Women, plumbing and work

IF I had said what Maureen Freely describes me as having said in her review of my book Divided Labours (October 6), I would be happy to rebut myself. I did not argue that “traditional” women do not deserve a “fair deal” or that women should stay home with their children even if they do not want to. My book describes why, given an economic system that rewards competition and high levels of workplace investment, women are unlikely to achieve parity with men even if discrimination against women is completely eradicated. This is a descriptive claim rather than a claim about how things “should” be. In fact, I point out changes that would reduce the economic disparities between men and women.

For the biological reasons that Freely sneeringly describes, men have evolved to be (on average) more competitive and more willing to take risks than women. Competitiveness and risk-taking are important attributes of executives, both male and female. Women, in contrast to men, tend (again, on average) to be more nurturing and to invest more in their social relationships. For obvious reasons, employers reward employees for the services they render to the employer and not for services they render to third parties such as their families, no matter how socially useful those services might be.

For too long, statistical disparities between the sexes have been chalked up to discrimination on the assumption that men and women are identical, apart from the plumbing. It is time to recognise that, for fundamental biological reasons, the predispositions and preferences of the sexes are often different and members of the two sexes will often choose to devote their energies in different directions.

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