

Having it all

The gender pay gap that still needs to be closed

Making it easier to combine family and work would help both men and women



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THEY “do the same work, are exempt from no rules or duties, and most of them have fathers, mothers, sisters or brothers dependent upon them. Why, then, should women not receive the same salaries?” This question was asked in a circular sent by equal-pay suffragettes to female teachers in New York’s public schools in 1905. At the time, teachers’ starting annual salaries were set at \$900 for men and \$600 for women.

In most rich countries such outright discrimination is history. A woman doing the same job for the same employer earns 98 cents to the dollar paid to a man. Yet the

gender pay gap persists. In the OECD, a club of mostly rich countries, the median full-time wage for women is 85% of that for men.

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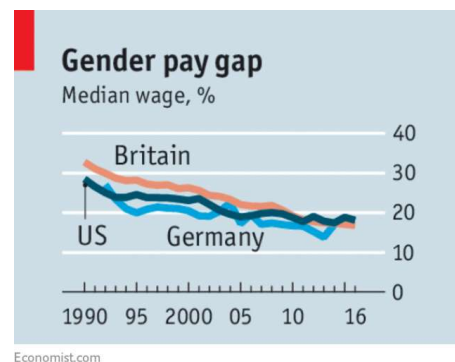
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Women earn less than men because their careers differ in two ways (see [article](#)

(<http://www.economist.com/news/international/21729993-women-still-earn-lot-less-men-despite-decades-equal-pay-laws-why-gender>)). The occupations that many opt for, such as teaching and nursing, are less lucrative than those chosen by men, perhaps because of the long history of putting less value on women's work. And women pay a high price for motherhood. They often miss a first promotion because they are on maternity leave. Later they take less demanding jobs with poor prospects. Often they are overqualified for their new role, but somebody has to pick the kids up from school.

It is not the place of governments to tell young people what careers to pursue, nor to tell parents how to divide their responsibilities. But the underuse of women's skills is a waste for individual women and society alike. The consequences are particularly painful if a couple later breaks up.

The careers men and women want are more similar than the careers they end up in. Women are as ambitious as men. They are more likely than men to go to university, and equally likely to ask for promotion. Young men are much less likely than their fathers to see themselves solely as breadwinners. Many want to play a big part in their children's upbringing.



Helping both sexes fulfil their aspirations is more complicated than passing an equal-pay law. Fortunately, it does not require social engineering or the sort of costly special treatment for working mothers that put some employers off hiring or promoting young women in the first place.

The first step is well-designed parental leave. In America, the only rich country with no such entitlement for new mothers, many of them drop out of the labour force. Unless some leave is reserved for fathers, as in Norway and Sweden, couples tend to opt for the mother, who has stayed home after the birth, to take all of it—especially if the father is older, and thus more senior and highly paid. That seemingly small, commonsense decision sets a pattern that can last a lifetime.

Next comes high-quality pre-school care. Then the school day and the timing of school holidays should be adapted to suit working parents and extended with after-school and holiday activities (no silly rules such as sending children home for lunch, as in Switzerland).

Many of these policies cost money. But they offer high returns. Paternity leave has been shown to make a father more engaged throughout his children's upbringing, helping them to thrive. Early-years education sets toddlers up to do well at school. And women whose careers have not been derailed by motherhood will pay higher taxes later. They will also be less likely to need state support in old age, or if they divorce.

Balancing act

For their own sakes, employers should stop writing off mothers who have spent time out of the workforce, on the outdated assumption that a career break signals a lack of ambition. Above all, they would benefit from offering more flexibility to all their employees. Where staff have the right to ask for this, men are rejected more often than women. But only if men can combine family and work will women be able to do so, too.

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