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# THE PAY GAP

by  
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Considering that Fortune 500's 2017 list of top CEOs counts a paltry 32 females (6.4% of the total), it's hard to be convinced that the term "boys club" is anything but axiomatic when talking about the upper echelons of professional management. But it's not only these lucrative, top-level corporate jobs that still report a male-heavy presence. A deep look at the many other job markets that have been resistant to female hires reveals a frightening aspect of our collective subconscious.

While social and governmental initiatives throughout the developed world have increased the number of women filling top management positions and are steadily narrowing the gender pay gap, experts admit that as much as 40% of this disparity remains unexplained. Even adjusting for factors like gender-dominated fields of study – think: mathematics or computer science – something still doesn't add up.

One contending explanation is called "pollution theory". It's the idea that men hesitate to give women access to traditionally all-male occupations not because women are unworthy or threaten to replace male employees, but because society subconsciously equates 'women's work' as less valuable work.

Let's first understand this: even in occupations dominated by a female presence, women get paid less than men. That is, even for jobs that require the same level of difficulty and expertise, 'women's work' is valued less than similar occupations traditionally held by their male counterparts. Claudia Goldin, Harvard economist and author of *The Pollution Theory of Discrimination*, argues that this simple fact has led to a generations-long struggle to right the lopsided scales of economic fairness.

Goldin's theory goes on to suggest that the presence of women in the workplace doesn't threaten a man's ability to earn, but the social status attributed to his job. In essence, "new female hires may reduce the prestige of a previously all-male occupation", she says.

It's a problem so ingrained in the human psyche that its origin predates recorded history. In his 2007 book *Categorically Unequal: The American Stratification System*, sociologist Douglas Massey uses modern isolated communities in developing countries as exemplars. His studies show how small communities in which the sexes share hunting and foraging duties exhibit a greater overall level of egalitarianism.

However, once societies separate those duties along gender lines inequality exposes itself. All-male groups tend to cultivate aggressive and competitive character traits while all-female groups tend to reinforce more nurturing and compassionate attributes. "The end result," Massey explains, "is a divergence in gender-specific attitudes and behaviors that work to the detriment of females once the two sexes reunite."

At one time, inherent biological differences, like strength, and unequal access to education resulted in far more men being better equipped for some of the most skilled and physically demanding jobs. But with technological advances leveling physical differences and women earning 60% of American baccalaureate degrees, few would argue that women today are ill-equipped to perform as personal finance advisors, web developers or paramedics – all of which fields have been resistant to equalizing new hires along gender lines.

In a recent interview with VICE, clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson suggested that eliminating things like makeup and high heels from the workplace could minimize how women are treated in male-dominated scenarios. The idea is that the wholesale removal of female sexual markers would reduce the male compulsion to view women as "others", thus lead to a more neutral environment.

But powerhouse evolutionary biologist duo Bret Weinstein and Heather Heying of Evergreen State College disagree. They argue that any attempt to solve the gender misalignment puzzle by altering the way women behave in the workplace is impractical at best and flagrant victim-blaming at worst. Between gender-specific clothing, inherent biological traits (including scent) and the litany of other social norms, far too many gender markers exist to hope that the elimination of the few most obvious would eradicate the perception of women as different from men.

Those who lack a broad understanding of the issue will point to the (slowly) growing number of women filling top management positions and be satisfied labeling it "progress". But the women who buck the odds and reach that rarified air are too often viewed as exceptions to their gender, not members of it. So while data-points such as these are easy to collect and add a wrinkle of pizzazz to reporting, this power-centric, top-down perspective can actually serve to reinforce old stereotypes.



Without these women having an increased visibility as “women” in the workplace, the value of “women’s work” will never climb the ladder with them.

With each year, the gender wage gap gets more press. Public figures like Jennifer Lawrence, who spearheads her own aggressive social media campaign, are doing well to bring the issue into the hearts and minds of their fans. But simply learning about a monster living under your bed isn’t the same as evicting it.

Tackling the problem is such a tricky task because we’re dealing with a subconscious association across an entire population. Whether we want to or not, our society still equates women with less *valuable* work.

While lawmakers throughout the developed world are continually drafting policy that promotes equal pay across genders, all energy is directed in a top-down fashion.

Perhaps the answer to eradicating the gender wage disparity isn’t just by paying women an equal amount as men who perform the same duties, but by also starting at the bottom and looking up.

If we increased women’s wages in women-dominated sectors like nursing, teaching, social work for example, it stands to reason that the overall perceived value of “women’s work” will also increase. Because, in an environment where the base value of work cannot be drawn along gender lines, the concept of prestige pollution cleans itself up rather quickly.