

An Ethical Problem in the Current Global Economy: Gender Pay Gap

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Abstract

The global economy is currently facing many challenges, some old and persistent, and some new, in various forms. Gender inequality in the labour market is an older problem that has a global dimension and affects women both in terms of labour force participation and pay. For equal work and similar responsibilities, women earn on average significantly less than men. This paper aims to address gender pay inequalities as a problem of the global economy. The aim of the paper is to review theoretical approaches and explore the extent to which these theories can explain the gender pay gap. The first part of the paper argues for the ethical dimension of the problem studied. Attention is then focused on the main myths that cast doubt on the reality of gender pay discrimination. In the final part, human capital theory, game theory and the theory of labour's contribution to productivity are discussed. Our thesis is that these theories, at a particular level, offer only partial, unsatisfactory explanations. Taken together they provide detail and offer richer explanations of the gender wage gap.

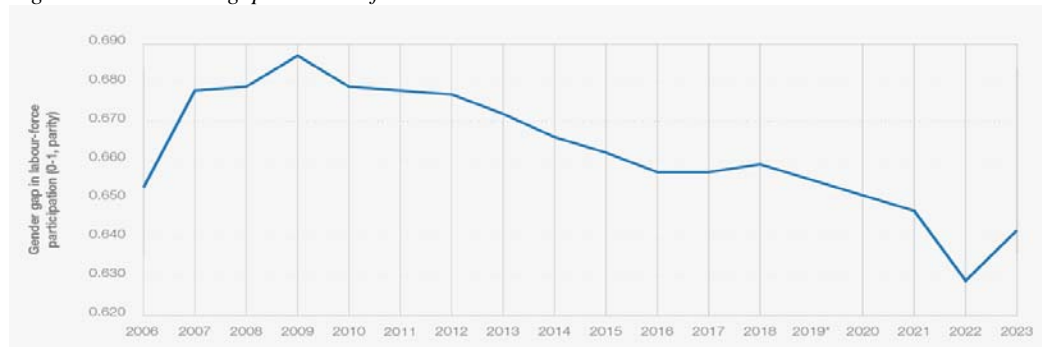
Key words: gender pay gap, discrimination, employment, ethics

J.E.L. classification: F66, J16, J71

1. Introduction

Labour force participation in the global economy in recent years has been characterised by the persistence of a significant gender gap between women and men. World Economic Forum reports (2023) and other specific statistical documents highlight that gender parity levels in the labour market are regionally diverse and have experienced uneven developments over time. Globally, women's participation rate has seen a significant decline since 2019, for example between 2019 and 2020, by 3.4% compared to 2.4% for men. Between 2022-2023, parity is expected to recover from 63% to 64%. But even with this increase, parity is at its second lowest level since the first edition of the index in 2006 and below the 2009 peak of 69%, as can be seen from the figure below.

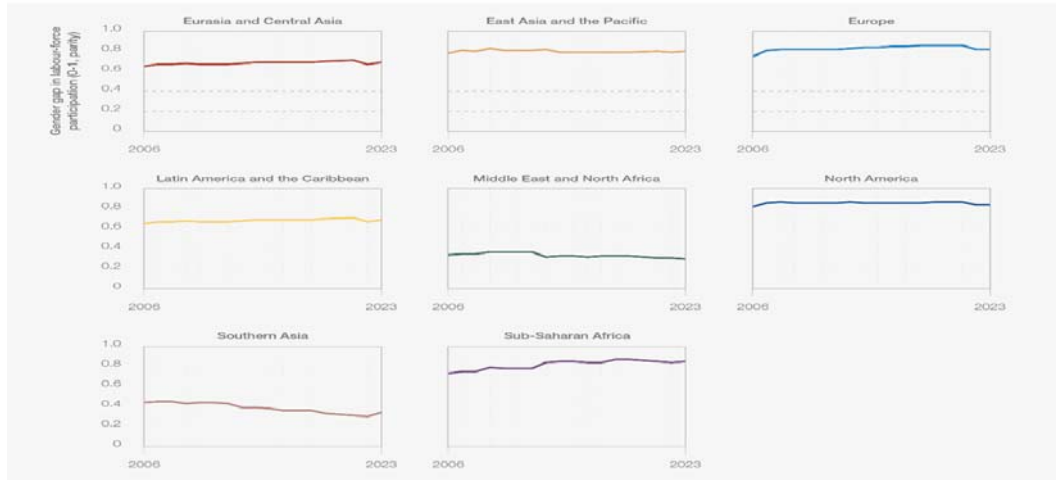
Figure no.1. Gender gap in labour-force 2006-2023



Source: World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report*, 2006 – 2023

At regional level, developments in labour force participation parity have been uneven, with an overall decrease however in the 2022 edition. The lowest parity levels are present in the Middle East and North Africa (30%) and Southern Asia (34%). North America has the highest score - 84%, followed by Europe at 82% and East Asia and the Pacific at 80%.

