Activity 1 – Equal Pay for Equal Work

Introduction

The feminist movement in Britain has been closely associated with the movement for labour rights. Therefore, it is no surprise that the demand for ‘Equal Pay for Equal Work’, or that workers doing the same kind of work (‘work of equal value’) should have equal remuneration, has been an important part of the feminist movement. It particularly emerged during the second wave of feminism. While more women had entered employment in Britain during the World Wars, traditional gender roles were reinforced in post-war British society. In the 1960s, fewer women than men were employed and mostly in what emerged as ‘feminine’ low skilled jobs, such as receptionists and secretaries. It was also, however, common for women to be paid less than men in work that required the same level of skills.

Ford sewing machinists’ strike 1968 and the Equal Pay Act 1970

The demand for equal pay for women came to a head in 1968, when women workers employed to sew car seat covers in the Ford factory in Dagenham went on strike. These women had been informed that their jobs were to be paid at the rate of Grade B (unskilled) jobs while men doing the same work were to be paid at the rate of Grade C (semi-skilled) jobs. As the women walked out of the factory in Dagenham, women workers in the Ford factory in Merseyside also joined them. The strike halted the production of cars in the factories and led to the cause of ‘Equal Pay for Equal Work’ getting mainstream political attention. The strike ended three weeks later after the Secretary of State for Employment, Barbara Castell, intervened and held discussions with the striking women. The women were offered a pay rise but were only re-graded to skilled jobs level after another strike in 1984. The strike led to the passing of the Equal Pay Act 1970, which has now been repealed and subsumed within the Equality Act 2010. Most Western countries have similar legislation – for example, Equal Pay Act 1963 in the US, 1978 Act on Gender Equality in Norway, 1998 Employment Equality Act in Ireland.
The gender pay gap today

Although the Equal Pay Act 1970 made discrimination in pay on the basis of gender illegal 46 years ago, the gender pay gap still continues. This is despite better education among women, which may have contributed to the pay gap a few decades ago. Today, on an average, women earn 13.9% less than men among full time workers in Britain. This average pay gap may be attributed to various factors – for example: more women are in lower skilled jobs; fewer women are in senior positions in workplaces; women may do less overtime work. Such factors can be used to justify the current pay gap, on the premises that women may be less qualified; less interested in pursuing work outside the home; and may spend less time at work after maternity; and so on. While these may be taken as possible justifications, they nevertheless point to gender differentiation and thus require further sociological investigation. Do women prefer to spend less time at work or are women unfairly and burdened with caring responsibilities and penalised for maternity? Are women not interested in senior positions in workplaces or do promotion systems discriminate in favour of men? Are women largely employed in low skilled jobs or are the jobs done mostly by women valued less than those mostly done by men? Are women’s jobs, such as sewing, defined as unskilled because women typically learn to use sewing machines at home whereas men tend to learn their crafts in formal apprenticeships? Let us consider these issues in the activity below.

Task

In 2012, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of women employed at Birmingham city council in an equal pay case. The women were mostly employed as cooks, cleaners, catering and care staff. They claimed that they were unfairly denied bonuses that were handed out to refuse collectors, street cleaners, road workers and grave diggers, jobs that mostly employed men, thus creating a gender pay gap. They

2 The Fawcett Society, which campaigns for equal pay, has good resources exploring some of these issues - http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/policy-research/the-gender-pay-gap/
3 https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/oct/24/women-birmingham-council-pay-court
argued that this was work of equal value but was not equally compensated. Find out more about the case and then consider the questions below:

1. In what ways is this landmark equal pay case of Birmingham city council workers different from or similar to the case of Ford factory workers in Dagenham in 1968?

2. What arguments would you employ if you wanted to justify denying bonuses to cooks, cleaners, catering and care staff – jobs that are considered traditionally feminine and thus mostly employ women?

3. While this activity focuses specifically on formal paid work, women are often disproportionately involved in unpaid domestic and care work. Feminists have long campaigned for recognising this invisible contribution of women as 'work'. Sociologists such as Anne Oakley⁴ and Arlie Russell Hochschild⁵ have written extensively about women’s ‘double’ and even ‘triple shift’ – work outside the home, housework and care work. Think about the concept of ‘work’ – is it always exchange of labour for money or can there be a broader definition of work?

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