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Feminist myths and magic medicine: the flawed thinking behind calls for further equality legislation

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Feminist Myths and Magic Medicine

The flawed thinking behind calls for further equality legislation

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SUMMARY

- Equal opportunity policies, in regards to women's access to the labour market in the UK, have been successful.
- Despite this, many politicians and feminists appear disappointed with the slow pace of change in women's attainment of top jobs. Sex differences are treated as self-evident proof of widespread sex discrimination and sex-role stereotyping rather than the result of personal choices and preferences.
- Thus, calls to smash the glass ceiling, to eliminate the pay gap and to end sex differentials are regularly heard in Parliament and from supranational organisations, academia and the media.
- But these demands for further change rest on faulty assumptions and outdated or partial evidence. For the latest academic research and cross-national comparative studies show that most of the theories and ideas built up around gender equality in the last few decades are wrong.
- Despite feminist claims, the truth is that most men and women have different career aspirations and priorities. Men

and women often have different life-goals and policy makers should therefore not expect the same job outcomes.

- For example, there is no evidence that the sex segregation of occupations is an important cause of the pay gap between men and women.
- Similarly, a study of nine OECD countries has shown that the link between occupational segregation and the pay gap is coincidental, not causal. We now know why: higher levels of female employment produce higher levels of occupational segregation (as more unskilled women join the labour force) and thus a larger pay gap.
- Sex differentials in the professions are due primarily to substantively different work orientations and career choices among men and women.
- Modern and egalitarian societies do not necessarily score better on these popular indicators of gender equality. The country with the lowest level of occupational segregation in the world is China. The lowest pay gap in the world is in Swaziland, followed closely by Sri Lanka. Despite all its family friendly and equal opportunity policies, Sweden (and the other Nordic countries) does not have a better record than Anglo-Saxon countries in terms of eliminating sex differences in the labour market.
- Quotas are increasingly popular with the political classes across Europe (but are illegal in the EU). Policy makers should learn that they – and many other policies intended to promote sex equality – at best have little impact and at worst are counter-productive and a waste of public funds. They should adapt policy accordingly.

1. INTRODUCTION

Equal opportunities policies have been successful in the UK, stimulating massive changes over the past 30 years and transforming women's lives. Women today have more choices than men, including real choices between a focus on family work and/or paid employment. For the first time in history women in developed societies are free to take up any occupation or career on the same basis as men. In 2005, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) celebrated these changes shortly before it was merged into the new Equality and Human Rights Commission.

In *Then and Now*, the EOC set out how life has changed for women. The fertility rate fell from 2.37 in 1971 to 1.78 in 2004. Average gross household income almost doubled from £324 per week in 1970 to £552 per week in 2002/3 and disposable income rose by a similar amount. In 1970, two-thirds of students in higher education were male. By 2003, over half were female.

However changes in female employment have been relatively small. Among women of working age, six out of ten had a job in 1975, compared to seven out of ten in 2005. The increase in female employment has been primarily in part-time jobs – not

only in the UK, but across much of western Europe. Women's full-time employment rate has remained constant, hovering between 30% and 40%, about one-third of the age group since at least 1850 in Britain, similar to many other European countries.¹ Across western Europe, full-time equivalent (FTE) employment rates² remain around 50% for women and 75% for men. It is only in the Nordic and post-socialist countries, where public policy has pushed women into paid work for decades, that the female FTE employment rate rises to around two-thirds of the 15-64 years age group, still well below rates for men (see Table 1). Even this is illusory. Swedish economists have shown that Sweden and the US are almost identical in women's average actual hours of paid work and household work, even though Swedish women appear to have labour force participation rates 20% higher than in the US.³ On average, working wives still contribute only one-third of household income, husbands contribute two-thirds. When wives without jobs are included in the analysis, the overall contribution of wives is even smaller.⁴

¹ Hakim 2004.

² FTE employment is total hours worked in main jobs and second jobs divided by the average annual number of hours worked in full-time jobs. A simpler version counts two part-time jobs as equivalent to one full-time job.

³ Jonung and Persson 1993, page 271. This is because many Swedish women are away from their jobs at home full-time on extended maternity and parental leaves.

⁴ Hakim 2004, page 73; Scott, Dex and Joshi 2008.

Table 1: FTE employment,* 1997† and 2007
(as% of population aged 16-64 years)

	Men		Women	
	1997	2007	1997	2007
Finland	69	71	61	64
Estonia	64	72	56	64
Denmark	77	76	62	63
Latvia	61	72	52	63
Lithuania	62	69	57	62
Sweden	70	74	60	62
Slovenia	66	72	57	60
Cyprus	79	80	50	60
Portugal	77	73	57	58
Bulgaria	–	65	–	57
Czech Rep.	73	74	54	56
Romania	71	65	57	52
Slovakia	63	68	50	52
France	69	67	49	52
UK	74	73	50	51
Ireland	76	77	45	51
Austria	76	75	51	51
Hungary	64	65	49	50
Poland	59	63	47	49
Spain	70	75	38	49
Croatia	–	63	–	49
Spain	70	75	38	49
Germany	71	71	46	48
Belgium	71	69	44	47
Greece	72	75	41	46
Luxembourg	76	74	45	45
Netherlands	75	74	41	44
Italy	67	70	37	42
Malta	77	73	32	33
EU–15	71	72	45	49
EU–25	70	71	47	50

* FTE employment is total hours worked in both main jobs and second jobs divided by the average annual number of hours worked in full-time jobs.

† Or nearest year, typically 1998 or 2000.

Source: extracted from European Commission, 2008.

New maternity rights facilitate (and in some cases even force) women's return to work after a birth, but the return is often short-lived. The British Millennium Cohort Study shows that, apart from graduates, the majority of women still take a substantial break from work after a birth. By the time a child reached three years of age, only half of all mothers had any paid work, almost invariably a part-time job. Even in the 21st century, only one in ten mothers chooses to return to full-time work by the time a child is three.⁵ Only one in ten mothers who worked up to their first birth persists with full-time employment careers a full 11 years after the birth.⁶ The two-earner family remains far more common than the dual-career household – or rather what the Dutch realistically call the one-and-a-half earner family.

These modest changes in women's employment over the past 30 years are decried by feminist campaigners, academics and politicians, who insist that legislation did not go far enough and demand the elimination of all sex differentials.⁷ The 2006

⁵ Employment patterns among graduates are no so different, according to a March 2010 report in *The Economist*. For example a study of MBA graduates of the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business by Marianne Bertrand and her colleagues found that 10 to 16 years after graduating, in 2009, around half of those with children were working full-time, one-quarter were working part-time, and one-quarter had left the workforce to become full-time mothers and homemakers. Vere 2007 also shows that even graduate women have realised that 'having it all' does not work in practice for many.

⁶ Dex and Ward 2007; McRae 2003.

⁷ Most notably the academic Anne Phillips 2004, Kat Banyard 2010, the Fawcett Society, and the Labour politicians Harriet Harman MP and Jackie Shaw MP who shaped the 2009 Equalities Bill. They all claim that sex discrimination remains important in the UK today, and that the pay gap and all other sex differences can and should be eliminated.