Figure no. 2. Gender gap in labour-force participation, by region, 2006 – 2023

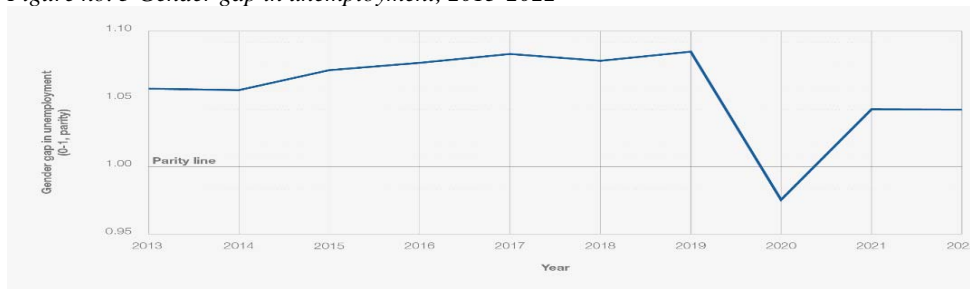


Source: World Economic Forum calculations based on *Global Gender Gap Report, 2006-2023*

The analysis presented in the Global Gender Gap Report 2023 (ch. Benchmarking gender gaps) on the global gender parity index over the last 17 years (between 2006 - 2023), on a constant sample of 102 countries, shows an average reduction of only 0.24 percentage points / year. In this context, it can be seen that the overall progress in gender parity shows an overall gain of only 4.1% from 2006 to 2023. Thus, it is estimated that if the same rate of overall gender parity progress is maintained from 2006 to 2023, the overall gender gap will close in 131 years, i.e. in 2154. An important issue is the correlation between female labour force participation and the level of national income per capita. Thus, according to Ortiz-Ospina *et al* (2018) women have higher labour force participation in some of the world's poorest and richest countries. In middle-income countries, the percentage is in the middle range.

From the above data it appears that gender parity remains a major challenge in the labour market, although the figures show some improvement, the gaps remain wide on several indicators of economic performance. In addition to these trends still present at global level, women also face two particularly important challenges. The first problem is the higher overall unemployment rate among women than among men. On this issue, the most recent data provided to the International Labour Organization (ILO) indicates a global unemployment rate of 4.5% for women and 4.3% for men. In the figure below it can be seen that over the period studied, and in general throughout history, there has been consistently lower participation of women in the labour force. The year 2020 is an exception due to the pandemic, when unemployment peaks for both women and men.

Figure no. 3 Gender gap in unemployment, 2013-2022



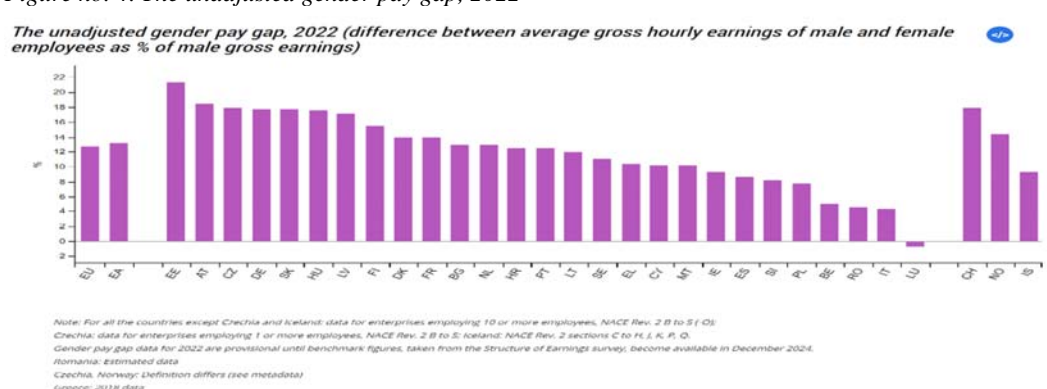
Source: World Economic Forum, calculations based on ILO modeled estimates 100 countries, constant simple

