

# ‘Labourers of love?’

## – the cost of undervaluing women’s work

In a new EOC research report,<sup>1</sup> which reviews the previous research of the issue, combined with some new polling evidence, the EOC asks whether these low-paid, largely female-dominated roles are an inevitable reality of market forces, or actually a failure of the market itself? What does it mean and what can be done about it? But firstly, why should this matter more now than ever before?

This is a defining issue for 21st Century Britain because the reality is that women workers form the backbone of our public services, and increasingly the success or failure of public-service reform hangs on the link between investing in the workforce and service-delivery. Best-practice employers in the private sector have long since established the causal link between investing in their workforce and the corresponding improvements in customer satisfaction, increased productivity and expanding profit margins. A similar ‘win-win’ is possible in the public sector and perhaps nowhere more so than in the social-care sector where 9 out of 10 of home-care workers and care assistants are women.<sup>2</sup> In the near future our ageing population and their families will require a structural shift in provision of the kind already shaping our childcare infrastructure. Over-60s already outnumber under-16s. In the next 20 years, the number of people aged 85 and over in the UK is set to increase by 70%, compared with just a 9% growth in the overall population.<sup>3</sup>

**Jobs traditionally done by women are poorly paid and undervalued. Low-paid jobs dominated by women are found in each of the five ‘Cs’ – cleaning, catering, caring, cashiering and clerical work. It is the concentration of women in these roles that particularly contributes to their poor rewards. Sometimes women are doing jobs they love, but almost certainly they are low-paid. Historically described as working for ‘pin money’, one could also describe them as ‘labourers of love’ doing tasks ‘naturally’ associated with women, because of what is regarded as their ‘innate’ attributes rather than their skills. As a result this undervaluation of women’s work is often not taken seriously, so women in these roles have been largely overlooked by policy makers.**



Women. Men. Different. Equal.  
Equal Opportunities Commission

But we know that older people increasingly want to live actively and independently in society. They do not necessarily want or need institutional care, so the services they want and expect will have to change to respond to that growing demand.

Family life is changing. Disability Rights Commission, EOC and Carers UK survey evidence<sup>4</sup> shows that in years to come loved ones who so often provide unpaid care at a cost to their own economic, physical and social wellbeing, will be increasingly unable and unwilling to plug the care gap. The carers simply won't be there so people will increasingly turn to care services. We face a caring time-bomb, where people's expectations about the support they and their loved ones will receive won't be met due to the traditional undervaluing of those performing these critical roles.

But how can we move from undervaluing our care workers and high staff turnover rates to professionalising the sector and delivering modern, responsive, good quality care for all who need it? Is it simply about paying care workers a living wage or are there other levers that government could use to tackle this significant and growing challenge?

## What is undervaluing?

More than 30 years after the Equal Pay Act made it illegal to pay women less for doing the same job, a 17% gender pay gap in full-time hourly earnings still exists.<sup>5</sup> For part-time workers the full-time hourly pay gap is 38%.

The traditional explanation for the gender pay gap is that women don't invest in education or in continuous work experience. But new EOC research<sup>6</sup> has shown that even though girls are now out-performing boys at school and this achievement gap continues into higher education, they continue to be rewarded less at work. What's more, the gender pay gap widens as experience increases. These findings suggest that women's work is being undervalued.

Why is the work that women do seen as less valuable or important than the work that men do? Is it because it is less valuable, or is it because we look at it in a different way?

We like to think that rates of pay are set by reference to the skills people bring to their work, and not to whether the jobholder is a man or a woman, but there is a lot of evidence to suggest this doesn't always happen.

Similar jobs in the same workplace may be rewarded differently, with men getting the higher rates of pay. For example, among men and women working in a warehouse, female 'pickers' earned less than male 'warehouse operatives' (Pickstone et al., v. Freemans plc); and in a textile laboratory the female 'lab assistants' earned less than male 'lab technicians' (Todd v. Tennants Textiles Ltd).

