

The Gender Wage Gap: A Critical Analysis

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Every year, Equal Pay Day is celebrated in Canada on April 4th. It is the length of time the average woman has to work into the following year to make the same amount of money that the average man did the year before. This topic holds significant importance within our current public discourse. It is noteworthy because it frequently garners uncritical acceptance without thoroughly examining its implications. Prominent organizations like the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the United Nations have advocated for more comprehensive legislation to address the gender wage gap, employing various methods such as motions, public campaigns, and reports. At first glance, this argument seems compelling and reasonable, suggesting that gender equality can be achieved simply by recognizing and compensating individuals equally for the same work. However, a deeper examination reveals critical flaws in this liberal perspective. Instead of propelling us toward genuine equity, it tends to perpetuate and reinforce existing power dynamics through the lens of neoliberalism.

The critical guiding questions for this paper's inquiry include:

- What are the underlying demands, or lack thereof, within the liberal framework for Gender Pay Equity?
- How is 'work' defined, and who holds the authority to determine its value and compensation?
- To whom does the call for Pay Equity extend?
- By what means can Equal Pay be realized?

- What would a comprehensive concept of Gender Pay Equity encompass?

This paper posits that the prevailing liberal approach to Gender Wage Equity is inadequate due to the following reasons:

1. It perpetuates pre-existing power dynamics.
2. It neglects the structural origins of the problem.
3. It assumes a uniform experience for all women.
4. It disregards the intricate intersection of race and gender in the workforce.
5. It fails to demand substantial social change and relies on market-driven solutions.

The main argument of this paper invites a reevaluation of the very framing of the issue. It will emphasize the multifaceted dimensions of how labour is valued and influenced by gender and race while underscoring the need for a comprehensive solution that transcends wage comparisons and embraces a radical demand for recognition and redistribution.

This paper is structured to systematically deconstruct the liberal approach to Pay Equity, dissecting its components one by one to expose this perspective's inherent weaknesses and limitations. In the ensuing comprehensive exploration, the structure of the argument will be as follows:

1. What does Gender Pay Equity want?
2. What is considered work?
3. Pay Equity between who?
4. Pay Equity how?

5. Broad-based alternatives.

Part I: What Does Gender Pay Equity Want?

Before critiquing the liberal approach to Gender Pay Equity, it must be made clear what this viewpoint posits as the problem and what is the proposed resolution. Oelz et al.'s (2014) introductory guide to the Gender Wage Gap developed on behalf of the International Labour Office (ILO) serves as a perfect example, exhibiting a general summary of the current political position regarding the topic. In this guide, Oelz et al. explain that:

Ensuring that the work done by women and men is valued fairly and ending pay discrimination is essential to achieving gender equality and a core component of decent work. The principle of equal remuneration for men and women for work of equal value, as set out in the Equal Remuneration Convention, needs to be implemented if equality is to be promoted and pay discrimination is to be addressed effectively, particularly since women and men often do different jobs. (Oelz et al., 2014, p. iii)

This quote is relevant in its entirety and important to deconstruct several foundational assertions that are being made in this segment:

1. The first line states that gender equality is contingent on eliminating the Gender Pay Gap; however, it is assumed that we are referring to *paid* work, not unpaid work (such as housework or casual labour). Therefore, the issue is posed as remuneration, not systemic oppression.
2. The paragraph continues by postulating that equal remuneration must be implemented if we want to achieve equality. This assumes that Equal Pay is the primary vehicle for gender equity. Henceforth, the issue is one of pay discrimination, not *valuation*.

3. Finally, the authors claim that the problem is also connected to the fact that men and women perform different jobs. This is true; occupational segregation is a fact; nevertheless, this claim fails to question *why* the occupations predominantly held by women are less paid, less secure, and less recognized as *work*.

In summary, the mainstream liberal tenets can be summarized as follows in Table 1.

