap because fewer women will be able to get into the programs that they want to get into to study the subjects they are interested in (Beede et al., 2013). This problem is also rampant in places like trade schools, which show a much higher enrollment level for men than women in construction-related trades (Beede et al., 2013).

Arguments Against the Existence of a Wage Gap

Some argue that there is not really a wage gap in the United States.

Individuals who argue against the existence of the wage gap state that many of the studies that have been done that look at the different wages that men and women receive in a way that is very misleading (Tobak, 2011). These individuals claim that women have a tendency to choose jobs that pay less than the jobs that men choose; however, when women do choose the same jobs that men choose, they are paid about the same amount for the work that they do (Tobak, 2011).

Although there is some truth to this statement, it completely discounts the many barriers that women face when it comes to getting a job at the same level as a male peer. For instance, women face particular trouble if they are likely to have a baby; employers are much more willing to hire male workers in certain high-performance positions because of the fear that a woman will become pregnant and need to take time off of work to have her child (DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011; Peterson & Morgan, 1995). While the literal pay gap may be growing smaller, there are still obvious and readily significant differences in the way men and women are treated in the workplace, and there are still significant barriers in place to dissuade women from taking the high-powered jobs that are encouraged for their male peers (DiPrete & Buchmann, n. d.; Selmi, n. d.; Western & Rosenfeld, 2011; Peterson & Morgan, 1995).

Discussion and Conclusions

There are many different kinds of inequality in the workplace, and all of these types of inequality have been extensively analyzed and studied. However, there are still men—and women-- who try to dismiss the existence of these inequalities, stating that there is no more need for feminism, and that society has achieved equality in the workplace. Nothing could be further from the truth—while advancements have been made, there is no doubt that there still needs to be a lot of work done to ensure that women are granted the same protections as men in the workforce.

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