Women and Work Commission report chose not to recommend further legislation to promote gender equality, opting instead for moral exhortation, models of good practice and other advocacy. Harriet Harman ignored this to ensure that the 2009 Equalities Bill included prescriptions for action. The main purpose of the Bill was to synthesise and harmonise equal opportunities laws across all the relevant social groups and criteria (sex, age, ethnic group, religion, disability and sexual orientation). However Harman insisted it should also include new obligations on employers, most notably compulsory gender pay audits for public bodies and companies, and a strong push for employers to use positive action (in effect, positive discrimination) in favour of women, so as to make business 'more representative'.

Yet how realistic is the goal of eliminating all sex differentials, particularly as it is based on myths that have no basis in social science research? The goal of getting 50/50 male/female shares in all political, economic and socially important top jobs is out of touch with the preferences and aspirations of the majority of women. Devoting resources to policies that are bound to fail is a waste of public money – which is doubly irresponsible at a time of economic restraint. The UK provides the main example in the following discussion, but much of the evidence concerns all European, and even all OECD countries, so the argument applies more broadly to all modern liberal societies in the 21st century.⁸

⁸ Similar critiques of feminist ideology have been offered from other perspectives. See Badinter 2006; Shackleton 2008.

2. TWELVE MYTHS

The proliferation of feminist myths was first analysed in 1995, prompting a fierce academic debate between sociologists and economists that continues to this day.⁹ Unfortunately, feminist ideology continues to dominate thinking about women's roles in employment and the family, and on how family-friendly policies are universally beneficial in promoting sex equality.

On top of that, new feminist myths are constantly being created, seeking to portray women as universal victims (of men or of society at large), and to prove that gender equality and family-friendly policies are beneficial, not only for women themselves, but also for the companies that employ them and for the wider society.

There are a dozen new feminist myths. They have no solid basis in social science research, yet are popular, widely believed, and constantly reiterated in the media, in public speeches, in the

⁹ See Hakim 1995; Ginn et al 1996; Hakim 2004, 2007; Hakim 2008. It is now accepted by many other scholars across Europe that the five feminist myths identified by the author of this report in 1995 were fully substantiated.

European Commission's regular reports on gender equality topics, and very likely in the work of the new European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) in Vilnius.

Myth 1: Equal opportunities policies have failed

The big success of equal opportunities legislation is the narrowing of the pay gap between men and women, from around 29% in 1975 to 16% or even 10% today.¹⁰ Most of this change took place very quickly in the 1970s, when the Equal Pay Act was implemented. The pay gap has remained fairly stable since 1995 in the UK. The European Commission also admits that the pay gap has remained fairly stable and unchanging across Europe since the mid-1990s, along with other indicators of gender equality.¹¹ There has been no decline in the occupational segregation of men and women in the EU since 1992; on the contrary, there is a rising trend since 2000.¹²

The US also reports a 'stalled revolution'. The average pay gap between men and women in the US declined from 40% in 1960 to between 25% and 30% after 2000, whereas it is now only 17%

¹⁰ The pay gap is normally measured as the difference in average gross hourly earnings for full-time workers. In the UK, the pay gap on this basis is variously reported as 16% or else 10% currently, depending on whether mean or median earnings data are used. However the European Commission regularly publishes league tables using average gross hourly earnings for all employees, whether full-time or part-time. This inflates the pay gap in countries with a large part-time workforce, such as the UK. See for example Plantenga and Remery 2010, pages 66-67.

¹¹ Hakim 2004, pages 167-170; Plantenga and Remery 2006; European Commission 2007a, 2009

¹² Bettio and Verashchagina 2009. A study by EU labour lawyers states that the pay gap is also increasing in some EU countries, but fails to give clear evidence. See Foubert 2010.

in Europe.¹³ This is largely because women have now taken up the professional and managerial occupations they find attractive. Further big changes in employment patterns and relative earnings seem unlikely. Equal opportunities legislation has done its job, and done it much more quickly in Europe than in the US, it appears.

However some feminists are disappointed with this progress. They insist that equal outcomes and symmetrical roles for men and women in all aspects of family life and employment can and should be achieved.¹⁴ All sex differences are treated as self-evident proof of widespread sex discrimination and sex-role stereotyping rather than the result of personal choices and preferences. They call for yet more family-friendly policies to help women break the glass ceiling and gain a half-share of the top jobs in all spheres of activity.

These expectations are prompted in part by a refusal to accept that the policy goal is equality of *opportunity*, not equality of *outcomes*. Academics and the European Commission routinely conflate the two, as illustrated most spectacularly by the Gender Equality Index constructed by academics for the EU.¹⁵

In addition, some policy expectations are based on assumptions and beliefs that recent research has shown to be false. The latest research also suggests that social engineering policies can sometimes be counter-productive in their effects, doing more harm than good.

¹³ Blau, Brinton and Grusky 2006, pages 41, 69, 111; European Commission 2009.

¹⁴ Phillips 2004; Plantenga et al 2009; Plantenga and Remery 2010.

¹⁵ Plantenga et al 2009.

Nicola Brewer, the first chief executive of the new Equality and Human Rights Commission in the UK, bravely admitted that extending maternity leave rights up to 12 months might encourage employers to discriminate against women. However it was perverse of her to pretend that allowing fathers to share parental leave could alter this. In the UK, only a fifth of fathers use paternity leave.¹⁶ This is actually a rather high rate. All the evidence from the Nordic countries is that only a tiny minority of fathers, in the region of 5% to 10%, ever took any paternity leave until they were forced to. When they do, it is often for activities other than childcare, as suggested by the fact that paternity leave is concentrated in August and around Christmas and New Year.

Presenting shared parental leave as the cure-all magic medicine for gender equality displays dogmatism and myth-making at its worst. Raising children takes over 20 years, as long as many careers, not only a few months after the birth. Parental leave should be open to either parent, to allow parents a free choice in their domestic arrangements. But it does not automatically change family roles and the popularly understood benefits of some routine division of labour in households.

Myth 2: European gender equality policies are effective

Both the European Commission and the United Nations' International Labour Office (ILO) believe that occupational segregation can, and should be eliminated by pro-active policies. They offer two arguments. First, they claim that the segregation of men and women into different occupations is a principal reason for earnings differences between men and women. Second, they argue that occupational segregation

¹⁶ Carvel 2008.

restricts people's choice of career, especially in the crucial early years of adult life. The assumption underlying this policy is stated clearly by the Commission as the feminist idea that all gender differences are the result of learned roles and sex stereotypes, not choice, so can (and should) be eliminated by social engineering. The Commission would like to see all occupations having a 50/50 male/female split, and would like to impose positive discrimination or quotas in order to achieve this.¹⁷ This year, it threatened to impose female quotas for company boards if EU members do not voluntarily adopt them, and it also wants female quotas for political representatives.¹⁸ So far, the European Court of Justice has ruled that such policies are not lawful.¹⁹

Like the EC, the ILO insists that occupational segregation is an important measure of gender equality in the workforce,²⁰ that it produces serious inefficiencies in the economy; and that policy should aim to reduce it, if not eradicate it in all civilised societies.²¹ Similarly, the OECD has long held that occupational segregation is produced by sex discrimination primarily, and that the pay gap can and should be eliminated.²² So it is not surprising that the UK EOC, and the UK government, has taken the same line for decades.