Table 1

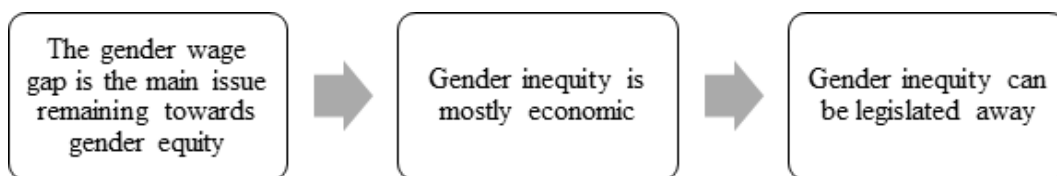
Main tenets of the Liberal Gender Wage Gap

Gender Wage Gap as a problem of:	VS a problem of:
Economic Remuneration	Systemic Oppression
Discrimination	Devaluation of what “work” is.
Occupational Segregation	The gendered and racial-based nature of labour.

The mainstream line of argumentation of liberalism can be summarized as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Liberal Line of Argumentation



We must remember that the primary demand for Gender Pay Equity is that a woman should be paid the same when compared (and this is an important detail) to a man performing the same job. This is a very reductionist viewpoint for the reasons stated in the table above, which we will further explore in the subsequent sections of this paper.

Despite this liberal line of argumentation purporting itself to be feminist, it blatantly erases gender considerations from its analysis. Floro (2014) suggests that including gender in economics demands a thorough study of the fundamental tenets underlying neoliberal theories and models. This approach necessitates a more complex understanding of the relationship between gender and the market economy and the mechanisms driving social reproduction. It emphasizes the importance of delving deeper into social relationships and draws attention to the power disparities that underpin monetary transactions and processes. Neglecting the notion of power erases the relational inequalities between privileged and marginalized individuals or groups, encouraging the propensity to put men and women, people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds, and workers and management on an ostensibly equal playing field. Floro (2014, pp 4-6) makes three main assertions about the gendered implications of neoliberalism:

1. Market forces consistently fail to address the distributional inequities built-in social relationships. Indeed, the unequal power contained in gender interactions draws on existing social norms, customs, and practices and can be replicated in the realm of economic activities, influencing economic outcomes.
2. Gender relations, like other facets of social relations, do not always entail explicit negotiation or bargaining; instead, they arise from implicit differences in power and manifest themselves as disparities between a person's actual contributions, needs, and abilities and that person's perception of them. As a result, both men and women

internalize gender notions and representations. For example, employers may regard women's paid employment as 'secondary' or 'supplemental' wages and hence less significant to the home than that of the 'main' male breadwinner. Women are socialized to think that their employment is less valuable, or that housework does not constitute "work."

3. Gender relations are intertwined with a broader set of social relationships that structure the allocation of resources and responsibilities, as well as claims and obligations, among various social groupings. Ignoring this can lead to the oversimplification of women and men as homogenous categories. When the interrelationship of gender with other social stratifications is acknowledged, one gains more significant insights into the social dimension of the economy. The interconnected nature of power highlights the key distributional element of economic processes.

Schaar (1997) makes a compelling argument against the idea of equality of opportunity which underpins the rationale of Equal Pay. This concept presupposes that life is a race in which everyone has an equal opportunity to compete, no matter the end result, or that there are mostly losers, but that people continue to compete. This perspective is inherently individualistic and still adheres to market logic, thus failing to demand any substantial reform or social change within the neoliberal system. The equality of opportunity scheme enlists support from the pre-established values and social order hierarchy. It seeks to sustain and reinforce it, not to widen the scope of inclusion or equity. As asserted by Schaar, "No policy formula is better designed to fortify the dominant institutions, values, and ends of the social order than the formula of equality of opportunity, for it offers everyone a fair and equal chance to find a place *within* that order" (1997, p. 138). From this, the conclusion follows that the Equal Pay doctrine does not seek to

change the underlying heteropatriarchal system but to include (as in force) a certain semblance of fairness into an essentially unfair social structure.

Moreover, Schaar also points out that the equality of opportunity scheme “removes the question of how men should be treated from the realm of human responsibility and returns it to *nature*” (Schaar, 1997, p. 139). In the case of the Gender Wage Gap, the pay differential is explained away as a problem of women choosing lower-paying jobs and asking for less raises, as their work is less valuable to the market. It is portrayed almost as a fact of nature, something that cannot be controlled, and it is just the way the economy is. Hence, the mutual responsibility we owe to each other is removed from the equation, and inequity is posed as an unintended natural consequence of the market that has to be counteracted, in contrast to a concerted, primordial characteristic of capitalism. The demand for equality, as outlined in the equal opportunity principle, is essentially a demand for an equal right to become unequal (Schaar, 1997, p. 142). The liberal logic posits that the problem is the market, and the solution is for the market to correct itself on its own by suddenly starting to appreciate women's labour more, but only some women's labour, those whose work is already recognized as paid labour, whose wages can be mathematically compared against other men in the same range, and who are able-bodied to compete in the market economy.