And in the economy as a whole, most of the lowest-paid occupations in the UK are dominated by women.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, simply being employed in a female-dominated occupation can reduce your pay by as much as 9%.<sup>8</sup>

Our research<sup>9</sup> has found that this is an ongoing process that shows no sign of disappearing, even though, on the face of it, women's position in the labour market has improved.

Indeed, as some occupations have opened up to women, their value has declined. The entry of women into occupations such as banking, clerical work and teaching – all once male preserves – has been associated with a lowering over time of their pay and status.

## A decline in male rates of pay

Between 1991 and 2000 the average pay of male bank managers declined relative to the overall median pay by 50 percentage points at the same time as the proportion of bank managers who were women increased from 1 in 5 to more than 1 in 3. This was despite an increase in the pay of managerial occupations relative to median pay over this period.

Women are making their presence felt in some professions – medicine and law, for example. But high-earning jobs continue to be dominated by men. A quarter (23%) of the companies in the FTSE 100 don't have a single woman director.<sup>10</sup> And new, emerging, higher-status roles are more likely to be held by men. For example, the proportion of women employed in IT jobs is declining.

The undervaluing of women's work is a force that not only persists, but also continues to emerge. Of the 1.3 million additional jobs projected for 2004–2014 around half are expected to be taken by women,<sup>11</sup> but this alone won't be enough to end the undervaluing of women's work. It's not going to go away on its own.

### 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.**

**But there is evidence 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<sup>12</sup> undertaken by the Equal Opportunities Commission 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 (an hourly rate of between £5.68 and £8.80).**

# Why it matters

The undervaluing of women's work matters because it...

## ...damages Britain's productivity

The contribution that women bring to the labour market is not being fully recognised. Society does not recognise their worth when attributing a value to the skills, responsibilities and demands of jobs such as caring for young children or elderly people. This lack of recognition means that there is a disincentive to gain accredited skills and qualifications – why bother, if no-one is going to recognise what you've done? This contributes to Britain's significant skills gap, which in turn undermines the country's productivity.

What's more, many women are working in jobs where their potential is not being utilised. Our research has found that three-fifths of women in work are working below their potential, most commonly, in the case of part-timers, because they wanted flexible work in order to combine paid employment with caring for children.<sup>13</sup> As many as 3.6 million women qualified to Level 2 or above are not fully using their talents in the labour market, either because they are not working or working below their past potential, and might be able to do so if better flexible working were widely available.<sup>14</sup>

An EOC investigation into the Transformation of Work has found that 6.5 million people in Britain today could be using their skills more fully if more flexible working was available, either by working at a level at which they used to work or simply returning to the workforce.

## ...undermines the quality of our public services

Unsurprisingly, when there is low pay and little investment in accrediting skills or action taken to improve the status of some occupations, there tends to be a high turnover of staff. This includes several female-dominated occupations on which our public services depend: for example, staff-turnover rates are particularly high in early-years' full daycare settings (17%) among local authority care staff in children's homes (15%) and elderly people's homes (14%) and among home-care staff (13%).<sup>15,16</sup> Such high levels of staff-turnover undermine the quality of public services, which rely on individuals providing consistent care and support, particularly if services are to become more personalised.

## ...contributes towards child poverty

Whether resulting from women opting for lower-skilled employment because they have difficulty finding work that fits with their family commitments, or because the work that women do is not sufficiently valued, women's low pay is a major factor behind high levels of child poverty. Being in a job is no guarantee of being out of poverty: nearly half of children living in poverty (48%) have a parent who is in work. The vast majority of low-paid parents are women: in some female-

occupations pay levels are not sufficient to maintain an independent adult, let alone a family. Our investigation into Classroom Assistants in Scotland illustrates the problem all too well. Very few Classroom Assistants are lone parents, for although the work fits well with family commitments the wages are too low to make the work financially viable for single-breadwinner families.

## ...causes pensioner poverty

The undervaluation of women's work is also a major factor behind pensioner poverty. Low levels of pay and interrupted earnings because of family responsibilities means that, on average, women reaching State Pension age are currently entitled to around 70% of the value of the full basic State Pension, compared to men who qualify for around 95%.<sup>17</sup> Only around 30% of recently retired women are entitled to a full basic State Pension (compared to around 85% of men). Women are also less likely to have private pension provision – 39% of working-age women contributes to a private pension compared to 46% of working-age men. Although young women tend to be more likely to invest in a private pension than young men, as women become older (and their working patterns change) they are less likely to be participating in a private pension.