The second issue, which is the subject of this article, is the inequality of pay for work of equal value between women and men. With regard to the concept of "equal pay for equal work" we consider it important to make a few clarifications to avoid ambiguities. As defined in the ILO Equal Remuneration Convention 100, adopted in Geneva in 1951, equal pay for equal work means that all persons, irrespective of gender, are entitled to receive equal pay for equal work and for different work of equal value. The clarification of this distinction is essential because there are situations where jobs held by women and men may require different qualifications, responsibilities or working conditions, but their value is equal and the distinction in fact guarantees equal pay. Beyond this clarification, there are two approaches to pay differentials:

- The pay gap as the difference in average pay between men and women.
- The unadjusted pay gap as the difference between men's and women's average gross hourly earnings, expressed as a percentage of men's earnings. This approach does not take into account education, age, hours worked or type of work (Eurostat, Gender pay gap statistics).

Various countries have over the years harmonised their legislation to ensure equal pay, without gender differences, so that both men and women are paid equally even for different jobs of equal value. An example of the above is the Obama administration, which has taken steps to eliminate discrimination and close the gender pay gap, when the pay gap is 2.5% higher than the average in industrialised countries. Thus, a full-time woman earns 79 cents for every dollar earned by a man (Lam, 2016). At the European Union level, the gender pay gap differs widely across countries. We exemplify with the rate gap in several countries recorded in 2021: Estonia (20.5%), Austria (18.8%), Germany (17.6%), Hungary (17.3%) and Slovakia (16.6). Luxembourg has closed the gender pay gap. Other countries with lower gender pay gaps in 2021 are: Romania (3.6%), Slovenia (3.8%), Poland (4.5%), Italy (5.0%) and Belgium (5.0%). It can be seen that the gender pay gap is much more pronounced in the first group, where it is over 20% (Estonia) and the second group, where Luxembourg, for example, has eliminated this discrepancy, while in Romania the percentage is only 3.6%. In the following year, 2022, the percentages at the extremes are present in the same and even more radical countries: Estonia (21.3%) with the highest gender gap, and Luxembourg (-0.7%) with the lowest. Concerning women's gross hourly earnings in 2022 in the EU, statistics show that they were on average 12.7% below those of men. In countries with lower incomes the pay gap is even more pronounced, for example in Pakistan women are paid 40 or even 45% less than men.

Figure no. 4. The unadjusted gender pay gap, 2022



Source: Eurostat (online data code: sdg_05_20)

2. Theoretical background

Every year, thousands and thousands of women globally report gender discrimination in the workplace, and most of these complaints concern the significant differences in pay for equal work and equal responsibilities under similar conditions between female and male employees. The issue of pay inequality has both ethical and legal dimensions, as such practices violate ethical principles, rules and declarations developed at global level that regulate precisely these aspects of pay equity. Ignoring and violating these principles of equality and fundamental human rights creates an ethical conflict. The granting of unequal pay on the basis of gender for the same responsibilities and time

worked is immoral and the practice has been likened to discrimination in the workplace, thus depriving women of pay that is rightfully theirs (EPA, 1963, pp. 151-154).

2.1. Unequal pay for women and men is an ethical issue

In the EU, the principle of equal pay for equal work, without gender discrimination, was introduced as early as 1957 in the Treaty of Rome, now called the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union. Article 157 (ex-Article 141 TEC) of the Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union explicitly states that: "Each Member State shall ensure that the principle of equal pay for male and female workers for equal work or work of equal value is applied" (para. 1). A significant moment in the USA, one might even say a 'milestone', marking a new direction in relation to gender pay disparities, was in 1963, when President J.F. Kennedy signed The Equal Pay Act, a law protecting people against gender pay discrimination. As can be seen, the issue of pay inequality has an important legal component, as evidenced by the legal rules developed to regulate it. However, pay differentiation, at different levels, persists to this day, globally.

Apart from the legal issue, which is not the focus of this article, the gender pay gap is also an ethical issue. The action itself, with its gender-based pay criteria, is in conflict with various socially established and assumed moral norms and principles, such as equality, justice, respect, dignity, etc. The problem is that, on the one hand, the gender pay gap incorporates discrimination and creates barriers to career development for women. The risk of gender pay discrimination can multiply in other forms in the institution, for example for people with disabilities, or on the basis of older age or ethnicity. On the other hand, a fundamental principle of ethics, the principle of equality, is violated. Therefore, gender pay inequality must be tackled as an ethical problem, with all its specific features, with an impact on society as a whole, not just on women, and which can be resolved using appropriate instruments and mechanisms, involving economic, political and educational factors.

