“WOMEN'S WORK” AND THE GENDER PAY GAP

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Let us look at the list of the top billionaires, we have Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg and it is only after scrolling down through about fifteen names that we find, Francoise Bettencourt Meyers, the owner of L’Oreal. Around the world, men hold around 93% of all executive positions in the top 100 companies. With only 5% of women making it to the top 500 CEOs, the leadership gap between men and women is undoubtedly glaring, and with such a blatant gap in the leadership positions, a pertinent wage gap is obvious. According to data, globally women earn 70 cents for every dollar a man makes, as we take a closer took at certain countries specifically, in places like South Korea and India, the gap widens as women make as low as 31% and 24.5% of what a man does respectively.

When we come across the term, “pay gap” a phrase that often comes to light is “equal pay for equal work”. The equal pay law has been enacted in most countries. Although when we correlate the statistics with the “equal pay act”, the obvious question that arises is - are women paid less for the same job? The specific term for this analogy is discrimination. However, after referring to a heavy body of research work on the said matter, we understand that discrimination is just the tip of the iceberg and potentially explains a rather insignificant part of the actual problem. So if discrimination is not the problem. Why are women paid less?  Rewinding to around 1960s women were expected to be the “caregivers” of the family, despite people understanding that women might need to earn a minimal amount of money, they were never encouraged to have “actual careers” as that was still reserved for men. Women, especially from financially stable families never contributed to the workforce, this was a result of various factors like lower education, not having the required credentials, and other cultural norms like “women should only become homemakers” and “women are only fit for feminine jobs”. All of this changed in the 1980s with the Women's Liberation Movement which commenced in New York. This movement fought against what we know as “institutional sexism”. Prior to this, discrimination against women was legal and allowed employers to put out job listings only for men. As the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM) gained its acclaim, so did women gain opportunities. And subsequently, this was a major breakthrough as women found their places in various fields, from Rachel Carson in STEM to Nancy Landon Kassebaum in Law. However, no significant results were seen in the existing pay gap.

As, irrespective of these changes one problem remains a constant, women even today are expected to raise children and remain the primary caregiver of the family. When we compare the trajectories of a man and woman starting from the same place, is when we realize the heart of the problem. Even though initially, both have consistent and equal growth in career. The scenario drastically changes when a woman decides to take up motherhood. A mother often has to put in nine hours of additional work towards childcare in a week than a father, which significantly reflects on her paycheque. Statistics have shown that only a fraction of women are expected to work full time after becoming new mothers, however, the same expectation flips in the case of new fathers, where 70% of them are expected to work full time. On the contrary, women who decide to not have children earn around 96% of what a man makes. According to a very elaborate study on childcare and gender equality, it is established that the actual wage gap is not between men and women, but between women and mothers. This analogy is coined as a “motherhood penalty”. Hence, the said issue goes deep down to various psychological and sociological definitions of how we perceive the workings of a family.

Even though this problem remains incredibly deep-rooted, some countries have brought a significant change to their structure, one of them being Iceland. In 1975, women took to the streets on a strike, demanding equal pay and equal opportunity. Women’s representation in both political and corporate fields skyrocketed since then. In 1980, Iceland elected the world’s first democratically voted female president.  Iceland also became one of the countries with the most generous maternity leaves. However, things revolutionized when in 2000, As Iceland introduced paternity leave as well, making sure fathers have an equal contribution as caregivers. Now women in Iceland make around 90 cents of that of a man. One of the highest in the world.

Virginia Woolf, in the early 1900s, said, “For most of history, anonymous was a woman”. However as times changed, women have found their voices in the silence, dominance in suppression, and concord in conflict. We have won battles, and still, there is so much left to be conquered. And bringing change takes time, consistency, and a whole lot of effort. Countries like Iceland have proved that shrinking the wage gap is not impossible. It is only when we consider men and women, both as caregivers and breadwinners of the family this problem can be resolved.