Money Is Not the Only Measure

Your editorial ‘The gender pay gap must go’ (1 November) decries the fact that a woman earns on average only 81 per cent of what a man earns. Yet the simplistic observation that men and women have different average earnings is misleading. As the economist Jennifer Roback has noted, ‘once we observe that people sacrifice money income for other pleasurable things, we can infer next to nothing by comparing the income of one person with another’.

Numerous studies have shown that men and women exhibit systematic differences in the value that they place on various job features. Men attach more importance to financial aspects of the job, while women value various interpersonal and other non-wage aspects of the job, such as safer working conditions, flexibility of hours, shorter commute times and opportunities to help others.

Although men hold the highest-status jobs, they also hold the lowest ones. Moreover, although women hold many of the lowest-paying jobs, men have a virtual monopoly on the least attractive jobs. Warren Farrell has pointed out that 24 of the 25 ‘worst’ jobs as rated in the Jobs Rated Almanac (rated on a combination of salary, stress, work environment, outlook, security and physical demands) were 95 to 100 per cent male.

When men and women perform the same jobs, the ‘gender gap’ persists but is substantially smaller. In the US, for example, women overall earn only about 75 cents to a man’s dollar, but among engineers the figure is 87 cents. According to a recent National Science Foundation study, however, the figure increases to 97 cents if ‘years of experience’ is controlled for, and the gap shrank another percentage point when education, specialty and employment sector were controlled for. Factors such as productivity (including hours worked), quality of education, and family-related choices were not considered in the study and could easily account for the rest.

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