From this section, we can conclude that the liberal approach to the Gender Wage Gap perpetuates pre-existing capitalist and (neo) colonial power dynamics while neglecting the structural origins of the problem.

Part II: What is considered work?

How work is defined, whether it is paid or unpaid and by whom it is performed are highly relevant to the topic. This definition process is deeply entrenched in racial, patriarchal, and colonial constructs, shaping what qualifies as "work." To overlook the pervasive issue of unpaid labour predominantly shouldered by women is to disregard the profound disconnect between the significance of this labour and its recognition or lack thereof in the market. The devaluation of this work is directly tied to ingrained relationships of domination.

Okin's perspective (1995) offers that feminist philosophy can be criticized by applying Michael Walzer's idea of complex equality. She argues that women's status may increase if the family sphere does not dominate other facets of their social lives. She contends that the issue originates in the private realm and spreads to the public and paid work domains. Okin's viewpoint is very similar to one of the tenets of liberalism's Gender Pay Equity: the issue is one of women's family spheres, such as motherhood and unpaid domestic labour, "dragging" them down in their public, paid labour sphere.

However, as illustrated by Baker et al. (2004), equality has several dimensions beyond the economic realm, including the cultural, political, and affective aspects. All these facets are fundamentally interconnected, challenging the artificial divide between the public and private spheres that have been instrumental in perpetuating patriarchy and devaluing women's labour. Economic inequality reflects the underlying lack of worth given to women in the neoliberal system; it is not what causes it; it is the result of it. In liberal ideology terms, then, the only aspect where women can reasonably demand "equality" is at work. This is an ableist argument that still demands active participation in the economy, so if you do not have marketable abilities, or if your labour is not conducive to profit, then it is fair to be discriminated against. In a deeper reflective example, if your labour does conduct to profit but cannot be recognized or paid as such

because otherwise it would not be profitable enough or sustainable in the current socio-economic status quo, then, its value will be continuously negated, and separated from the public, paid sphere, which is the case of feminized labour. In this same vein, Baker et al. (2004, p. 132) assert that Gender Wage Equity programs may reduce inequities in employment and income but leave intact inequalities of power and recognition. They identify the following issues with anti-discrimination laws, which are also applicable to the liberal gender pay inequality approach, given that it is premised on the same philosophy (discrimination):

- It gives priority to market outcomes.
- It focuses on individual rights vs. group relations.
- It relies on comparisons.
- It tends to treat dominant and subordinate groups as symmetric (equality of opportunity presumption).
- It has limited impact in practical terms.

For all these reasons, Baker et al. (2004) assert that these legal provisions do not constitute an appropriate resolution conducive to equality of condition.

Gring-Pemble (2018) further contributes to this critique by questioning the political rhetoric of Gender Pay Equity, which often frames its support for women's roles as wives and mothers without sacrificing their employment prospects. Instead of challenging the romanticized "natural" division of labour, where women are primarily associated with household (private sphere) responsibilities and men with labour force (public sphere) roles, lawmakers tend to favour options that preserve women's unpaid domestic duties while also facilitating their

participation in work outside the home. Consequently, these discussions need to consider alternative arrangements that could distribute work and family responsibilities differently among couples. This assumption of women as the primary caretakers and their role as unpaid workers in the household remains unaltered and largely excluded from public concern because questioning it would be perceived as a threat to the concept of the nuclear family. It effectively upholds a hetero-patriarchal, capitalist, and (neo)colonial social structure, which stands at the root of the problem.