## ...is out of step with most people's sense of fairness

How we value certain skills is also a question of fairness – a choice for society. Does it matter that childcare workers earn less than car mechanics or rubbish collectors?<sup>18</sup> Or that police officers – 76% of whom are male – earn 18% more than nurses for full-time work – 85% of whom are female?<sup>19</sup>

Most people seem to think it does, and younger generations tend to be more likely than older generations to perceive these differences in rewards as unfair.

## What the public thinks

**In a survey of over 2000 adults<sup>20</sup>, people were asked who should receive the most pay for each of a pair of occupations or if they should receive about the same:**

- 65% thought that nurses and police officers should receive about the same, 21% thought nurses should earn more and 13% police officers.
- A little over half thought childminders and car mechanics should get about the same, whereas 1 in 5 thought childminders and the same proportion thought car mechanics should earn more.
- 44% thought that plumbers and medical/legal secretaries should be paid about the same, 23% felt plumbers should get most and 30% thought the same of medical/legal secretaries.

**People were then asked how fair it is that occupations where most of the workers are women tend to be paid less, on average, than comparable occupations where the majority of workers are men:**

- 85% of women and 74% of men thought this was not fair.
- This included 59% of women and 40% of men who said it was not at all fair.
- Younger generations were more likely to say that it was unfair. 83% of under-65s thought it was unfair compared to 68% of over-65s.

## What do they earn?

Average hourly earnings of full-time employees, UK, 2006

Occupation	£ per hour
Car mechanics	9.72
Childminders	7.64
Care assistants & home carers	7.61
Plumbers	11.51
Medical secretaries	9.78
Nurses	13.44
Police officers	15.91

Source: ONS (2006) Annual survey of hours and earnings 2006.

## Why does it happen?

### Market failure

Differences in pay are often attributed to the market: it is assumed that in a market economy skills that are in demand will automatically attract higher rewards. But far from low-paid caring jobs being paid at 'the going rate' as reflected by demand for the work or the services they provide, EOC research<sup>21</sup> shows that they are actually paid well below the rate that they could command because the market is *not* demand driven. The research identifies 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, ie 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. Paradoxically, the political drive towards funding frontline services, particularly in the health and education sectors, and the drive to limit public sector pay increases, restricts the money available for rates of workforce pay, which in turn risks undermining frontline service delivery as staff turnover and vacancy rates increase.

But decisions about pay, status and rewards are not only shaped by market forces, or market distortions, but are influenced by wider norms and attitudes in society – and are not entirely beyond the control of employers or policy makers.

## Too many women?

Much of women's experience depends on where they work. Workplace characteristics, such as the degree of job segregation or the type of payment system, are increasingly found to explain *more* of the gender pay gap than the characteristics of individual employees. In other words, **working in a female-dominated occupation is more detrimental to your pay level than being a woman per se**. Indeed, it has been estimated that for every 10 percentage points greater the proportion of men in an occupation, hourly wage levels are boosted by 1%.<sup>22</sup> This link between the number of women in a sector and its low pay is illustrated by the Government's attempts to recruit more men into the childcare profession. EOC research<sup>23</sup> found that promotional childcare recruitment campaigns aimed at men were of limited success because of the low pay and low status of the profession. It was only by addressing this that men would be recruited in any significant numbers.

Our research<sup>24</sup> has shown that the undervaluing of women's work is compounded by the fact that women's (soft) skills tend to be less visible than men's. They are less valued and are less likely to be properly rewarded partly because their impact on productivity is hard to quantify and also because women are stereotyped as being naturally good at the job and are thought to be prepared to trade lower pay for job reward.

