

Equality as parents must be our focus

By KEITH RANKIN*

The recent Herald feature on women, with its emphasis on women in the workplace, reflects a revival of interest in gender pay equity and the means of addressing the problem of unequal pay.

Yet the statistical evidence that there is a problem is lacking. Figures that combine all age groups mislead us.

My reading of the evidence is that the battle for legal and social equality in the workplace has been won, and that the only remaining battle is for legal and social equality outside the paid workforce.

Social change takes place slowly, as one generation gives way to the next. Thus it is the 20-34 age groups that research must focus on. The workplace discrimination that older generations of women still face is likely to be a result of attitudes formed decades ago; attitudes that will fade as older generations themselves fade.

Are women in their twenties disaffected by discrimination? We don't know as much as we should. But we do know that the average age for giving birth is now almost 30. This means that it should be easier than before to compare the experiences of young women and men in the paid workforce, without the complicating factor of child-raising.

In March 1991, the median income of women aged 20-24 in full-time work was 98 per cent that of males of the same age. If we adjusted for hours worked, women in their early 20s received fractionally more than men of the same age.

Since 1991, at a time when we most needed such data, Statistics New Zealand stopped publishing Census income data by age, gender and employment status. Nevertheless, it is possible to make useful inferences from Census data that covers all working-age adults.

The main reason for income differences between men and women is that more males of all ages are employed full-time.

The next most important reason is that, on average, women work fewer paid hours than men. Even women in full-time employment (defined as 30 or more hours) work significantly fewer hours than men in full-time work.

Most of the differences in incomes arise from fewer hours and not lower average rates of pay.

Data that I have seen from the past three Censuses for all persons over 15 show that the median female income remains at 58 per cent of the median male income. However, of the age groups from 25 to 75, only one did not show improvements in female incomes

relative to male incomes.

That exception was 60-64, a result of the raising of the age of entitlement for New Zealand superannuation. Women aged 25-34 and aged 45-59 have made huge relative income gains since 1991.

The reason for the lack of change for all ages combined is what statisticians call a "composition effect". A greater proportion of women were in the age groups that had the biggest historical differences in female and male incomes. That statistic will correct itself in time, even if no laws or attitudes change.

It is very unlikely that unequal outcomes that exist for women aged 30-65 will ever get close to disappearing if we keep focusing on the paid workplace as the source of those differences.

The second sphere that defines our lives is our home life. By the irrefutable laws of subtraction, any inequality in either of the two spheres - workplace and home - must cause inequality in the other.

We recognise that, at the very least, women cannot function as equals in the workforce without adequate leave and childcare arrangements.

Inequality at home necessarily means inequality at work.

Yet we are still passing laws that increase gender inequality in the home. I'll mention just two recent laws that exacerbate inequality: the 1991 Child Support Act, and Paid Parental Leave, which was introduced this year.

Child Support is an attempt to preserve the traditional breadwinner model in an era of increased parental separation. Its core assumption is that children are brought up in families with one caregiver and one provider.

Thus, the reasoning goes, after separation, the caregiver continues to give care and the provider continues to provide so that the children receive a similar material standard of living to what they received before separation.

In the modern world of gender equality most of today's nuclear families have two caregivers and two providers. And so it should be.

Our family law, however, continues to reinforce the 1960s past that our employment law has long since left behind.

Today, children need their fathers and their mothers as both caregivers and providers, before and after parental separation.

Child Support needs to be reconstructed on new foundations.

Both paid and unpaid parental leave legislation discriminates against male parents.

When family law and social attitudes enable full equality between males and females as parents, then and only then will we have full gender equality in the sphere of paid work.

Employers will treat women as equals when they perceive that a male employee is as likely as a female employee to take time off to be a parent, or to take sick leave when a child is sick.

Once full legal equality exists outside the workplace, it will still take time for social outcomes to reflect that equality - about 30 years (one generation), I would expect.

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SubjectDetail: none (Ref: 2647006)

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