Liberal rights philosophy has the capacity to both challenge and perpetuate prevailing social power structures. Lisa Schwartzman (2006) offers a feminist critique of liberalism, focusing on Ronald Dworkin's rights theory. She identifies several deficiencies in how liberal theorists conceptualize rights, arguing that rights can effectively combat oppressive practices and systems only when defined and applied with a keen understanding of and critical perspective on the social dynamics of power. Schwartzman asserts that although liberalism can be harnessed to champion radical conclusions, it possesses inherent characteristics that often make it favour the existing status quo. Due to liberal theory's propensity to emphasize the ways in which the government can violate citizens' rights through overt policies and practices, relations of class, race, and gender hierarchy are frequently ignored in liberal legal theory, particularly when these three hierarchies are intricately entwined. Henceforth, some feminists of colour have contended that the law finds it much more challenging to recognize and remedy instances of gender-based discrimination against women when it also stems from issues of race and/or class. This is problematic since these phenomena are entangled, and their impacts are amplified in environments of racial and gender hierarchy.

From this section, we can conclude that the liberal Gender Wage Gap ideology disregards the intricate intersection of race and gender and how what is considered work is deeply entrenched into capitalistic, and hence, colonial meaning-making systems that consistently work to:

- Give the illusion of competition (under capitalism) as sufficient and fair.
- Keep unpaid housework outside the field of scrutiny.
- Place the responsibility into the individual for their own destitution.
- Occlude the interconnected nature of domination.

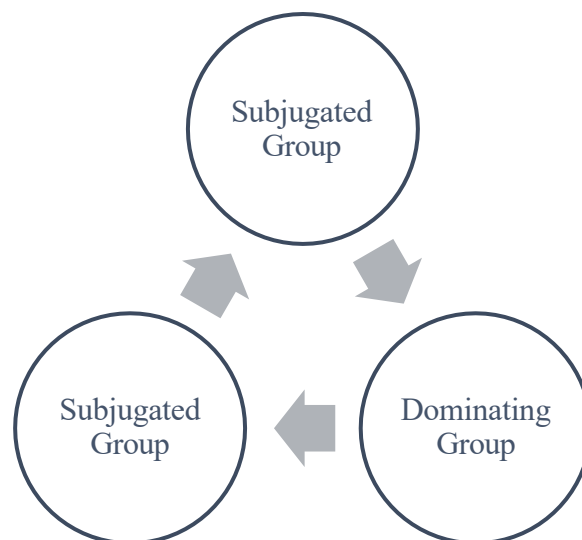
Part III: Pay Equity between who?

Another one of the core issues with the liberal Gender Pay Equity ideology is that it is based on comparing pay between men and women within the same occupation and scale. This dependency on comparators brings a set of critical flaws. As articulated by Dhamoon (2021), the theory of Relational Othering critiques the oversimplified dualism of men vs. women as separate categories, showcasing how difference generates complex triangular relations of domination that extend beyond the binary framework of Norm/Other. Group identities are not discrete, independent entities with separate political realms; instead, they are indissociably linked by means of labour divides, precarious hierarchies, nation-building strategies, and resistance patterns. Women vs men is not a critically useful dualism; instead, Dhamoon proposes a critical approach that draws attention to the interconnected processes of re/making, re/organizing, and managing oppressive formations of difference that function both within and outside of contexts of dominance, this approach is termed as "Relational Othering." (Dhamoon, 2021, p. 874).

Relational Othering is an object of study which accounts for the connections between various group political positionings by describing a specific set of power dynamics that transcend a single group identity. This brings us to the assumption of liberalism present in the Gender Pay Equity debate, which assumes that women are a monolith and that there is no more complexity worthy of deconstruction within that category. Relational Othering teaches us that the issues of women of colour cannot be collapsed into the generalized "women's issues"; to do so is to erase the unique experiences of racialized women and the racialized nature of work. This triangular relationship can be appreciated in Figure 2 below, where we can observe that power relationships are overlapping and non-exclusive; subjugated groups (such as women) have internal subdivisions that are also characterized by domination (such as race). Subjugated groups can also exert a relationship of domination over other groups.

Figure 2

Triangular Domination



Moreover, Ahmed (2012) examines in her book how the economic structures of corporations and modern institutions serve as a vehicle for whiteness and white supremacy.

Therefore, when addressing issues related to labour, such as the gender wage gap, it becomes imperative to consider the racial dimension. Work itself is profoundly influenced by gender and race, and pertinent questions surrounding what constitutes work, whether it is compensated, and who performs it should all be factored into the discourse.

The liberal Equal Pay approach, based on the wage comparison approach, also fails to consider that most times, due to hierarchical and occupational segregation, there are no men to compare the women's wages with. Hence, the liberal approach broadly dismisses one of the root causes of the problem of the devaluation of women's work, which is connected to the sections discussed above. It ignores how wage work is de/valued on gendered terms, and what is valuable to society is not necessarily what is better paid.

