How could the economy compensate for “women’s work”?  

Date: Tuesday, April 1, 5:30 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.  
Location: Osher Lifelong Learning Center, (OLLI) in Sedona  
Facilitated by: Dr. Jona Vance, NAU Department of Philosophy

5:30 p.m. Welcome and Introduction  
Andrea Houchard, Director, Philosophy in the Public Interest

5:45 p.m.  
Dr. Jona Vance, NAU Department of Philosophy

- What is “women’s work” and how has its definition persisted?
- What do societal attitudes towards “women’s work” say about how women and certain kinds of work are valued?
- Why do we still have gender inequality in pay and what should be done about it?
- How should people be compensated for “women’s work”?

6:50 p.m. Recap of discussion
What is “women’s work” and how has its definition persisted?

“Women’s work” refers to work that some believe should be carried out by women. It implies a sexual division of labor whose origins are both ancient and a subject of great debate. The sexual division of labor is a largely universal concept observable in all human societies. Activities that are widely considered “women’s work” today include cooking, grocery shopping, sewing, gardening, and general house and childcare. Unsurprisingly, the root of the difference between men and women, and subsequently, men’s and women’s work is childbearing. Many believe that women’s work has been defined throughout history as tasks easily performed while watching children. Anthropologists have noted that such activities have the following characteristics: they do not require rapt concentration and are relatively dull and repetitive; they are easily interruptible and easily resumed once interrupted; they do not place the child in potential danger; and they do not require the participant to range very far from home. ¹

This raises the question: Is the phenomenon of “women’s work” purely a result of child bearing, or are there physiological differences between men and women that make women more apt to perform this work? This is a subject of intense debate. There is ethnographic evidence (e.g. accounts of women performing heavy physical labor) to support the theory that, at a primitive level, there is little physiological difference between the sexes, they have similar capacities for strength and intelligence. Others claim that women are relegated to these tasks as a result of a core difference is physiology. Some say stronger men coerce women into doing such monotonous work, and/or women are psychologically better suited for doing dull work. ²

What do societal attitudes towards “women’s work” say about how women and certain kinds of work are valued?

“Women’s work” is a potentially derogatory term, the use of which may imply an attitude towards women as inferior. In his Politics, Aristotle advocates excluding women from public affairs and relegating them to the household. Shortly after making this claim he says, “The relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and ruler to ruled.” ³ Can one hold distinct views of women and of women’s work? In other words, can one believe “women’s work” to be inferior to “men’s work” but still hold that women are not inferior to men? It seems that attitudes towards “women’s work” are importantly linked towards attitudes toward women.

Why do we still have gender inequality in pay and what should be done about it?

There is an earnings gap between genders that exists across a wide range of occupations. There are no major disciplines that are immune to this gap. Since 1965, women’s pay as a percentage of men’s has climbed 15%, but a large discrepancy remains. Today, women make $0.77 for every dollar men make. ⁴ Explanations for the gap include women’s tendency to select lower paying jobs, lack of experience (because they spend time raising children), and differences in wages paid in sex-dominated industries (construction, mining, manufacturing, etc. for men, service-sector and clerical jobs for women). Analysts have determined that only a portion of the gender gap can be explained by these measurable factors. In fact, 40% of the gender pay gap is unexplained by these factors. ⁵ This portion is most attributed to blatant sexism, potentially unintentional gender discrimination, and women’s reluctance to negotiate. It is illegal for women to be paid less than men for similar work, but this data suggests that it is happening anyways. In 2009, Barack Obama signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act into law. The bill allows women wider latitude to sue their employer for paying a male counterpart more for equal work. The Paycheck Fairness Act would hold employers to a higher standard in gender equality but is struggling to garner the support it needs to be enacted. ⁶
**This graphic breaks down the gender wage gap, detailing the portions that can be explained. The “unexplained” portion is theorized to be result of sexism.**

**How should people be compensated for “women’s work”?**

Answering the question of how “women’s work” should be compensated is a complicated question that raises a number of other questions. What type of compensation is fair? Is monetary compensation the only or best way to truly value work? Where should this compensation come from? In some cultures, “women’s work” is seen as a duty, not something to be rewarded with monetary compensation. It is becoming increasingly popular for families to pay a designated family member to care for their elderly. Certain countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Sweden compensate caregivers financially. Finally, exactly what types of “women’s work” should be compensated?

**Works Cited**


The “hot topics” in the Hot Topics Cafés are selected by community members representing diverse constituencies and viewpoints. We thank our committee for their participation.

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