¹⁷ European Commission 2005a, b.

¹⁸ Groom 2010.

¹⁹ Hakim 2004, page 191.

²⁰ 'Occupational segregation' is the concentration of men in certain occupations and women in different occupations.

²¹ Anker, 1998: 5-9.

²² OECD 2002.

The European Commission has made closing the pay gap, and the elimination of the gender segregation of jobs, the two key indicators of progress on equality for women in the EU labour market, and it argues that encouraging more women into employment helps to achieve these two goals. The fact that the pay gap has remained relatively stable for over a decade in most European countries, prompts calls for more aggressive social engineering, stronger legislation to combat covert or indirect sex discrimination, more family-friendly policies to help more women into jobs, more training for women in sex-atypical occupations, and so on.

The alternative conclusion is that the analysis is incorrect and the goals are unrealistic, which is why the key indicators levelled off over a decade ago. Despite the current emphasis on 'evidence-based policy' in the UK, and the rest of Europe, research evidence is ignored when the picture it paints challenges political ideology.

Myth 3: Occupational segregation is noxious

It is necessary to distinguish between horizontal and vertical occupational segregation, which are often conflated.²³ Horizontal occupational segregation exists when men and women tend to choose different careers – for example men are carpenters while women are cooks. Vertical segregation exists when men dominate higher-grade higher-paid occupations and women are concentrated in lower-grade, lower-paid occupations in the same area of activity: for example men are managers while women are secretaries, men are surgeons while women are nurses.

²³ Hakim 2004, page 148.

Most studies focus on horizontal occupational segregation, which most people would regard as inevitable, and where there is no immediate link to earnings differences. Few women aspire to be engineers or soldiers, and few men choose to be nursery teachers and beauticians. Insisting on 50/50 quotas of men/women in all occupations makes no allowance for variations in tastes, talents, interests, personal choices and cultural diversity.

Vertical occupational segregation is rarely studied, and has an obvious link to earnings differences between men and women. However these would generally be regarded as justified rather than sexist: in capitalist economies it is self-evident that managers earn more than their secretaries. We might argue about how big the pay gap between them should be, but it is agreed there will be a pay gap, to reflect different levels of expertise and responsibility.

The crucial question is: why are women less likely to achieve the top jobs and associated higher pay? Is it due to women's lack of interest in the jobs, in promotion to greater responsibility and high pay? Is it due to active exclusion by selection panels? Is it due to simple inertia, with men sponsoring and selecting other men like themselves? Analyses of statistical data on the workforce cannot tell us anything at all about the social processes going on within companies or among young people choosing careers. We cannot assume that a low percentage of women in higher grade jobs is due primarily to sex discrimination. Dozens of other factors are known to play a part, and the key question is whether they fully explain observed outcomes.

Myth 4: Scandinavian policies deliver gender equality

The most comprehensive cross-national comparative study of the sex segregation of occupations was carried out over ten years by the International Labour Office (ILO). The study covered two decades, 1970-1990, and used detailed data on all the occupations in 41 countries, examining from 200 to 460 separate occupations in each country. All the key measures of occupational segregation were employed, and the study explored vertical segregation and the pay gap as well as horizontal job segregation in vast detail.²⁴ This landmark study overturned all received wisdom in this area, yet is routinely ignored by social scientists.²⁵

The results showed that, after excluding agricultural occupations (which are never clearly differentiated, and usually employ both men and women), the level of occupational segregation in Nordic countries was substantially higher than in other OECD countries, higher than in Egypt, and substantially higher than in Asian countries such as China, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia and India. Only the predominantly Islamic Middle East and North Africa, and certain developing countries, had similar or higher levels of occupational segregation.²⁶ These unexpected results led the ILO to carry out fuller analyses of the data for Sweden, Norway and Finland, which were presented within the context of Nordic gender equality policies. By

²⁴ Anker 1998; Melkas and Anker 1997, 1998.

²⁵ For example there is no reference to this landmark study in American and European reports on job segregation, the pay gap and gender equality, such as Blau, Brinton and Grusky 2006; Neramo 2000; and Gönas and Karlsson 2006.

²⁶ Anker 1998, pages 176-8.

restricting comparisons to the OECD countries, this report avoided the embarrassing conclusion that in some respects sex equality in the Nordic labour markets is equal to that in developing countries such as Angola, Senegal and Bahrain, but it still showed the Nordic countries to have the highest level of job segregation in the OECD group, while Italy and the USA have the lowest level. This is powerful evidence that Scandinavian 'gender equality' policies do *not* deliver gender equality – so the ILO study has been systematically ignored by academics and policy-makers alike.

What the ILO study reveals is that women are nurses while men are doctors; women are primary school teachers while men are university lecturers; women are secretaries while managers are men – and that these patterns are strongest in the Nordic countries. In sum, both vertical and horizontal sex segregation of occupations are higher in the Nordic countries, despite, or because of, welfare state policies that promote sex equality and allow women to combine paid work with family work.²⁷

The ILO reports tried to whitewash this politically incorrect result by claims that the pay gap is smaller in Nordic countries than in other European countries.²⁸ However this is true only in manufacturing industries, where few women work. All other studies show that when earnings data for *all* workers are analysed, the Nordic countries are no different. For example, the pay gap in Sweden and Norway is very close to that in Italy, Austria, West Germany and Australia despite institutional and ideological differences.²⁹ An analysis of hourly pay statistics for

²⁷ Melkas and Anker 1998, page 24.

²⁸ Anker, 1998: 34; Melkas and Anker, 1998, page 19.

²⁹ Blau and Kahn, 2003.

full-time employees in the 1990s found pay gaps of about 20% in Norway, the UK, France and Australia, about 25% in the US and Canada, and about 30% in West Germany.³⁰ Overall, the pay gap in Nordic countries is no different from that in other advanced economies.

Nordic women benefit from substantial family-friendly pro-natalist policies, but the effect of these is to impede equality with men in the labour market, in terms of access to the top jobs, occupations with authority, or higher pay. This is finally being admitted by academics, even in Scandinavia, and is regularly confirmed by European Commission reports on gender equality. The countries with the lowest pay gaps are Italy (4.4%), Poland (7.5%), Portugal (8.3%) and Belgium (9.1%). The largest gaps are in Slovakia and Estonia (26% and 30%). But Finland (21%) and Sweden (17%) are entirely average.³¹

In 2000, married and cohabiting Swedish women earned 66% of men's incomes *after including* state benefits. Women with small children had incomes 57% of male incomes.³² Swedish women are just as financially dependent on men, or the state, as they are elsewhere in Europe. Yet academics and commentators around the world constantly repeat the myth of the pay gap being virtually eliminated in the Nordic countries, and especially in Sweden. They claim that Swedish women receive wages 'not far below those of men' so that there is a 'relatively small gender gap in pay in the Nordic countries as compared to other

³⁰ Grimshaw and Rubery, 1997, Table 7.

³¹ European Commission 2009, page 36; Plantenga and Remery 2010, page 67.

³² Gönas and Karlsson 2006, page 5.

countries ... as a result of relatively high gender equality.³³ This is a feminist credo that is divorced from reality.

