



Secrets of the gender pay gap

There's more to the gender wage gap story,
says Hong Kong's humorist

This columnist, who is also a writer of books, was at a school as a Visiting Author when one of the children asked a financial question: "How much does Thor get paid?"

"Good question," I said. "Superhero salaries are never revealed. However, they seem to do just fine. Definitely they get paid more than authors or teachers!" (Always good to get the academic staff on side.)

Then a teenage girl's hand shot up. "I bet Thor and Iron Man get paid more than Wonder Woman," she snarled.

"Yeah," the other girls growled—and so did the teachers. The atmosphere changed. Teaching staff (all female except two) nodded sternly at this timely reminder of gender inequality.

"In superhero land, boys and girls get paid exactly the same," I said, trying to dodge the bullet.

What I was thinking (but didn't say) was this. The truth is that many male superheroes have massive incomes (think Iron Man, Batman, Black Panther, Mr. Fantastic, Nighthawk, Professor X, Green Arrow, etc). But Wonder Woman, if memory serves me, was a nurse! Probably earned peanuts!

Why was everyone in a bad mood about this? The previous month, a news report said that in the creative industries, male stars get paid more than female stars. Earlier that week, a study of the BBC showed that women presenters earned significantly less than men.

The Internet was filled with outrage at what they saw as horrendous sex discrimination, as were the three women in this

columnist's family. The only possible response from any males in the vicinity was to join in the cries of "burn down the BBC."

Trouble is: it's probably not true.

This writer has spent years in the creative industries (including working for the BBC), and knows full well that financial chiefs of these organizations are automatons who see nothing but bottom lines. They honestly don't care if you are male, female, transgender, hermaphrodite or a googly-eyed alien from the planet Zorg.

Chief financial officers in the entertainment industry have to be heartless machines, since they deal with over-emotional artistes every day of their lives.

So while it's true that gender discriminatory pay practices do exist in modern societies, that's not the whole story.

Academic studies repeatedly show that women at certain stages earn less money because they have a superior attitude to work-life balance. Guys sign up for every promotion and burn out into early graves, while women make smart compromises and as a result are happier, as well as living longer, healthier lives.

Researchers call this the "self-selected pay gap." Journalists never write about this because outrage sells more newspapers and gets more clicks.

Truth is: The gap between male and female pay at the BBC is much smaller than the U.K. average, indicating the organization is unusually successful at finding ways to steer money into the hands of female staff.

But you must never say any of this. All nuance in conversations is dead these days.

FEMALE FRIEND: "Burn down the BBC!"

ME [quietly]: "But if you do a comparative study of pay statistics..."

HER: "WHAT?"

ME: "Nothing! Burn down the BBC!"

After my school talk, I was signing books when I was approached by a nerdy boy who was a fount of knowledge about superheroes.

"Wonder Woman is a nurse," he said.

I was about to tell him to shut up for his personal safety (his teachers were hovering nearby), when he added something that got me thinking: "She's an army nurse with the rank of Major."

Interesting. There is zero gender pay gap in the military, and U.S. army Majors earn a fortune, more than US\$100,000 a year.

Thor, being a minor Norse god, probably doesn't get paid anything at all.

Oh well, Wonder Woman seems like a nice person – she can buy Thor a drink.



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