

Gender

Why is homeworking a 'women's issue'?

Gender and homework

The vast majority of homeworkers, both in the UK and worldwide, are women. The position of women in society is therefore vital to any understanding of homework, and the issues it presents. In the latest piece of research by the National Group on Homeworking, 87% of homeworkers who participated were women. This finding mirrors previous research by NGH and others, consistently indicating that over 85% of UK homeworkers are women

Why are most homeworkers women?

Before the industrial revolution, most families earned a living through working at home, whether this was through agriculture or producing goods to sell. With industrialisation much production was centralised in big factories, but there always remained specific labour-intensive processes that factory bosses could get done more cheaply by 'putting out the work' to be done at home. This 'outwork' or 'homework' was done mainly by women, often with help from their children, and homeworking continues to be a largely female occupation to this day.

Homeworking provides a means for women to combine the need to earn a wage with the unpaid family work that falls to women in the home. When homeworkers are asked why they work

from home, the most common reason given is in order to combine work with child care, or other caring responsibilities.



Women continue to bear the bulk of home and family responsibilities, on top of their paid jobs.

Undervalued and underpaid

Homework is notoriously low paid and recent research show around half of homeworkers are earning less than the national minimum wage. In some cases homeworkers are being paid as little as £2.10 per hour for skilled sewing work. Whilst homeworking can provide some extreme examples of shockingly low pay, it also reflects wider trends in the labour market, where women's work is consistently undervalued, and women are underpaid.

Despite 30 years of equal pay legislation in the UK, the gender pay gap remains a massive problem. Women working full-time earn on average 17% less per hour than men working full-time and for women working part-time the gap is 36% per hour. Whilst the gap has been narrowing, this is happening far too slowly, and at the current rate it will take 40 years to close the full-time pay gap and 140 years to close the part-time pay gap.

Why is women's work undervalued?

There are two primary causes for the undervaluing of women's work. The first relates to the types of skills required for so-called 'women's jobs' and the fact these skills are viewed as somehow natural and innate. The second relates to the traditional stereotype of the male breadwinner, which by implication suggests women's work is somehow peripheral to family incomes and not of great importance.

Women's skills

Many of the paid jobs that have traditionally been done by women can be seen as an extension of the unpaid family work women do in the home – caring, cleaning, cooking, crafts. Because this kind of work is seen as inherently female and somehow 'natural' for women, it is not accorded the same kind of status – or pay levels – as jobs that are considered more professional or highly skilled. In fact many so-called 'women's jobs' require at least the same skill levels as traditionally male occupations but the assumption that these skills somehow come naturally to women, means they are not properly valued.

The 'pin money' myth

The other reason women's work is chronically undervalued is that the role many women play in earning a living for their families is not recognised. There is a stereotypical assumption that in a couple the male is responsible for earning a livelihood, and the female is responsible for the family and home. Although this view is now largely recognised as being outdated – and was never universally the case anyway – it has left its mark on the way women's earnings are viewed.

A woman's wage is often portrayed as an optional extra for a family, a welcome addition to the male wage but not of the same importance or value. Women's wages are still sometimes dismissed as 'pin money' – a little bit of cash for luxuries and extras, but not essential for rent, food and bills. These assumptions are frequently made with regard to homeworking – as though criminally low pay is somehow acceptable because the women don't really need it, and are only earning a bit of cash to spend on themselves. The reality for homeworkers is quite different. In a recent study we asked homeworkers how they would cope without their income from homeworking. 57% said they would not be able to afford essentials like food or bills, 24% said they would have to cut back on other family costs, like school trips or the family car and less than one in five said they would only have to cut back on treats.

Women's poverty and child poverty

NGH believes that all workers should be properly – and fairly – paid for the work they do. Decent pay for a dignified life is a basic right irrespective of gender and personal circumstances. However, for a

government which has famously committed to end child poverty by 2020, there is an added practical incentive to tackle the continuing gender pay gap and exploitation of women workers.

Tackling child poverty means tackling family poverty and women's poverty. Four out of ten children in poverty are in lone mother households. A further three out of ten are in households where their dad works, but their mum is on low income or no income. Mothers are at greater risk of poverty in the UK than in any other western European country, and if mothers are poor, their children will be poor. There are no rich children in poor families. Yet despite the evidence, the Government's strategy to end child poverty does not recognise the gendered nature of poverty. Tackling gender inequality is essential to tackling child poverty, and in particular this means addressing the injustice and exploitation faced by some of the lowest paid women workers in the country.

For further information:

The Fawcett Society

<http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/>

Equalities and Human Rights Commission

<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/>

Women's National Commission

<http://www.thewnc.org.uk/>

End Child Poverty Campaign

<http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/>

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