Myth 5: Social and economic development promotes gender equality

The ILO also found that the US and Canada have the lowest levels of occupational segregation within the OECD group. These are liberal and *laissez-faire* economies with fewer welfare state and family-friendly policies than in western Europe, but with a fierce commitment to the sex and race equality that is the hallmark of meritocracies.

The country with the lowest level of occupational segregation in the world is China; Swaziland and Sri Lanka have the lowest pay gaps in the world.³⁴ The ILO study concluded that the sex segregation of occupations does not decline with socio-economic development, as was widely believed, and that social, cultural and historical factors are the main determinants of how work is divided between men and women.³⁵ The same conclusion seems to apply to the rewards for work and hence the pay gap. On gender equality, Europe is not ahead of the game, and Sweden does not offer a model of best practice among the developed economies.

Myth 6: Higher female employment promotes gender equality

The findings of the ILO study are corroborated by several academic studies showing that raising female employment leads to a reduction in gender equality. A study of Sweden, the

³³ Melkas and Anker 1998, pages 9, 10; Gönas and Karlsson 2006, page 21; Arndt 2009, page 184.

³⁴ Anker 1998, Tables 2.2 and 9.1.

³⁵ Anker, 1998, page 409.

UK, Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Germany, Switzerland, Italy and Portugal in the 1990s concluded that gender-equality norms facilitate the integration of women into professional and managerial occupations, but high levels of female employment are associated with greater segregation of women into female-dominated service sector occupations, which are rarely high status jobs.³⁶ The failure of the Nordic countries to achieve sex equality in the workforce, despite high female work rates, was duplicated in the socialist USSR, and egalitarian Israeli *kibbutzim*, but not in socialist China. Clearly, egalitarian policies can work, but not when combined with family-friendly pro-natalist policies.³⁷

An OECD study of industrialised countries confirms the ILO results, showing that higher female employment rates often lead to higher levels of job segregation and a larger pay gap. This is the result of women with lower levels of education and less careerist attitudes being pulled into the workforce.³⁸ Countries with low female work rates, such as Italy, can have a low pay gap because working women are a highly selective minority with strong work commitment and continuous careers.

Like other studies, the OECD study found that occupational segregation is substantially lower among younger women, but rises over the lifecycle, partly due to women's discontinuous work histories. A further analysis of the same data by the EC looked at EU countries more closely.³⁹ It reiterated the

³⁶ Charles, 1998.

³⁷ Hakim, 2000, page 241.

³⁸ OECD 2002, pages 89-110.

³⁹ EC 2002.

importance of career interruptions in reducing (women's) earnings, and generally confirms the OECD results: the pay gap in the EU is lowest in Italy, Belgium and Portugal, and highest in countries with large part-time workforces.⁴⁰ More recent EC reports tell the same story repeatedly: countries in southern Europe with low female employment rates also have lower occupational segregation and a smaller pay gap; high female work rates lead to greater segregation.⁴¹

Other academic studies report consistent results. A study of nine OECD countries was the first to show that the link between occupational segregation and the pay gap is coincidental, not causal.⁴² We now know why: both are pushed up by rising female employment.

A study of developments in East Germany after reunification shows that declining female work rates were accompanied by a 10-point *shrinking* of the pay gap, from 26% under communism to 16% under capitalism. It also found that reduced childcare services played no part at all in falling female work rates. Work orientations were the main factor, as careerist women stayed in jobs while mothers who had previously been forced into jobs left the labour market to become full-time homemakers.⁴³

In short, there is no evidence that the sex segregation of occupations is an important cause of the pay gap between men and women, even though such a link has always been assumed,

⁴⁰ European Commission 2002.

⁴¹ Bettio and Verashchagina 2009.

⁴² Rosenfeld and Kalleberg 1991, page 217.

⁴³ Hunt 2002.

and is now fixed rigidly in policy-makers' thinking and in the policies of the EU, OECD, and ILO. Recent studies show clearly that high female work rates are more likely to cause a widening of the pay gap and an increase in job segregation. High female work rates and gender equality in the workforce seem to be mutually exclusive policy goals, contrary to European Commission, and feminist assumptions. Despite this solid evidence, the European Commission persists in treating employment rates as an indicator of gender equality, and insists that three-quarters of women should be in paid work.⁴⁴

Myth 7: Women's access to higher education changes everything

Case studies of the professions and management regularly explode the myth that women's access to higher education and higher status occupations brings gender equality into the workplace. Case studies of women who achieve high status professional and managerial jobs also demonstrate why family-friendly policies can be irrelevant. They show that women in high-powered jobs reduce or eliminate work-life balance problems by remaining childless, in about half of all cases, or by low fertility, as illustrated by the nominal one-child family, or by subcontracting childcare and domestic work to other women. In contrast, almost all their male colleagues are married, with several children, but also with wives who typically remain full-time mothers and homemakers.⁴⁵

Case studies of professions that are fully integrated, employing men and women in equal numbers, provide the most conclusive

⁴⁴ European Commission 2009; Plantenga and Remery 2010, pages 66-67.

⁴⁵ Wajcman 1996, 1998; Hakim 2000.

evidence that job segregation does not cause the pay gap, and is not the social evil it is made out to be. Studies of pharmacists in the UK, the US, Canada and France reveal large sex differences in pay and job grade, even in this fully integrated and highly qualified occupation. In Britain, the 27% pay gap in pharmacy is well above the national average. However, it is fully explained by sex differences in hours worked, work histories, and types of job chosen, not by sex or race discrimination, which have been eliminated in the profession by severe staff shortages. Women in pharmacy gravitate towards jobs that are local, can be done part-time or for short periods, and to jobs with fixed hours of work that can be fitted around family life. Men in the profession gravitate towards ownership of independent pharmacies, which entail long work hours and the additional responsibilities of self-employment and running a small business. Other men work towards management jobs in the large retail chains, again accepting long hours and more overtime in return for higher earnings.⁴⁶

These integrated occupations prove that sex discrimination does *not* prevent women's access to senior positions in management and the professions. Sex differentials in the professions are due primarily to substantively different work orientations and career choices among men and women, even among university graduates, even among people of exceptionally high intellectual ability, and hence to very different career paths.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Hakim 1998, pages 221-34.

⁴⁷ Hakim 2000, 2003, 2004, pages 178-182; Lubinski and Benbow 2006; Ferriman, Lubinski and Benbow 2009.

Myth 8: Men and women do not differ in careerist attitudes, values and life goals

Academics have only recently considered the importance of attitudes and values, including attitudes to risk, promotion, career success and higher earnings. What emerges from these new studies is that attitudes and values are the invisible 'hidden hand' shaping employment histories and career paths as well as private lives.⁴⁸

One landmark study is Babcock and Laschever's compendium of research *Women Don't Ask*, which showed how sex differences in earnings emerge soon after graduation from university because young men routinely negotiate higher starting pay, while most young women fail to do so. This sex difference in bargaining and negotiation over promotion, responsibilities and pay develops over time into a cumulatively sizeable earnings gap in adult life – even among people who attended the same universities and have the same qualifications, including MBA graduates.