The interest in addressing specific problems in economics in an ethical way has grown considerably in recent decades and is part of a deeper vision, so that there is now talk of "a real thirst for ethics in economics". Kliksberg (2012, p. 277) points out that globally the socio-economic elite supports the idea of corporate social responsibility, which strengthens concern and commitment to problem solving. We mention in this regard Global Economic Ethics - Consequences for Global Business, a document launched in 2009 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The Manifesto set out to promote globally accepted norms for economic action that reflect "a common fundamental vision of what is legitimate, just and fair." The content of the Manifesto is linked to other international documents and United Nations guidelines on fundamental human rights, with the explicit statement that "Every human being - without distinction for age, sex, race, skin colour, physical or mental ability, language, religion, political opinion, or national or social origin - possesses an inalienable and untouchable dignity".

Gender equality and pay equity for men and women are imperatives that imply responsibility for both economic communities, governments and society in general. The gender pay gap seems to be a women-only issue, as it is women who face this problem. However, the approach should be different as pay inequality is not only a women's issue, it is a problem for all stakeholders, namely the work group, their families, the community and ultimately society.

2.2. Gender pay gap - myth or reality?

The statistics on the gender pay gap are clear, the principle of equal pay is being violated, which raises many ethical and social/economic issues, yet there are voices that argue that the evidence is irrelevant and that pay is being paid according to existing rules and methodologies that are being applied. A 2019 survey of 8566 adults in the USA highlights the distrust of the pay gap (Renzulli, 2019). Thus, 46% of men and 30% of women do not believe there is a gender pay gap. The issue of equal pay has been "made up to serve a political purpose", without actually representing a legitimate problem.

Various studies point to another perspective on the pay gap, namely that there can be no discrimination. Rather, women choose not to enter higher-paid positions but lower-paid jobs, so the gap is actually their fault (CWF, 2019; Gould *et al*, 2016). In other words, some people believe that

there is no gender pay discrimination in the workplace, only choices by women who tend to gravitate towards careers that pay less. An example that contradicts this position is the case at Google, where more than 10,000 women in various positions have sued the company for damages because the tech giant violated California's Equal Pay Act by underpaying them. Specifically, these women "earned nearly \$16,800 less than 'similarly situated men'". Finally, in 2019 Google paid out several million dollars to close the pay gap and acknowledged that women were paid less than men working in similar positions (Shah, 2021).

An analysis of the gender pay gap should also take into account that women's career choices are frequently influenced by cultural traditions, religious affiliation and gender stereotypes in society. For example, girls may be steered from childhood towards professions considered more 'feminine', with lower average salaries, and discouraged from moving into fields such as technology or engineering, all of which contribute to an increased risk of pay discrimination. Occupational gender segregation has decreased in recent decades, but the pay gap still remains a reality. A study conducted in the US over a 50-year period concludes that the entry of an influx of women into a previously male-dominated occupational area leads to a decline in average wages for the occupation as a whole, even for men in the field (Levanon *et al*, 2009).

In another approach, according to research evidence, the pay gap is blamed on the fact that women are not as good as men at negotiating for higher pay, are less aggressive, and therefore earn less. Babcock *et al* (2003) point out that women are less likely than men to negotiate for several reasons. For example, they are oriented from childhood not to promote their own interests, and internalising this behaviour manifests itself in adulthood. As for the position of companies, many discourage women from asking for pay rises and even penalise them when they do. As a result, when a more attractive offer comes along, women often prefer to accept it rather than use it as a bargaining tool. A 2022 survey in the UK shows that 31% of men who asked for a pay rise were successful, compared to a lower 21% of women (Kirk, 2022). Pay rises awarded to men more than women when requested can be seen as positioning in the area of gender discrimination and, according to the statistics, is a reality, not a myth. According to Bowles *et al* (2007, p. 86) "Women are still expected to fulfill prescriptions of feminine niceness ((e.g., warmth, kindness, sensitivity to the needs of others), which are emblematic of their subordinate status".