## Equal pay law is out of date

The limitations of equal pay law means even where undervaluing women's work is clearly visible, it may not be possible to challenge it. The Equal Pay Act (1970) gives the individual the right to equal pay and means women and men should be paid equally where they are doing the same job, but also where they are working in roles that have equal value. But a legal challenge is only possible where women and men are working for the same employer. For example, cleaners working for a private company, which in turn is contracted to provide cleaning services for a local authority cannot bring an equal value pay claim if there are other staff (eg security guards) employed directly by the local authority who are paid more. They may in practice be working side by side, but because their employers are different the law does not apply.

To address this anomaly the EOC wants the law changed to make it possible for equal pay claims in circumstances where there is no actual comparator doing equal work, but where there is prima facie evidence of discrimination in the employer's pay practices. Additionally, litigation would be minimised, individuals better supported and undervaluation more likely to be corrected if it were possible for trade unions, the EOC/CEHR to bring representative actions on behalf of individuals in equal pay claims.

The law also relies on the individual to take action to address the equal pay problem, rather than placing the responsibility on the employer to identify and address the causes of unequal pay within their pay systems. Modern equality law such as the duty on public bodies to promote equality between women and men, in force since April 2007, is moving away from the emphasis on individual action to challenge inequality, and towards placing the responsibility on the institution itself. This does not remove the rights of the individual, but does mean that the responsibility for equality rests with the public body.

Instead of relying on repeated litigation, the EOC has been calling on an overhaul of equal pay law which would include an obligation on employers to check for the causes of any pay gaps and to take action on them. In return for this pay review, employers would be given time to correct any pay inequality that they find, protected from any legal claim.

Best practice employers regularly check their pay systems for any pay inequality. This combined with the effective use of job evaluation techniques means that they can avoid leaving themselves open to damaging equal pay claims. But lasting change will not be achieved without modernising equal pay law.

## Part-time pay penalty

The penalty attached to part-time work is particularly high in the UK: women working part-time earn 38% less than men working full-time<sup>25</sup> and our research suggests almost two-thirds (64%) are working below their potential.<sup>26</sup>

Many managers are unaware of the talents, experience and ambitions of their women part-time workers. The general view is that the majority of women were working in jobs suited to their capabilities.

*“I think the majority are in a job that suits them. The level that is comfortable to them.”*

Manager, private sector, manufacturing <sup>27</sup>

## Outdated views about the economic role of women

Pay structures are still influenced by the view that women work essentially for ‘pin money’ – they are often assumed to be second earners in a family.

*“You’ve got this group of people, waiting until their partners come in, and then they’re coming out for a little bit of pocket money or a little bit of independence themselves.”*

Manager, private sector, sports, leisure and hospitality <sup>28</sup>

## Unequal rewards

Overall, earnings inequality in the UK is high in comparison to many western European countries. For example, out of 12 pre-2004 member states, the UK had the fourth-highest level of inequality in 2002.<sup>29</sup>

While the Equal Pay Act can deal with the undervaluing of women’s work where it occurs within a particular workplace and where women are doing work that is equal to that being done by male colleagues, it cannot tackle the wider societal issues. Most importantly, the Act was designed to change behaviour – the way in which rates of pay are set, and not attitudes – the way in which certain types of work are seen as being intrinsically less valuable than others. But, as our polling has shown, attitudes can change.

## Agenda for Change

The NHS Agenda for Change, which provides fair pay and a clearer system for career progression for staff employed by the NHS, is an example of how the legal framework and a different attitude to the valuing of women's work can go hand in hand. Staff are now paid on the basis of the jobs they are doing and the skills and knowledge they apply to these jobs. The reform is underpinned by a job evaluation scheme specifically designed for the NHS. To support personal development and career progression, there is the NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework, linked to annual development reviews and personal development plans. The system is designed to replace outdated demarcations and allows staff to progress by taking on new responsibilities. This will allow jobs to be designed around patient and staff needs, improving overall productivity and the job satisfaction for staff.

### School meals service – St Peter's C of E Primary School, East Bridgford, Nottinghamshire

In April 2000 Jeannette Orrey (head chef) and David Maddison (head teacher) at St Peter's C of E Primary School, decided to take advantage of the new freedom schools had in the way they delivered school dinners. Ms Orrey was unhappy both with the food pupils were given and with the vulnerability of staff contracts and hours in the contracted out school meals service.

