
Pay Equity – Now you see it now you don't!

At the February meeting of the Wellington Branch of NZFGW Dr Anne Else and Dr Celia Briar spoke to the Branch on Pay Equity. This is a very familiar subject for our members and we were delighted to have with us Dame Laurie Salas, Elizabeth Orr, Joan Ferner and Barbara Mabbett who have all taken leadership roles in this area over the last fifty years.



Dr Else acknowledged that much of what she said was not new. From the nineteenth century till the 1970s women's role was broadly seen as private though it had public consequences. Men's role was to support families and represent them in public. In 1874 11% of women were in paid employment. Before World War II the majority of women worked before marriage. By 1971 over a quarter of married women were in the workforce, but their careers were still regarded as secondary to men's, and women were barred from some occupations like fire fighting. In some cases women's opportunities diminished. In 1920 40% of secondary school principals were women but by 1979 this had fallen to 10%. Only in the last 20 years have women been able to choose from a wider range of occupations and move into senior positions.

New Zealand has a long history of paying women less. Between 1936 and 1954 different wage rates were specified for

men and women in the same jobs. From 1914-1972 married women's wages were taxed as secondary income, and today women on the DPB also have any wages taxed as secondary income.

Anne identified two contradictory ideas which underpin policy today.

- The old idea of women's difference from men – their unpaid work in families and availability to provide free care.
- A new idea of women's sameness to men – their ability to earn enough to support themselves and their families.

She quoted demographer Janet Sceats; *"...although the structures of families have changed and opportunities for women have increased the norms about gender roles in the family seem to have remained remarkably stable. Women should contribute economically to the family unit but...this should not compromise their family obligations."*

In fact today a family requires income from both parents, and most women earn less than men. In principle we have equal pay for equal work but in practice we had this for only 18 years from 1972 to 1990 when the Employment Contracts Act was passed. With individual contracts it has become increasingly difficult to establish the level of equal pay and where studies have been done it looks like women have gone backwards in many areas.

Occupational segregation is a major factor in pay inequity. It continues to be a feature of the New Zealand labour market, but the picture is complicated. Many more women can now be found in formerly "masculine" professional occupations where entry is by formal qualification. There is also a layer at the bottom of the market where men and women compete in roughly equal numbers for the same low paid jobs. However, 230 mid-level occupations are still predominately male, while 51 occupations are predominantly female. These women are most likely to be in care or service jobs which are seen as an extension of their natural roles, and are therefore worth less than working with things like machinery or money.

Anne noted that women with children have a very high chance of spending some time as a sole parent. Sole parent households, 85% female-headed, are the most likely to be living in poverty.

And she posed the question "Would pay equity advances lead to even more stringent demands on women and an even higher incidence of sole motherhood?"



Dr Celia Briar's work has been directed towards the design and use of tools to assess equal pay, and gender equity. Her message of hope outlined several of

these tools which are available free from The Department of Labour and the Human Rights Commission. Check their websites if you would like to know more.

She acknowledged that it has become very difficult for an individual to bring a claim

for equal pay or pay equity but felt that it was more productive to encourage employers to use the tools to review their workplace. Where the tools have been used, largely in the Public Service, significant discrepancies have been revealed, and this provided a sound basis for change.

Celia suggested that if your workplace has not done a pay and employment equity review you can: Ask your union to request that the organisation either:

- Undertakes a pay and employment equity review, using the Department of Labour 4-step review templates and the PEEAT tool. These tools are available free, but there is no longer any financial help with the costs of doing a review such as hiring a project manager, and the PEEU no longer exists to provide expert backup advice or information.¹

or

- Uses the free Human Rights Commission self-assessment tool as a relatively quick 'health check' to see whether there are gender issues that may need to be addressed.²

The full text of Celia's talk can be seen in; *Women's Studies Association (NZ) Newsletter Vol. 30 No. 1 March 2010.*

¹<http://www.dol.govt.nz/services/PayAndEmploymentEquity/standard.asp>.

²<http://www.neon.org.nz/payequitymonitoringtool/>