

Employment

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Pay issues must step over the parent trap

Blame for the gender pay gap often falls on the historic public sector practice of paying bonuses to male manual workers. Yet between 2008 and 2009 the gender pay gap narrowed in the public sector but widened in the private sector. Part of the problem seems to be a continuing lack of transparency about pay and a widening divide between employment rights for mothers and fathers, both of which the Government is proposing to tackle by 2011.

The increasingly generous measures introduced by the Government for working mothers may also be working against parity of pay. A study from the Research Institute of Industrial Economics has shown that the more family-friendly a country tries to be, the less its women succeed in the workplace. For example, in Sweden, where a woman can take 60 weeks of paid leave, only 31.6 per cent of managers are female, whereas in the United States, which has no statutory paid leave, women occupy 42.7 per cent of the top posts.

One way to drive equality of pay would seem to be to improve the balance of paid family leave between mothers and fathers. Fathers in the UK have the most unequal rights in Europe — two weeks paternity leave against 52 weeks of maternity leave. Encouragingly, the two main political parties turned the focus on dads last week. Labour's Green Paper Support for All: the Families and Relationships restated its commitment to introducing additional paternity leave, enabling fathers to take up to six months' leave if their partner returns to work before the end of her maternity leave. Under Conservative plans, mothers would be expected to take 14 weeks' leave, but the remaining 38 weeks could be split between parents.

The Government first consulted on additional paternity pay and leave in 2005 and included powers to introduce them in the Work and Families Act 2006. Additional paternity leave will be introduced only for babies due on or after April 3, 2011.

Resolving gender pay issues will require a shift away from male patterns of working and a recognition of the importance of shared parental responsibility. Some commentators have suggested that tipping the balance this way could improve society as a whole. Statistics show that countries with a better record on equality have populations who lead longer, healthier and happier lives and have lower rates of teenage pregnancy, violence, obesity and imprisonment.

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This Article is correct to the best of our knowledge and belief at the time of going to press. It is however written as a general guide, so it is recommended that specific professional advice is sought before any action is taken. We are required by law to protect personal data.

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