We shall also consider who we compare wages with, between men and women in the same country. Of the same race? In the same company? These different reformulations of the question bring us different answers that are highly relevant to what approach is being taken and what solutions are imagined. If, for example, we are comparing at an international level, it will be more telling about the ways neoliberalism reproduces colonialism at a global scale, which is essentially heteropatriarchy. There must be a consideration beyond comparing two individuals in the same country when the cause and results of this dynamic are global. Radical decolonization invites us to ask to include the broader scope of this false dualism. We shall consider the man, the woman and the Other as a triangular relationship.

Barker and Kuiper's (2014) research is instrumental in elucidating the process of the feminization of labour over recent decades, driven by globalization. This transformation is characterized by the heightened participation of women in the paid labour market, accompanied by a shift in working conditions – moving from integrated factories with a stable labour force to

a global production network that employs individuals often perceived as unorganized, undemanding, yet dependable. Barker and Kuiper explain that income disparities were attributed to both within-country and among-country disparities in the late nineteenth century. This created room for global class solidarity. Nevertheless, things changed during the early twenty-first century. The world's primary cause of income disparities is location-based and can be attributed to the differences in income between nations (Barker & Kuiper, 2014, p.4). Globalization is woven from above with various and intersecting forms of oppression and difference; rising disparities between nations impede class and gender solidarity as well as gender equality. This uneven concentration of income, wealth and access to resources increases the stratification among women. The challenge with the previous notion of fostering gender-based class solidarity or a global sisterhood is the stark divergence in class interests between impoverished women from the global south and north.

The book by Das Gupta (1996) about Racism and Paid discusses the racial implications of how the value placed on specific jobs, who performs the job, and whether this labour is fairly compensated is very much based on a white supremacist paradigm. Racialized women were historically the possession of white women in the form of slavery, or during the Jim Crow era, the housemaids of white women, hence, their employees. This dimension of labour and the racial dynamics of labour within the category of "women" cannot go unmentioned. Das Gupta (1996) demonstrates how racist beliefs have translated into the disproportionate representation of Black employees and workers of colour in the workforce's most marginalized, least desirable, least secure, and lowest-paying sectors, particularly in the aftermath of slavery and colonialism. Simultaneously, these individuals have systematically been excluded from more lucrative, secure, and coveted job opportunities, primarily due to discriminatory workplace policies and

interconnected institutions, including the education system. Racism, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy are one and the same; they go hand in hand, and to not make these intersectional questions, like liberalism fails to do, perpetuates the assumption that all women are on equal terms when they are not.

This section concludes that the Gender Wage Gap must also be recognized in terms of race, class, and global positionality. Not all women inhabit the same place. *The gender wage gap is a racial/class gap.*

Part IV: Pay Equity How?

Equal Pay demands seem clear, equal between the genders, but what is it genuinely asking for? Equal pay, how? Through which mechanisms? The liberal approach to Pay Equity, as it stands, falls short of demanding genuine redistribution or systemic change, essentially leading to a politics of recognition while allowing the existing structures of domination to persist. It is crucial to conceptualize a well-defined economic equity mechanism, a facet that Equal Pay often leaves ambiguous, leaving the resolution primarily to the whims of the market. In its current form, Equal Pay relies on appealing to the presumed moral conscience of the market, a fundamentally flawed notion given the nonexistence of inherent morality in a laissez-faire economy. What the current state of affairs shows us is not what is valuable or not, but what happens when there is no regulation of the market, and therefore, whose lives are valuable and whose are pushed to conditions of premature death.

As explained in the previous sections, one of the main issues of the liberal Gender Wage Gap argument is that it pushes a fictional division of economic issues as separate from political issues; as explained by Phillips, “the full equality of respect can only be guaranteed when there is

convergence in economic and social conditions" (1999, p. 95). It is impossible to separate instances of economic domination from cultural domination as, in practice, these two are always closely related. Furthermore, it is worthy to further expound on Phillips's assertion that in traditional liberal thinking, freedom is defined as non-interference, but in contrast, when freedom is conceived as non-domination, we are forced to focus on systemic inequities.