Mr Maddison wanted to demonstrate the value the school placed on the contribution the catering staff had made to the school. His main objective was to improve the quality of meals being served to pupils, but he also wanted to reward Ms Orrey by giving her the opportunity to show what she could do, and to improve conditions for all the catering staff.

The staff, who were employed directly by the school, received an increase in pay and their hours and contracts were secured. Mr Maddison re-designated Ms Orrey as Catering Manager and moved the job from the catering (manual) pay scale to the APT&C Salary Scales. This gave her not only a pay rise, but also career progression, a clear demonstration of her contribution and value within the school. Overall, jobs are more secure and conditions better, and staff now feel that they are very much a part of the school and that their contributions are appreciated.

As for the school meals service, all food is now sourced locally, much of it is organic, and all meals are made in-house. Members of the community, for instance older people and parents, are invited in to join the school and pupils for some of their dinners.

Take-up of meals has flourished and 80% of pupils now eat school dinners. The school and catering manager have not only inspired many other schools to follow by example, but Ms Orrey has played a significant role in influencing national policy and was the inspiration behind Jamie Oliver's groundbreaking programme, Jamie's School Dinners.

## What can we do about it?

The answer is not only to simply encourage women to move out of occupations which are undervalued, but to remedy undervaluation within these jobs.

Policy makers are often reluctant to engage with these issues, regarding them as being within the domain of employers, an issue for bargaining between trade unions and employers or simply the market at work. But policy makers have more influence over these issues than they realise.

The Equal Opportunities Commission is calling on employers and policy makers to:

- Develop and accredit skills and strengthen the link between skills acquisition and pay.
- Ensure that public sector employers are exemplars in rewarding skills fairly and equally.
- Use public sector procurement to ensure that organisations benefiting from contracts with the public sector properly evaluate the skills of their staff and reward these fairly and equally.
- Promote job evaluation techniques and pay systems that do not have in-built bias against women, their skills and family circumstances.
- Reform equal pay legislation to:
  - Allow claims for equal pay in circumstances where there is no actual comparator doing equal work, but where there is prima facie evidence of discrimination in the employer's pay practices
  - Provide for representative actions in equal pay claims.
- Promote an ethos of equality, transparency and predictability in pay systems.
- Maintain the value of the national minimum wage.
- As a first step we would like to see the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) carrying out an inquiry into the undervaluing of work done by women, and assess the degree to which this has an impact on other groups of workers such as migrant labour.

## Notes

- 1 Grimshaw, D and Rubery, J (2007) Undervaluing women's work. EOC Working Paper Series No. 53. Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission.
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- 6 Grimshaw, D and Rubery, J (2007) Undervaluing women's work. EOC Working Paper Series No. 53. Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission.
- 7 Jones, P and Dickerson, A (forthcoming 2007) Poor returns: winners and losers in the job market. EOC Working Paper Series No. 52. Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission. In six of the bottom 10 jobs, more than 70% of workers are female. In aggregate, almost three-quarters of the bottom 10 jobs are held by women.
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- 9 Grimshaw, D and Rubery, J (2007) Undervaluing women's work. EOC Working Paper Series No. 53. Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission.
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For full-time work, childcare workers earn on average £7.63 per hour, refuse collectors earn £8.16 per hour and car mechanics earn £9.72 per hour.
- 19 ONS (2006) Labour Force Survey: employment status by occupation and sex, April – June 2006; ONS (2006) Annual survey of hours and earnings 2006. Available from: [www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/Product.asp?vlnk=14248](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/Product.asp?vlnk=14248)  
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Police officers refers to ranks up to and including sergeant. Employment percentages and pay comparisons based on full-time employees.
- 20 ICM Research interviewed a random sample of 2004 adults aged 18+ by telephone between 24–28 January 2007. Interviews were conducted across the country and the results have been weighted to the profile of all adults. ICM is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. Further information at: [www.icmresearch.co.uk](http://www.icmresearch.co.uk)  
Interviewees were not given pay rate information before answering these questions.
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