A controversial myth about the gender pay gap is that working mothers are less dedicated and less effective. There are many reports of companies dismissing women because of pregnancy, because they consider mothers-to-be incapable of working during this period. Studies have shown that employers prefer to employ women without children rather than mothers, and when they make an offer to a mother, they offer her a lower salary than they offer other women (Kricheli-Katz, 2012). It is true that in most situations mothers take on the role of caring for the child and the number of hours worked, at least for a while is reduced, but this should not become the 'punishment for motherhood'. Mothers become more vulnerable during this period, financially disadvantaged compared to men. A study tracking the state of affairs in Denmark between 1980-2013 shows that childbirth creates a gender gap in earnings of around 20% in the long term. The gender inequality produced by the 'motherhood penalty' has increased, according to the study, from around 40% in 1980 to around 80% in 2013 (Kleven *et al*, 2019).

So while some argue that the gender pay gap is just a myth, research evidence shows that pay discrimination in the workplace globally is still a reality that negatively affects women.

2.3. Gender pay gap theories

The issue of the gender pay gap has been studied and interpreted from different perspectives, bearing in mind that beyond this issue there are certain social and economic structures that have been theorised to provide a better understanding of this pay gap.

Human capital theory is based on the assumption that education and skills training are necessary to increase the productive capacity of a population and are becoming increasingly important components of the labour market. Education is understood as an investment in human capital, and is considered by proponents of this theory to be as valuable as, or more valuable than, physical capital (Woodhall, 1997). Human capital is therefore the value of an employee's experience and skills, which includes education, skills, training, and other components valued in the workplace, such as

punctuality and loyalty (Ross, 2023). Research by Chan (2016) shows that education increases productivity and raises workers' lifetime earnings. Thus, a positive correlation between education and earnings emerges, confirming human capital theory.

To what extent can this human capital theory explain the discrimination or gender pay gap resulting from education? Mincer (1974) attempts to explain the gender wage gap using a human capital investment model. In his approach he estimates a linear wage equation as a function of both education and experience variables. The gender wage gap is caused by the difference in investment in individual human capital. Several researchers still believe that investment in education will lead to higher wages. Gary S. Becker, winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics (1992), noted the role of human capital theory in explaining and better understanding the gender wage gap. Since women are traditionally more likely than men to work intermittently, especially after having children, they are less motivated to invest in training and education that would improve their income and work skills. Lower investment in individual human capital at the education level would explain the lower earnings gap for women compared to men (Becker, 1985). On human capital theory, most studies suggest that it plays an important role in explaining the gender wage gap. However, because it is based on broader assumptions, human capital differentials fail to provide a satisfactory explanation of the gender wage gap unless factors such as education and experience are included. Therefore, human capital theory alone can only partially explain the gender pay gap.

Game theory. The growing number of studies proving the existence of the gender pay gap (Joshi *et al*, 2015; Webber and Canché, 2015) have stimulated investigations in this area with the aim of explaining the gender pay gap. In this context, some studies highlight that the differences could be generated by a female attitude to avoid wage negotiations (Leibbrandt and List, 2014). Behavioral economics, a relatively younger multidisciplinary field of research, studies the approach to decision-making situations, how people make judgments and decisions from different perspectives (Heilman and Kusev, 2017). The behavioral model in Ultimatum Game (Güth *et al*, 1982), which involves a bargaining task between two players - the proposer and the responder - from the perspective of resource allocation, is discussed by researchers to be applied in studies that address gender wage gaps. Some gaps, as revealed by various research, could be driven by women's avoidance of wage negotiations (Leibbrandt and List, 2014). The decision-making situation in Ultimatum Game, if it can prove an association with people's decision-making behaviour in wage bargaining, could be used to investigate and provide new explanations for why women are usually given and accept lower wages than men (Heilman and Kusev, 2017). Eckel *et al* (2008) review laboratory research using two games, the dictator game and the Ultimatum Game, to examine gender differences in bargaining. From the Ultimatum Game it appears that there is a tendency for women to be more egalitarian than men and also "to expect and ask for less in the negotiation". The research shows that differences in the behaviour of women and men in negotiation tend to be small, with negligible differences in many situations, although women may be more sensitive to issues of general fairness in negotiation. The fact that women tend to ask for and accept less in negotiation can influence the final outcome. In most cases, however, women and men behave similarly in negotiations (Eckel *et al*, 2008). Therefore, this theory offers a possible explanation for gender pay disparities from a bargaining perspective. The pay gap can also be explained by the bargaining undertaken by women and men, in the sense that research shows a tendency for women to demand and accept less, which would justify the lower pay as an end result.