Other studies show that women do ask employers for additional benefits, but there are sex differences in requests. Men are more likely to ask for more money, while women are more likely to ask for shorter hours.⁴⁹ Numerous other studies also show that women seek and prioritise non-financial benefits such as personal development and convenience factors when choosing jobs, whereas men prioritise high earnings.⁵⁰ The focus on the sex differential in earnings is misleading because it does not

⁴⁸ Campbell 2002.

⁴⁹ McGovern et al 2007: 120-122.

⁵⁰ Hakim 2004, pages 83-120, 2005; Hult 2008.

encompass the complete package of employment benefits and rewards, and overlooks the issue of short and flexible work hours, which women value most.⁵¹

National interview surveys in the UK, Spain and other countries show that women divide into three very different groups in terms of life goals, values and aspirations:

- a minority are careerist;
- a minority are centred on home and family life; and,
- a majority seek some combination of paid work and family work.

In contrast, men are more likely to be careerist in their attitudes and goals, although a substantial minority seek a good work-life balance. Most surprising of all, these three groups of women are found at all educational levels, in all income groups and social classes, and in all types of society (Table 2). The social and economic environment does matter, and alters the relative sizes of the three groups. However lifestyle preferences have been found to determine which structural factors influence any individual's behaviour.⁵²

Recent OECD studies acknowledge the importance of these rarely-studied attitudes and values in explaining sex differentials in careers, achievements in the labour market, and even earnings.⁵³ Previously, these differential outcomes were automatically attributed to sex discrimination.

⁵¹ Plantenga and Remery 2010.

⁵² Hakim 2003, pages 131-141.

⁵³ OECD 2001.

Table 2: National distributions of lifestyle preferences among women and men

		Family centred	Adaptive	Work centred
UK	All women aged 16+	17	69	14
	Women in FT work	14	62	24
	Women in PT work	8	84	8
	All men aged 16+	?	<48	52
	Men in FT work	?	<50	50
	Men in PT work	?	<66	34
Spain	All women aged 18+	17	70	13
	Women in FT work	4	63	33
	Women in PT work	7	79	14
	All men aged 18+	?	<60	40
	Men in full-time work	?	<56	44
Belgium-Flanders	All women	10	75	15
	Women with partners	12	75	13
	All men	2	23	75
	Men with partners	1	22	77
Germany	Women	14	65	21
	Men	33	67	
Czech Republic	All women aged 20-40	17	70	13
	Employed women	14	69	17
	Wives aged 20-40	14	75	11
Sweden	Women born in 1955	4	64	32

Sources: Data for UK and Spain, 1999, extracted from Tables 3.14 and 3.15 in Hakim (2003: 85, 87). Data for Belgium-Flanders extracted from Corijn and Hakim (2006) based on a 2002/3 survey. Data for Germany extracted from Bertram et al (2005). Data for Czech Republic from Rabusic and Manea (2009), based on a 2005 survey. Data for Sweden extracted from Huang et al (2007) reporting analysis of a longitudinal dataset that understated those in the family-centred group. Data shows actual lifestyle choices by age 43 (1998).

Myth 9: Women prefer to earn their own living and hate financial dependence on men

One indicator of women's lifestyle preferences is found in patterns of educational homogamy: whether women choose husbands with equal levels of education, or prefer a better-educated and higher-earning spouse.

Women's aspiration to marry up, if they can, to a man who is better-educated and higher-earning, persists in most European countries. The Nordic countries share this pattern with all other parts of Europe. Women thereby continue to use marriage as an alternative or supplement to their employment careers.⁵⁴ Financial dependence on a man has lost none of its attractions after the equal opportunities revolution. Symmetrical family roles are not the ideal sought by most couples, even though they are popular among the minority of highly educated professionals.⁵⁵

It is thus not surprising that wives generally earn less than their husbands, and that most couples rationally decide that it makes sense for her to take on the larger share of childcare, and use most or all the parental leave allowance. This is just as true of the Nordic countries as elsewhere. For example in Norway, only one-third of mothers have earnings roughly equal to the father's earnings (up to one-quarter less), and two-thirds of wives earn far less than their spouse, in part because many work part-time. There is thus no incentive to share parental leave.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Hakim 2000, pages 193-222; Domanski and Przybysz 2007.

⁵⁵ Hakim 2003, page 51.

⁵⁶ Lappegard 2008, page 147.

Myth 10: Family-friendly policies are essential to break the glass ceiling

One variant of the myth that social and economic development produce sex equality is the idea that gender equality policies and family-friendly policies (such as job-protected parental leave) help women to break the glass ceiling.

But do extensions of maternity leave promote gender equality? The European Commission's latest proposal for a mandatory 20 months of maternity leave across the EU is claimed to improve gender equality, not damage it, as well as helping to solve the problem of declining fertility in Europe.

It is thus disconcerting that all the evidence shows family-friendly policies generally *reduce* gender equality in the workforce, rather than raising it, as everyone has assumed until now. This conclusion has now been drawn simultaneously by several scholars working independently using data for a variety of countries: the US, Sweden, Denmark and Germany.⁵⁷ In particular, Sweden's generous family-friendly policies have created a larger glass ceiling problem than exists in the US, where there is a general lack of such policies.⁵⁸

Women are more likely to achieve senior management jobs in the US than in Sweden: 11% versus 1.5% respectively in the 1980s.⁵⁹ Another study found that women held 11% of all executive positions in Sweden compared to 14% in Norway, 16%

⁵⁷ Charles and Grusky 2004, pages 5-6, 10-11, 37, 297, 302-4; Hakim 2004, page 183; Hunt 2002; Jacobs and Gerson 2004, pages 7, 177.

⁵⁸ Albrecht, Björklund and Vroman 2003.

⁵⁹ Rosenfeld and Kalleberg 1990, pages 88-89; see also Wright, Baxter and Birkelund 1995.

in France, 17% in West Germany, 19% in the UK, and 24% in the US.⁶⁰ The most recent studies show women holding one-third of managerial and professional positions in all public companies in Sweden, compared to slightly over half of managerial and professional positions in the Fortune 500 companies in the US; women's share of CEO and vice-president positions were around 4% in Sweden, but double that at 8% in the US. Within the EU, French women have the highest share of executive posts, 38% compared to 43% in the US, 32% in Sweden and Spain, and 27% (the lowest level) in Austria.

All data show that Anglo-Saxon countries are more favourable than the Nordic countries for enabling women to reach the top jobs.⁶¹ Indeed, across the EU, one-third of all managers are women – yet the Nordic member states (Sweden, Finland and Denmark) all have *below-average* female shares of management jobs. The countries with the highest proportions are a diverse bunch: Latvia and Lithuania (41%), France (39%), Hungary (37%), the UK and Poland (35%).⁶²

There is no doubt that family-friendly policies are beneficial for the health and well-being of mothers and infants, and they help women to combine paid jobs with family work. What they do not do is create gender equality in the workforce or at home.

The Millennium Cohort Study and other studies in the UK also show that rights to parental leave do not prompt more women to return to work after having a baby. One-third of mothers do not work at all up to a child's third birthday, one-third work

⁶⁰ Asplund 1984, quoted in Henrekson and Stenkula, 2009, Table 2.

