

# What Needs To Change To Ensure Women Can Progress In The Workplace?

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## What Needs To Change To Ensure Women Can Progress In The Workplace?

The gender pay gap and women's progression in the workplace, in general, seems to be an unsolvable puzzle. Results from this year's gender pay gap reporting show that, despite the government's policy of naming and shaming employers (never the best motivator), the gap has not narrowed since [2018](#).

Gender pay reporting requirements were first introduced as part of the Equality Act 2010 and came into force in 2017.

All UK employers with 250 or more staff must report pay, bonuses and other data on 31 March (public sector entities) or 5 April (private employers) on the government's gender pay website.

It was thought that the threat of having one's organisation's name published would encourage employers to take action to narrow the gender pay gap and encourage more women to be placed in higher company positions. However, the data shows that the pay gap persists in all 20 sectors of the economy, with none paying women more than men on average.

What is going on? Have we reached an impasse on the gender pay issue?

### **"Lies, damned lies, and statistics"**

The problem with reports is, they sometimes miss the big picture. For example, take the [Global Gender Gap Report 2018](#). Produced by the World Economic Forum, it provides a global snapshot of the gap between men and women across four fundamental categories (subindexes): economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment.

Unsurprisingly, the top four countries in which women were most equal to men in these categories were the Nordic nations (Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Finland respectively). However, number five was Nicaragua, and Rwanda held the number six position.

Really? In Nicaragua, incidentally, one of the poorest countries in the world, [abortion](#) is illegal. And following President Daniel Ortega's crackdown on demonstrations, many women and children have been [plunged into poverty](#) following the imprisonment or exile of their husbands and sons.

In Rwanda, 86% of women participate in the labour force, as opposed to 56% in the United States. Rwandan women also enjoy

one of the narrowest wage gaps in the world. However, this situation has come about because of the devastating genocide of 1994 which left females making up 60 to 70% of the [population](#).

The Global Gender Gap is flawed because it compares women and men in the same country, rather than women in different places. For example, in Nicaragua, women are relatively equal to men in educational attainment. But the country's overall educational attainment for both sexes is poor by global standards.

The UK's gender pay gap reporting is similarly flawed as it fails to examine the underlying reasons for women not matching men in pay and top positions. Is it because they can't or do many believe the cost of corporate/political success is too high?

It's time to talk about the elephant in the room.

### **Women, career, and family**

There are undoubtedly deep factors which hold women back from achieving their full potential. Every time we think the battle is won, a [Harvey Weinstein](#) or [Presidents Club](#) situation comes along and shows just how far we still have to go to eliminate discrimination and harassment. But what is not readily acknowledged is that the structure of work and school is no longer fit for the purposes of women succeeding in the fields of law, finance, medicine, and management. These roles require long hours, extensive networking, and regular travel.

Many women do not want to have their children brought up by a nanny or placed in daycare from 7am to 6pm, five days a week.

School hours remain the same as they did when many women stayed at home or participated in low-skilled, part-time work. As for the summer holidays – this long break was designed to allow children to help with the harvest, something

that is not applicable nowadays.

Our entire work and school hours culture is built for a way of life that no longer exists.

### **What are the real answers?**

To close the gender pay gap and get more women into top positions, **everything** has to change. Most employers are doing their utmost to support female employees, but there is only so far they can go and still retain the ability to generate the continuous growth our capitalist economic model demands.

In her legendary article ["Why Women Still Can't Have It All"](#), Anne-Marie Slaughter states:

"I still strongly believe that women can "have it all" (and that men can too). I believe that we can "have it all at the same time." But not today, not with the way America's economy and society are currently structured."

She goes on to say:

"In short, the minute I found myself in a job that is typical for the vast majority of working women (and men), working long hours on someone else's schedule, I could no longer be both the parent and the professional I wanted to be..."

Admitting she is stepping onto the treacherous ground of stereotyping, she boldly states:

"Still, the proposition that women can have high-powered careers as long as their husbands or partners are willing to share the parenting load equally (or disproportionately) assumes that most women will feel as comfortable as men do about being away from their children, as long as their partner is home with them. In my experience, that is simply not the case. I've come to believe that men and women respond quite differently when problems at home force them to recognize that their absence is hurting a child, or at least that their

presence would likely help. I do not believe fathers love their children any less than mothers do, but men do seem more likely to choose their job at a cost to their family, while women seem more likely to choose their family at a cost to their job."

So, what are the answers?

Ms Slaughter highlights key cultural aspects of working life that need to change to encourage more women to take on top positions. These include:

- Pressure to work long hours comes from the top, so managers have to "walk the talk" and leave the office at a reasonable time, not send emails after hours or when an employee is on holiday, and make it culturally acceptable to prioritise flexible hours to ensure school plays, sports days, bedtimes etc. are attended by parents. Cases for agile working need to be fairly evaluated, and requests granted if the argument is strong.
- **Redefine the career arc.** We are now living into our 80s, and increasingly many are reaching their 90s. Therefore, peaking in your late 40s is not compatible with today's life expectancy. Rather than see employees as washed out at 50, peak-career needs to be moved to this decade. Say a woman has her first child at 35. She is likely to have completed her education and achieved significant career goals by that time. If she has another child at 37/38, by 57, her parental responsibilities will be complete. It is at this time, between 57-70, that, if she chooses, she can concentrate on demanding positions. However, under our present system, men, and women of this age are seen as old, stuffy, inflexible, and due for retirement (stereotypes that have no basis in reality).

- **Involve men.** Men are participating far more in parenting than previous generations. They are also demanding more balance in their work and home life. Boys growing up today are receiving the message that 'supporting your family' means more than bringing home a generous wage. When both sexes push for change, working cultures have no choice but to adapt. Organisations that don't will lose talent to those that do.

## Final words

Change happens slowly. There are many other factors such as climate change and inequality that are throwing into light the flaws of the current economic systems we live under. It is time to change the workplace and school hours culture to reflect 2019 rather than 1959. There is only so much surface-level changes can achieve. To bring about true gender equality in the workforce, our whole society must embrace a new way of working, living, and thinking.

**[BDBF](#) is a specialist employment law firm based in the City of London.**

**Please contact our [leading employment law team](#) on 020 3828 0350.**

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