Labour contribution theory of productivity. Labour productivity is an extremely important factor with a direct impact on the efficiency and success of a job and in a broad sense represents the amount of actual output produced by an employee per unit of time, per hour. Direct measurement of individual labour productivity is problematic, however, as there are occupations to which the usual rules on output per unit time cannot be applied. Could gender differences in wages explain labour productivity theory? Research (Olsen and Walby, 2004) concluded that although productivity theories were true, they did not provide a satisfactory explanation of the gender pay gap. Although working in productive firms, women "do not seem to get as high a share of the realised output as the men do" (Olsen, 2009, p.144).

3. Research methodology

In conducting this study, we used a comprehensive review of research on the gender pay gap. In doing so, we have been particularly concerned with highlighting whether this gender pay gap is a global ethical issue and to what extent theories can provide satisfactory explanations. For theoretical background, recent data on these issues were collected from online databases, Web of Science and journals indexed in international databases. We also used reports from international organisations such as the World Economic Forum, the European Parliament, the International Labour Organization, the OECD. The criteria for selecting the specific studies and reports used in this article were the timeliness of the data provided and the possibility to make a comparative analysis, covering as wide an area as possible in the research, in order to draw conclusions closer to the global. A number of 38 studies and reports were identified that met the above criteria, most of which were published after 2000.

4. Findings

The results obtained from the analysis of reports and research that have been carried out, and from representative case studies, show that there is still a significant gender gap at the global level, expressed on two levels, from the perspective of the objectives of this article. On the one hand, there is a gap in women's participation in the global workforce, with regionally varying levels of parity and uneven trends, with the lowest in the Middle East, North Africa and Southern Asia. On the other hand, there is a gender pay gap globally, even for the same occupations, equal responsibilities and equal work value. This pay gap is present in higher percentages in regions where the gender gap is more pronounced and country-level earnings are lower. Unequal pay is an ethical issue whereby the principle of equality is violated, also incorporating discrimination. Recent trends in economics are to pay more attention to ethical approaches, which is also highlighted in international documents undertaken by different countries and organisations. Although the figures show evidence of gender pay inequality, it is seen by some as a myth, without being understood and accepted as a real problem. These myths are contradicted by statistical data, but they persist because there is probably a misunderstanding of what the pay gap measures or for other reasons. In an attempt to explain and provide a better understanding of the gender pay gap problem we have explored three theories, which we felt were the most appropriate to apply to the topic under study. Each theory offers explanations and provides important understandings of the theme, but each does so only partially, without providing a complete perspective. For this reason we believe that for a better understanding of the situation, the approach must be carried out in a plural approach of theories.

5. Conclusions

The paper addresses the gender pay gap as an ethical issue in the contemporary global economy. Although studies show that progress in gender equality indicators has been made in recent decades, disparities persist at the global level. Reports from international bodies highlight significant gender gaps between women and men in both participation in the global labour force and pay for the same occupation and equal work. Regions with higher disparities are generally those where national incomes are lowest, and there is a correlation between gender gap indicators and material deprivation. The analysis of the most common myths that question pay inequality from different perspectives has shown that a significant percentage of people deny this reality, on the one hand, and on the other hand, show a lack of real knowledge of the whole issue. The three theories used to explain the gender pay gap each provide details that explain this gap. Human capital theory explains the gender pay gap by the difference in investment in individual human capital, involving factors such as education and work experience. Thus, if women invest less in education and have less labour market experience, they receive lower pay, which is a partial explanation. Game theory explains the gender pay gap through bargaining, in the sense that there is a tendency for women to demand and accept less, which would lead to lower pay as an end result. This theory also provides a partial explanation of gender pay inequality. Nor does the labour contribution to productivity theory provide a satisfactory, complete, but only a partial explanation. Analysis of these theories highlights on the one hand the

limitations of each theory in explaining the gender pay gap, on the other hand, taken together they highlight the complexity of this ethical problem. Taking account of these findings in conjunction with legislative measures, collective labour agreements and the application of ethical rules can play an important role in reducing and even combating the gender pay gap. Future research can complement this study by exploring other facets of the pay gap, such as the role of cultural and religious factors.

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Abbreviations

CWF – Canadian Women’s Foundation
EPA – Equal Pay Act
EU – European Union
ILO – International Labour Organization
WEF – World Economic Forum