

The cashier and the carpenter

Men and women do different jobs for different pay

IN 1964 LADYBIRD BOOKS, a British publishing company, launched a series of small picture books to help young children learn to read. They featured Peter and Jane, their dog, their house, their toys and the rest of their little world. Their dad went out to work and their mum stayed at home and looked after Peter and Jane. By the late 1970s, after a couple of updates, their world had changed slightly: dad did more things around the house and Jane was wearing jeans rather than skirts. But she still spent a lot of her time at home playing with her doll or helping mum. Peter preferred to be out and about with dad.

The books are still available, but their charm is now of the vintage variety. When they were first published, families in most industrial countries were just like Peter's and Jane's. In America in the early 1970s more than half of all families with children consisted of a breadwinner husband, a stay-at-home wife and two or more kids; now only a fifth do. Instead there are lots of single-parent households, and even if couples live together they no longer necessarily marry. If they do, the wives are likely to go out to work, whether or not they have dependent children, and take only a short break for maternity. Life is too expensive for most families to be able to manage on one pay cheque. In most rich countries the dominant model now is the two-earner family, with both parents working full-time.

Men are still more likely than women to be in paid work. Across the OECD countries some 83% of men of working age are in the labour market, compared with 64% of women. But the share of women at work is still rising. In the Nordic countries the gap between men and women has almost gone and in most of the big rich countries it is only ten or 15 percentage points. In the emerging markets it is much wider, not least because women do a lot of unpaid work in family businesses and farms that do not show up in the figures. However, in China the gap, at about 12 percentage points, is smaller than in many Western countries.

Even in rich countries the numbers are not all they seem because women generally put in far fewer hours than men. Measured by how many full-time jobs those hours would add up to, the average employment gap between men and women in the OECD widens to around a third. That is because women, particularly if they have children, are much more likely than men to work part-time and even in full-time jobs they work shorter hours.

The main reason why women do not put in long hours at their jobs is that they work long hours at home. Housework and child care the world over, but particularly in poor countries, are still seen mainly as a woman's responsibility, whether or not she also has a formal job. Even in the rich world women spend at least twice as much time as men on unpaid work: an average of 33 hours a week, against 16 for men. Where working women are the norm, as in the Nordic countries, the gap between the unpaid hours put in by men and women are smaller, though not negligible; where more of them stay at home, as in southern Europe, and particularly Japan and South Korea, it is much larger.

It may be unfair, but by working shorter paid hours, women are managing to achieve a reasonable balance in their lives. In a regular survey produced by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, only 16-18% of women (depending on whether they have young children) across Europe report dissatisfaction with their work-life balance, against 20-27% for men.

The most vexing gap between the sexes is in pay. Almost all rich countries have laws, passed mostly in the 1970s, that are meant to ensure equal pay for equal work, and the gap did narrow noticeably for a while when women first started to flood into the labour market. In America, for instance, it has halved since 1970, from 40% to 20%. But most of those gains came in the early years and have tailed off. Across the OECD the difference in male and female median hourly earnings now averages around 18%, but with large and sometimes surprising variations.

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