

To solve the gender pay gap, we need to radically rethink what a job looks like

May 1 2019, by Laura Jones



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The introduction of gender pay gap reporting has highlighted the continued gap in pay between men and women. While it is by no means a perfect metric, the very exercise of collecting this data has focused minds in the boardroom like never before.

But, in their rush to do something about the problem, [business leaders](#) should look beyond the data and ask: what would actually make the biggest difference to reducing their pay gap? Answering this means diving below the [often-touted](#) government figure of "record female employment" and asking what kinds of jobs women are doing. [Research](#) reveals that too often it's low-paid, part-time work, with little potential for pay progression.

It remains the case that women's working patterns and therefore careers are hugely affected by the transition to motherhood – [38% of mothers work part-time](#) (compared to 33% who work full-time), while only [7%](#) of fathers do.

The problem is not with part-time work itself (although we may want to ask why so few fathers go part-time after the birth of a couple's first child). The problem lies with the way companies treat their part-time workers. Astounding [research](#) published from the Institute for Fiscal Studies think-tank in 2018 finds that, on average, part-time workers get negligible increases in their wages year on year – and their disadvantage is far and above what we would expect to see if they received increases that are proportional to their full-time equivalents.

In 2012, [research revealed](#) that almost a quarter of part-time workers reported that they had no chance of promotion. This percentage was even larger among those in lower-skilled jobs. There is also [abundant evidence](#) that – whether it is retail sales assistants, catering workers, or nurses and teachers – part-time workers are perceived as less committed and opportunities for progression tend therefore to be limited to full-time employees. This traps part-time workers – who are predominately female – into lower-paid roles.

What full-time work looks like

So tackling the gender pay gap must take into account the way that part-time workers are treated. For starters, we need to look at improving the quality of part-time jobs themselves – including the opportunities and support available for progression and promotion. But, more fundamentally, we must also ask why, for so many British families, the answer to balancing work and childcare responsibilities involves mothers going back to work part-time?

There are some familiar and depressing answers to this question. Most obviously, the high cost of childcare makes it unaffordable for families to manage without one parent going part-time or even leaving the workplace altogether. But another answer lies in the expectations around what full-time work looks like and the demands that employers and workplace culture put on full-time workers.

Full-time employees in the UK work on average some of the longest hours per week in Europe – [42.3, compared with just 37.8 in Denmark](#). The UK also has one of the highest rates of part-time work among employed mothers in the EU.

Interestingly, research indicates that men's and women's employment hours are linked. While the average total household working hours varies across Europe, there is a clear pattern showing that when [men work longer hours, women work fewer](#). In some countries, including the UK and Austria, fathers work long hours and mothers have high levels of part-time employment. By contrast, fathers in Sweden work on average fewer hours – meaning the division of working hours between couples is more equitable, even though mothers there are more likely to work part-time.

[Research from the US](#) similarly suggests that a culture of long working hours reinforces traditional gender roles. When male partners work all the time, this significantly increases a female partner's likelihood of

leaving the labour market. With this in mind we should be wary of current workplace trends to work longer hours.

While optimists echo John Maynard Keynes in predicting a future of shorter working weeks enabled by technology, [others argue that](#) globalisation, "high-performance" work practices and the spread of technology has led to the rise of overwork and "extreme jobs". What [this research](#) makes clear is that expectations around working hours are not gender neutral. They rest on and perpetuate old forms of gender inequality.

So to truly make progress on tackling the [gender pay gap](#) we need to focus not just on women's working patterns, but the number of hours worked by men, which leads to a stark [gender](#) working gap. Ensuring that [full-time](#) employees are not required to work long hours is essential and will go some way to reducing the stigma associated with part-time or flexible [work](#). And in the long run the four-day working week for all might just be the great leveller.

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