⁶¹ Henrekson and Stenkula 2009.

⁶² Bettio and Verashchagina 2009, page 75.

intermittently, and one-third work continuously, typically part-time.⁶³ Only one in ten women works full-time continuously after having a child.⁶⁴ Most mothers choose part-time jobs and discontinuous employment after they have children, reflecting a preference for work-life balance over career success, a choice that seems to be increasing in popularity.⁶⁵ Similarly, in Norway, the introduction of a homecare salary for mothers did not change mothers' employment rates (which stayed at 25%) despite a 75% take-up rate for the new cash benefit alternative to using state nurseries for infants.⁶⁶ Mothers' behaviour and choices are shaped primarily by personal values and priorities regarding family work and paid jobs.⁶⁷

The UK government commissioned a series of evaluation studies that struggled to show that maternity leave rights produced a sharp increase in mothers' return to work after the birth, to the job held open for them by their employer. In reality, maternity leave rules and employers' schemes and benefits seem to have little impact on mothers' choices, which appear to be determined by their own prior attitudes to motherhood, family roles and jobs.⁶⁸ It is not really surprising that family-friendly policies are irrelevant to women breaking the glass ceiling.

⁶³ Dex and Ward 2007.

⁶⁴ McRae 2003.

⁶⁵ Hakim 2004, page 134.

⁶⁶ Ellingsæter 2003.

⁶⁷ Hakim 2000; Hakim 2004.

⁶⁸ Hakim 2004, pages 126-8; Hakim 2009.

Myth 11: Family-friendly policies make companies profitable

Both central government and academics have looked at whether companies with flexible employment arrangements, family-friendly policies and equal opportunities policies are more successful and profitable than those without such arrangements. Most of these studies have been based on analyses of the series of British Workplace Employee Relations Surveys,⁶⁹ and their equivalents in other countries. Some analyses do show a small link between workplace flexibility, work-life balance schemes and/or equal opportunities policies and labour productivity, financial profitability and lower labour turnover in the private sector. Others do not.

The problem with all these studies is that they can only show correlations and associations, at best (and typically very weak ones anyway), at a single point in time, between the existence of family-friendly policies or equal opportunities policies in companies and reported profitability and productivity. They cannot prove which is cause and which is effect. Academics can interpret their findings as showing that family-friendly policies cause a company to be more profitable. In reality, it is more likely that the reverse is true: only companies that are already large, successful and profitable can afford to bear the costs of generous family-friendly policies – such as long maternity leaves, paid special leave to care for sick children, term-time working, workplace nurseries, and other special benefits to attract and support their female workforce.

There has been less analysis of whether flexible employment arrangements and worktime flexibility are profitable for employers. These are usually introduced by employers for their

⁶⁹ Cully et al 1999; Kersley et al 2006.

own purposes, to suit the demands of their business – for example to tailor shift timetables to meet peak customer demand. However flexible employment arrangements that are designed around employees' needs tend to be called family-friendly practices, and do not generally match employers' business needs.

Myth 12: Women have a different, cooperative managerial style

Another myth that has been overturned by recent research is the notion that women bring distinctively feminine 'soft' and cooperative approaches to management and top jobs. This is one of the most common arguments offered for female quotas. A study of UK companies found no visible gender differences in styles of management. Female managers differ from male managers in their personal characteristics and family lives, but not in the way that they do the job.

The study was carried out by a feminist academic who was convinced she would find substantial differences in management style,⁷⁰ so the negative finding here cannot be ignored. It is easy to forget that many men employ a 'soft' consensual and cooperative style of management that is popular in service sector and knowledge industries. Women do not have a monopoly. Very often people self-select themselves into industries and occupations that have a congenial and compatible culture. But most occupations tolerate a huge variety of social styles. We have all known teachers who were coolly autocratic as well as those who were quietly supportive, and they 'succeeded' with different students.

⁷⁰ Wajcman 1996, 1998.

3. TIME FOR A RETHINK?

Several themes run through the debates on gender equality and how public policy can help achieve progress.

- Firstly, the primary concern is with the top of the occupational pyramid, and whether women are gaining an increasing share of top jobs – whether women are breaking the ‘glass ceiling’.
- Second, women are typically depicted as helpless victims of the social structure, who are denied their rightful place in top management.
- Third, one way or another, men are the scapegoats and are blamed for the dearth of women in top jobs – either because they discriminate against women and exclude them, or because they favour people like themselves, other men, or because they fail to share domestic chores so as to enable women to compete freely with men.

Policy-makers feel they must Do Something, must Act, in order to correct a visible injustice. The impetus to act, to be seen as taking charge of a situation, is so strong that no one is much

inclined to listen to the research evidence showing that most of the theories and ideas built up around gender equality in the last few decades are wrong, comprehensively falsified in recent years.

Good intentions may still fail if they are based on faulty knowledge and outdated perspectives. There is no doubt about the good intentions underlying Swedish social engineering. Nonetheless, Swedish social engineering has failed completely to establish gender equality in the labour force. On every indicator Sweden is just average, or scores worst of all the modern OECD countries. Only the propaganda has been successful.

Pushing women into jobs does not improve gender equality in the workforce, as previously claimed. Even within western Europe, countries with the lowest female employment rates tend to have the smallest pay gaps, as illustrated by Portugal and Spain compared to Finland and Germany.⁷¹ We now know that there is no direct link between occupational segregation and the pay gap; the association is coincidental rather than causal, and the two processes are independently socially constructed. Cross-national comparative studies by the ILO, OECD, and European Commission, and by academic scholars have overturned well-established assumptions that turn out to be myths rather than fact.

Case studies of integrated occupations, employing men and women equally, highlight the importance of sex differences in work orientations, values and life goals as the main source of variation in career patterns and earnings. Equal opportunities

⁷¹ Hakim 2004, page 172.

policies have squeezed sex discrimination down to a minor factor. Family-friendly policies help to create the glass ceiling, not eliminate it. Nor is there any strong evidence that family-friendly policies and large female workforces make companies more successful and profitable. The list of potent myths that structure current debates but have little or no basis in reality could be extended on and on.

Policies that fail in the socially homogeneous cultures of the Nordic countries are even more likely to fail in the larger, more diverse countries of the EU.⁷² It is arguable that in Sweden there is genuine agreement that the goal is equality of *outcomes* for men and women, and a reduction in social inequality generally. Political diversity in the rest of Europe is far too great for a similar consensus on such a goal.

EU legislation only aims for equal *opportunities*, accepting that outcomes will always display diversity and variation. This is the key weakness of the EC's attempts to establish a Gender Equality Index which would allow it to rank EU member states on chosen criteria.⁷³ Even without such an index, EC reports

⁷² The distinctive characteristics of Scandinavian societies should not be ignored. For example, Sweden is a small country with a homogeneous society in terms of religion, race, ethnicity, language, culture and politics – a homogeneity that has produced a conformist and authoritarian society (Brown 2010: 19-20). With a population of 9 million and a workforce of 4.5 million, Sweden is by far the largest Nordic country, yet it contributes only 2% of the EU population and workforce. Social experiments that may work in small, socially homogeneous and well-integrated communities may not work as well, or even at all, in large societies that are socially, ethnically, and culturally heterogeneous, such as the US, with a population of over 300 million, or even the EU as a whole with a diverse population of 500 million.