Moreover, in her article, Fraser (2007) contends that feminism has evolved, shifting away from its 1980s Marxist orientation that emphasized clear-cut demands for economic redistribution. This shift has seen feminism move towards an identity politics paradigm. This transformation, Fraser argues, was not the original intent but has led to the subordination of broader social and economic struggles to cultural battles and the politics of redistribution to the politics of recognition. This shift has yielded unequal progress, as recent significant strides in recognition-related issues within feminism have coincided with stagnation or even regress in the sphere of economic distribution. "Difference" reflects some, but not all the injustices encountered by women and minorities in a white-dominated society; nonetheless, focusing solely on difference obscures certain significant inequalities. The hegemonic role of difference in contemporary political and social discourse can make discussing class difficult; economic disparity is bracketed out of discussions about difference, which preferentially focus on identity politics (Phillips, 1999, p. 42). This leads to the ongoing displacement of genuine demands of distributive justice to one of cultural pluralism, a shift exemplified by the liberal gender wage gap approach. To address this, Fraser proposes a bifocal perspective on gender, viewing it through the lenses of both class and status. This approach reframes gender as a multifaceted axis encompassing two critical dimensions of social organization: distribution and recognition.

Young (1990) also provides a comprehensive critique of the foundational assumptions underpinning the liberal Gender Wage Gap, which predominantly hinges on a flawed distributive paradigm that fixates on patterns and material aspects while neglecting the broader dynamics of domination. The Gender Wage Gap is undoubtedly an economic issue. However, it transcends mere redistribution, as it encompasses a range of social goods beyond financial considerations, including power and various immaterial social goods. Young (1990) underscores the necessity of considering the social and institutional contexts and procedures in any philosophy of justice in order to attain non-domination and non-oppression. Money in the form of wages is assumed to be an immaterial good; therefore, it is erroneously imagined as static when, in reality, it is a "function of social relations and processes" (Young, 1990, p.16), the conception of oppression and domination, rather than just economic comparison points shall be the starting point of a conception of social justice.

From this section, we can conclude that another of the main flaws of the liberal Gender Wage Gap approach is that it fails to demand substantial social change and heavily relies on market-driven solutions.

Part V: Broad-Based Alternatives

Fraser (2000) presents a compelling argument against identity politics, which solely centers on issues of recognition while neglecting the explicit call for economic redistribution. Within this context, Fraser contends that the emphasis on recognition-related issues can inadvertently sideline, overshadow, and displace the efforts for economic redistribution rather than complementing, complicating, and enhancing them. Fraser refers to this phenomenon as the "displacement problem." The author suggests that we reevaluate the approach to recognition politics to address and, ideally, alleviate displacement concerns. This involves gaining a nuanced

understanding of recognition efforts and finding ways to integrate them with movements for economic redistribution rather than supplanting or undermining them. Furthermore, it calls for developing a recognition framework encompassing the full spectrum of social identities. This highlights the importance of shifting the focus from a mere issue of discrimination or undervaluation to one that considers the complex nature of domination.

The solution does not lie in focusing just on the immaterial economic aspect but on the broader dynamic of power inequality. The goal is to create a status of non-oppression and non-domination for all women; this includes the economic sphere but also transcends it. As outlined in Part II "What is considered work?" needs to be radically redefined. Baker et al. (2004) highlight the importance of valuing and redistributing affective and care work, which is often undervalued, unpaid, and for which women are socialized into taking as their sole responsibility. If we aim to create true Gender Equity, we cannot separate the domestic sphere from the public sphere; this division is artificially maintained to the detriment of women.

This paper has strived to show that comparing a woman's wages with the wages of a man in a similar position, even when well-intended, provides us with a very reductionist, narrow scope, and framing of the problem and thus, of the solutions. In order to improve women's status in society, they need a general vindication of their worth, value, and labour (public and private). The capitalist system that put and kept them in a position of oppression is not the way towards true liberation. Freedom, as defined as being free from domination, to possess the ability to choose between real choices, cannot be reduced by equity advocates to be recognized as worthy by the market. The market cannot be posited as the prime vehicle for ethics; it was never meant to be; it just reflects the broader worth, or lack thereof, given to women. The Gender Wage Gap

is a racial issue, a class issue, and a social domination issue. Its potential solutions must address all these aspects of the problem.

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