

Have the Gender Roles evolved in Women's Favour?

Women are making their mark in the world by going out to pursue their passion. The financial independence that comes with job opportunities and gender equality at workplaces has come a long way to improve the lives of women and has had a significant impact on the other areas of the society. But have the traditional roles of women as primary caregivers and bearers of most household responsibilities changed enough in the recent decades? Traditionally, women were responsible for household chores and caring responsibilities for the elderly and children whereas men were responsible for earning bread and butter for the family. Now, if women are bringing the "butter" and men are bringing the "bread", then who is serving it?

According to International Labour Organisation (ILO) Global Wage Report 2018/19, women earn about 20 percent less than men on average in the world, although the gap varies across different countries. Australia's mean gender gap (monthly salaries) is 31.5% which is significant among the high-income countries. Interestingly, the full-time gender pay gap is 14.8%, while the part-time gap is 3.3%¹. The gender pay gap is smaller in part-time jobs because most part-time workers are women. According to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), women constituted 68.5% of all part-time employees. The part-time work offers women with more flexibility to undertake carer and household responsibilities.

Let's consider education which is a key determinant in securing jobs across various industries. In Australia, it is surprising to see that more women (59.5%) are enrolled in universities and other institutions than men. Despite having higher education levels, women's workforce participation is 8% lower than men's (WGEA, 2022)². This raises concerns about where their time is spent if not in the labour market. And if the women are employed, either part-time or full-time, then are the household and carer's responsibilities divided equally?

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Time Use Survey 2022, females spent 4 hours and 31 minutes per day doing unpaid work activities (mainly domestic duties, childcare and adult care) whereas men spent 3 hours 12 minutes in comparison in the financial year 2020-21³. Mothers also spent an extra hour on childcare activities in comparison to fathers. Men spent an extra hour in comparison to women on contracted activities (such as paid work or education). An hour each day over a whole year can add to 365 hours in a year which is around 45 standard 8-hour workdays. Imagine the impact of doing this unpaid work for years. This will not only maintain but worsen the already existing pay gap.

If one considers forgone work experience and learning and development opportunities, the women pay dearly for undertaking that extra hour per day of unpaid domestic work.

Another unfavourable finding revealed that middle aged women feel more rushed for time than men (ABS, 2022) and it is also important to think why? Since these women are employed and also perform an extra hour of domestic duties, they must feel more rushed. This is where gender roles have been evolved in women's disadvantage. To promote gender equality, it is necessary to share domestic responsibilities equally to ensure the stress and anxiety that comes with limited time between work and domestic responsibilities is not borne unjustifiably by women.

In the recent years, especially after COVID, we have seen a rise in work from home arrangements promoting better work-life balance. The wage premium associated with working from home in Australia, is higher for men than women in full time jobs⁴. This is going to widen the already existing pay gap if policies and initiatives are not targeted by the public and private sector to encourage gender equality. Birch and Preston (2024) also found that the fathers who work remotely faced a fatherhood penalty (traditionally, the motherhood penalty is more prevalent as women assume childcare responsibilities) in comparison to other men. If the cause of this penalty is discriminatory behaviour by the employers, this will result in more uneven distribution of childcare responsibilities at home.

Economic empowerment is not enough to ensure gender equality, or rather to enforce fair and equitable economic empowerment, it is imperative that household and caregiving responsibilities are shared equally between the genders. Both workplaces and societal norms need to evolve to ensure promotion of fair and equal pay, flexible workplace arrangements, equal career development opportunities to ensure all-inclusive growth of the workforce. Meanwhile at home, communities must challenge traditional caregiving expectations like chores, childcare, transportation for children's activities and emotional labour of planning and tracking activities. This will go a long way towards ensuring that gender equality is not just an ideal but a reality. In the end, men need to understand that everyone enjoys being served an already buttered bread.

References

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3. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022, *Females do more unpaid work, males do more paid work*, ABS, viewed 20 January 2025, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/females-do-more-unpaid-work-males-do-more-paid-work>>.

4. Birch, E. and Preston, A. (2024), Working at Home and the Gender Wage Gap. Industrial Relations Journal.