⁷³ Plantenga et al 2009.

regularly present league tables based on constantly changing criteria of gender equality.⁷⁴ It is not clear that this new form of political bullying, rivalry and competition actually produces any concrete benefits to citizens on the ground anywhere in Europe.

Politicians and feminists are disappointed with the slow pace of change in women's attainment of top jobs. The problem is that their expectations of rapid change rest on faulty assumptions and outdated knowledge. Ambitious high-achieving work-centred women and men assume everyone is just like themselves. But this is fortunately not true.

⁷⁴ Plantenga and Remery 2010

4. THE SEARCH FOR MAGIC MEDICINE

The search for a Magic Medicine to impose equality of outcomes has lately turned to positive discrimination and female quotas for company boards of directors. Norway's decision in 2003 to impose a 40% mandatory female quota on boards from 2006 onwards has prompted similar proposals elsewhere in Europe, even though Finland and Sweden chose not to do the same. President Nicolas Sarkozy wants to impose a 40% female quota on French boards by 2016, and the legislative process is well advanced. Spain believes it can achieve a 40% quota rule for larger companies by 2015. The Netherlands is considering a 30% quota for boards by 2016.⁷⁵ In Greece, a 30% female quota has been set for promotion panels in the public sector. The Netherlands is also considering targets for women in decision-making government positions, although these would not be mandatory. In Austria, a 2008 proposal recommended female quotas for large enterprises.⁷⁶ In the UK, David Cameron is considering legislation to force companies to hire more women in senior positions. The Conservative 2010

⁷⁵ Ashton 2010; Hill and Rigby 2010.

⁷⁶ Bettio and Verashchagina 2009, page 60.

manifesto supplement *A Contract for Equalities* presents female quotas on corporate boards as a policy that tackles the gender pay gap.

Of course quotas for boards cannot possibly have the slightest effect on the pay gap, since the number of women affected would be minuscule. Even so, in autumn 2010, the Coalition Government invited Lord Davies of Abersoch to develop proposals for female quotas on boards. Lord Davies has already said he favours 30% or 40% quotas in order 'to make a real change',⁷⁷ but he is exploring a wide range of policy options. There seems to be a tidal wave of opinion in favour of quotas – at least among politicians. However opinion remains divided among senior women in professional and managerial positions. Company chairmen in the 30% Club favour a voluntary approach rather than legislation.⁷⁸

The campaign for female quotas is surprising because the great majority of European boards already include women as can be seen in Table 3. There has been a slow but steady increase in the proportion of European boards with women directors, from 68% in 2006 to 79% in 2010. Across Europe, around 12% of board members and director positions in large companies are held by women, and the UK's 13% is entirely respectable. Interestingly, the percentage is actually highest in the largest British companies. Women's share of board positions falls from 12% in the FTSE100 companies to 8% and 7% in the FTSE250 and FTSE Small Cap companies.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Ashton 2010.

⁷⁸ Hill 2010.

⁷⁹ Egon Zehnder 2010, page 14.

Table 3: Women on large company boards in Europe

	% of boards with women directors	% of director positions held by women	Number in sample
Austria	71	11	7
Belgium	70	12	10
Denmark	71	14	7
Finland	100	29	7
France	79	12	57
Germany	83	9	36
Greece	50	10	6
Italy	50	5	18
Luxembourg	50	6	6
Netherlands	76	15	21
Norway	100	32	6
Portugal	67	4	6
Ireland	67	11	9
Spain	86	10	21
Sweden	100	29	20
Switzerland	70	8	30
UK	86	13	73
All	79	12	340

Note: The survey covers the largest companies, those with market capitalisation of more than 4 billion Euros. Where a country had fewer than 6 such companies, the next largest were added to make a base of at least 6 firms per country. All data was supplied by Boardex in July 2010.

Source: Extracted from Egon Zehnder International 2010.

One key problem with quotas is that they are ruled out by European law. The European Commission sought to introduce positive discrimination in the 1980s, leading to a long struggle between the Commission, politicians and the European Court of Justice (ECJ). The issue was finally decided with two German legal cases that went up to the ECJ. In the mid-1990s the ECJ ruled on the *Kalanke* and *Marschall* cases, making it clear that positive discrimination and hence quotas are not permitted by European laws on equal opportunities. Employers have an

obligation not to discriminate; they are not allowed to discriminate in favour of any group by offering special benefits or special consideration. Quotas for women (or any other group) are therefore unlawful. Affirmative action to assist minority groups to gain skills and function more effectively in the labour market is permitted. But the principle of non-discrimination means that women are subject to the same competitive market forces as men, and reverse discrimination is never permitted.⁸⁰

Norway is not a member state of the European Union and is thus not bound by the ECJ's ruling that prohibits positive discrimination. However EU member states are bound by the ruling, which makes the French, Spanish, Dutch and British proposals for female quotas on boards unlawful. Politicians appear not to have noticed.

The second problem with quotas is that they make sense to politicians. They can see that, in relation to political activity, having a fair representation of the population elected to parliament makes some sort of sense. But company boards of directors are completely different. They do not 'represent' anyone, their functions are limited to the management of the enterprise and its activities. Publicly-quoted companies are answerable to their shareholders, employees and customers, a much more limited group than the entire population of a country.

One reason for the popularity of board quotas among the political classes is that they offer a *symbolic* success: the glass ceiling is broken at a stroke. Gender equality is achieved by

⁸⁰ Hakim 2004, pages 190-191. Campaigning labour lawyers (such as Fredman 2002) complain that this restricts their social engineering role.

edict. Yet the inconvenient fact will remain: there is no evidence at all that such quotas have any impact beyond changing the boards in question. Indeed, given that company boards are private bodies, it is hard to see how they could have any wider impact. If the media did not constantly report the female share of boards and similar positions, few would be aware of them. Boards are invisible to the vast majority of the population, and even to most employees in an enterprise.

In contrast, politicians and ministers are extremely visible, and publicly accountable through periodic elections. It would be easy to make a case for mandatory female quotas for ministerial positions, or for cabinet posts. Currently the British Labour party does this. It is hard to see how political parties that fail to apply quotas to their own activities and organisation can seek to impose quotas on private sector bodies.

The main value of female quotas on boards would be symbolic. However the symbolic value of female quotas in politics (where they are legal) is far greater, because politicians are far more visible than boards. Christine Lagarde, the French Finance Minister, is far more visible, and far more of a role model, than any woman on a company board. Arguably heads of government like Margaret Thatcher and Angela Merkel make more of a statement, and are far more visible, than heads of companies like Marjorie Scardino and Anna Botin, let alone invisible board members.

Nor is it possible to identify whether organisations are more profitable and successful if they employ women, offer family-friendly benefits, have women on boards, and so on. As noted earlier in relation to family-friendly policies, the problem is that it is impossible to specify cause and effect. Studies can only identify associations at a single point in time, because

longitudinal data are simply unavailable, or are impossible to interpret where they do exist. Successful and profitable companies are more likely to have the resources for employee benefits, symbolic or 'social responsibility' activities. There is no hard evidence at all that female quotas *per se* improve profits in the private sector. Similarly, there is no evidence that all-male boards make a company more successful or profitable.

