

Gender pay gap

How I demanded — and won — equal pay

Women feel rage and resentment that eviscerates any joy in work

Margaret Heffernan



Laura Kuenssberg, the BBC's political editor © AFP

JULY 30, 2017 by: Margaret Heffernan

When [BBC women demand](#) that Tony Hall, the director-general, act immediately to fix the [gender pay gap](#), I understand their urgency: don't fix it eventually, fix it now.

In the late 1990s, I worked in the US as the chief executive of iCast, a high-tech start-up that was part of the internet conglomerate CMGI.

At the time, I was the only female chief executive in the group of some 40 businesses. When an HR executive tipped me off that I was paid 50 per cent of the salary received by my male peers, her revelation threw me into a tailspin. I was so proud of my company and of the workforce I had hired: brilliant, creative engineers, designers, marketers and salespeople who were fearless in their quest to build software no one had ever seen before. I loved my job — or I had loved it.

Now all I could feel was rage: fury at being undervalued; anger that this was known and tolerated. I deeply resented being treated as though I were less than my peers, and I was furious that my joy in the work was now eviscerated by the contempt implied by discrimination.

Everything I had built, the great people I had recruited and the big ambition we shared felt tainted, now jeopardised by a single gross insult. As much as I loved my work, I knew that if I could not find a way to fix this problem, I would have to leave. The only thing worse than discrimination would be to collude in it.

But for weeks I was trapped. I could not say anything without revealing my source and I did not want another woman to suffer for my ill treatment.

Then I got a gift: being a publicly traded company, CMGI had to publish the salaries of its corporate officers — and some of these men were also chief executives of individual companies in the group, and so my peers. With the evidence I needed publicly available, I could act on it.

I wrote a long, furious email to the chairman, then whittled it down to a single bleak sentence expressing my shock and disappointment at discovering my salary was half that of my male counterparts. The next day, my pay was doubled.

In retrospect, I can see that I had several advantages. Being trapped with my knowledge for a few weeks gave me time to digest my anger and reach calm, firm decisions. I also had what I think of as running-away money: the financial security to leave.

In my experience, that freedom — hard won and not easy to attain — lends a steeliness to negotiations that nobody mistakes for a gambit. Not being a bluff, it is not called. And I worked with people whose champion I had to be. How could I defend their talent if I could not defend my own? Fighting for others is more energising and convincing than fighting merely for oneself.

In the light of [revelations](#) about the gender pay gap at the BBC — two-thirds of its stars earning over £150,000 are male — I look at both episodes with a sense of solidarity and grief. Until you have endured this kind of insult, it is hard to know just how bad it feels. Pay is personal: a visceral formulation of worth. Being underpaid in relation to your peers in an organisation takes your abilities, experience, goodwill and dedication and casually degrades them.

The contempt implied is beyond unnerving; you cannot but feel worth less. This anger should not be mistaken for self pity or vanity because it is exactly the opposite: it is fury at oneself for having been fooled.

It would be wrong to say that these showdowns are not about money — but they are not merely about money. At CMGI, I felt I was paid enough, just as the BBC women do. The fundamental demand is not cash but justice.

When I worked at the BBC in the 1980s as a radio and television producer, I knew that I was paid below anything I might receive outside the corporation. I did not care because we were all underpaid. We accepted that in exchange for rich opportunities to develop our craft with gifted colleagues, who were passionate about making great programmes for audiences that deserved nothing less. It was, and remains, an inspiring mission that most share today. But it is not possible to do justice to the work where you feel that justice is not done to you. You cannot honour the public when you feel yourself to be dishonoured.

The BBC should not be alone in the scrutiny it faces. Every organisation should be open about pay, to their benefit. In 2014, Satya Nadella, chief executive of Microsoft, argued that [one of women's "superpowers"](#) was not asking for raises. This, he suggested, was “good karma”. He has been talking ever since about his mistake.

“I didn’t understand,” he later said, “how deep the wound was.” Since then, his stature has only risen with his determination to learn. That is the opportunity open to Tony Hall, and all serious leaders, today.

margaret@mheffernan.com

Twitter: [@M_Heffernan](#)

Andrew Hill is away

Letter in response to this article:

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