Women (and any minority group) almost certainly change the culture of all-male boards. Some argue that greater diversity makes for better decisions, in all contexts.⁸¹ It is more likely that board diversity gives different decisions and different outcomes – both good and bad. Much depends on who is doing the assessment.

What does seem certain is that mandatory quotas can produce flimsy illusory change at the top. Norway's 40% quota has produced no impact at all on women's share of senior management, even though it has now been effective for over five years. Across Europe, the female share of executive positions on boards averages only 4% compared to 14% for non-executive positions. Norway and Finland have no female executive board members at all, compared to 6% in Britain, 7%

⁸¹ The economist Scott Page (2007) claims to show mathematically and through hypothetical modelling exercises that diversity alone can offer more benefits than intellectual ability alone. This is clearly dubious, as everything depends on the social context. Cultural diversity can be an advantage in multi-cultural contexts, and hence in multinational companies operating on a global scale, or in culturally diverse social contexts – settings where innovation and creativity are essential, rather than optional. However this argument is only weakly related to the arguments for putting females on boards, even in multinational companies.

in Greece and 8% in the Netherlands.⁸² No-one claims that Norwegian companies are increasing their profitability as a result of the new female quotas. Indeed there is no evidence that firms in the Nordic countries generally are more successful and profitable than those in other European countries because all their boards include women, and women contribute one-third of board members.

If the real goal is to enhance the visibility of senior-level women, so they can inspire others to achieve, then there are better ways of doing it. In the past decade, a new tradition has sprung up, of international conferences dedicated to highlighting women's achievements in business and in all other spheres. Such conferences are organised annually in Deauville by the Women's Forum for the Economy and Society in France, by DLD Women in Munich, and by the *Financial Times* in London. There are equivalent meetings in the US and Shanghai, and in other countries. Arguably, these events are far more influential in raising the visibility of high-achieving women and inspiring others.

The FT Women at the Top event is especially effective by publishing a list of the world's top 50 female business leaders, with details of their career path and achievements. London also runs the annual Women of the Year lunch which highlights the achievements of women who have had an impact on the public sphere, even if they lead otherwise modest lives. Such events do more to support and promote women of all ages and in all walks of life than mandatory female quotas for company boards that few can see.

⁸² Egon Zehnder 2010.

These events also present puzzles and challenges. Despite the brief history of Chinese capitalism, there are substantial numbers of Chinese women who own and run their own global companies, self-made millionaires who got there without any artificial aids. Why is it that women are better able to zoom ahead in China than Japan, in the US than in continental Europe? Why have so many European companies found it beneficial to import American women CEOs to revitalise companies, or board members to meet quotas? Addressing these questions would be rather more informative for future action than reporting annual league table statistics on the progress of gender equality in Europe.

5. LA GUERRE EST FINIE

Equal opportunities policies have been successful, and have done their job – at least as regards women’s access to the labour market in the UK. Overt and active sex discrimination has been outlawed almost everywhere.

However there is little evidence of popular support for the kind of social engineering demanded by feminists and supranational organisations such as the European Commission and the ILO to create societies with completely symmetrical roles for men and women. New feminist myths seek to conflate the European equal opportunities agenda with this different, political agenda.

In any case, sex and gender cease to be the most important focus of policy in the 21st century. This is clear in the new Equality and Human Rights Commission in Britain, which is responsible for monitoring all forms of discrimination, on grounds of sex, age, religion, race or ethnic group, disability, sexual orientation or transgender status. Looking at all of these in the round, it is clear that racial discrimination should now take priority over gender equality issues. It is most often perceived to

be a source of discrimination in the UK and there is consistent research evidence.⁸³

The European Commission is assiduous in running Eurobarometer polls to collect data on people's perceptions of discrimination, to make the case for further action. However across the EU, there is no association at all between the pay gap and national perceptions of sex discrimination.⁸⁴ These seem to be informed more by media events and government propaganda than by anything concrete.

In the European Commission, the social policy focus is slowly shifting to the problems created by increasing migration within the Union, and rising levels of immigration from non-European societies.⁸⁵ Declining fertility and an ageing society also pose new challenges for social and economic policy – and may lead to a re-evaluation of the contribution of full-time homemakers who have large families but no paid jobs. In this new scenario, the new feminist myths may finally be seen not only as wrong, but also redundant political ammunition for a war that has ended.

⁸³ Perceptions of discrimination are volatile, and seem to depend heavily on media stories with this focus, in the same way that fear of crime is disconnected from actual risk of crime and is prompted by media stories about crime. However the opinion poll commissioned by the new EHRC in 2009 found that race was widely perceived as the most common source of discrimination, while sex/gender was the least common. More important, men and women were *equally* likely to feel they had faced unfair discrimination at some time – under half of both groups.

⁸⁴ Shackleton 2008, Figure 3.

⁸⁵ European Commission 2007b.

If the war has ended, then there are a number of practical consequences. Firstly politicians and the media should recognise that policies which aim to achieve *equality of outcomes* for men and women are a fruitless goal and a waste of public funds. They should no longer make statements such as this made in a recent Coalition document:⁸⁶

'The factors behind the gender pay gap are complex. Outdated expectations of women's jobs and family roles, occupational segregation and traditional approaches to job design, coupled with a lack of flexibility in our systems of maternity and paternity pay and difficulties in finding flexible childcare, all contribute.'

Apart from the first sentence, this is wrong. Tilting at windmills is pointless.

The pay gap in particular has outlived its purpose as an indicator of equality. Now that it has been reduced to 10% in Britain, there seems no point in treating further small changes, up or down, as significant. New indicators should be found to measure equal opportunities. Sex discrimination could now take a back seat while other types of discrimination are given priority. There should be a change of focus towards ethnic minorities instead.

Most of all politicians and commentators should take on board the full implications of the latest research. The 21st century will not be a re-run of the 20th century.

⁸⁶ Government Equalities Office 2010b.

Politicians should also resist the temptation to impose more regulatory burdens on business which aim to achieve equality of outcomes. This applies to many areas of employment legislation, but most particularly at the moment to Commission calls for quotas on company boards and extensions of maternity leave across the EU.

Purely symbolic benefits are being achieved more effectively in other ways, and might yield substantive benefits at the same time. Schemes to highlight the achievements of successful women – in *all* fields of activity – provide more role models for aspiring young women than invisible quota members on boards. (Can anyone name a single one in Norway?)

The Coalition Government's decision not to implement compulsory pay audits is a step in the right direction. It would be more constructive to encourage companies and organisations to report on diversity measures in general in annual reports, without limiting the concept to fairness for women exclusively.

The MEPs recently forced the Commission to withdraw its proposal for 20 weeks of maternity leave across the EU. This new note of realism about the current economic situation is welcome. However constant extensions of such policies favouring women should be abandoned permanently from now on in favour of systematically gender-neutral policies across the board. The risk of creating and raising the glass ceiling is otherwise real even if never admitted.

Issues of fairness and equal opportunities will continue to stimulate debate, and disagreement is perennial. In this context, the old advice remains apposite: Keep Calm and Carry On.

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