

Dorling, D. (2018) Blame education's 'macho leader' cult for shocking gender pay gap, The Guardian, March 20th, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/mar/20/education-macho-leader-gender-pay-gap>

Blame education's 'macho leader' cult for shocking gender pay gap

Danny Dorling

For years schools have been sending pupils the message that women are worth less than men. It's our moral duty to fix that

Tue 20 Mar 2018



Experts have tried to explain the schools pay gap by saying there are large numbers of lunch supervisors and cleaners. Photograph: Alamy

The cult of the macho “strong leader”, which dominates education, has been damaging in so many ways. I always seem to be reading fatuous accounts of the apparently super-human workloads of our academy trust principals and university presidents. They rise at 5am to lead their institutions forward with an hour of emails, followed by breakfast meetings, and fall late into bed having worked tirelessly all day for their underlings. It is narcissist guff and to most of us is unimpressive, but given how much educational leaders pay themselves, it is perhaps not surprising that they try to justify their worth in this way.

But perhaps the worst effect of the “strong leader” has been the resulting failure to address the [gender pay gap](#). It is through pay that we demonstrate exactly how much we respect each other. Pay is always about respect.

Writing on these pages recently, [Fran Abrams](#) revealed that the [gender pay gap](#) within the first 40 academy trusts to report under the new legislation was 19.5% – much higher than the 11.8% average for the first 1,000 institutions that filed their reports.



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Experts said this was not surprising, “as schools have large low-paid workforces of classroom assistants, lunchtime supervisors and cleaners which are largely female”. However, almost all companies have cleaners, so that is hardly an excuse for why schools pay men so much more.

One of those that has filed a report is the Oxford Diocesan School Trust (ODST), a “not for profit multi-academy trust”, which reports 18% higher mean pay for men per hour, 24% higher when worked out for the median worker in its schools. Women make up more than 90% of the workforce of the trust, which runs 21 church schools in Oxfordshire.

The trust claims that “internal analysis indicates that when females and males in ODSST who hold the same job role are compared, the mean salary for female staff is at least the same as that for their male comparator, if not slightly above”.¹

Its analysis is not publicly available, so we can't see the detail. The trust says, though, that only five of its 21 headteachers are male. Are those five really paid the same as the 16 female heads and, if so, which man is being paid so much more as to explain the overall disparities?

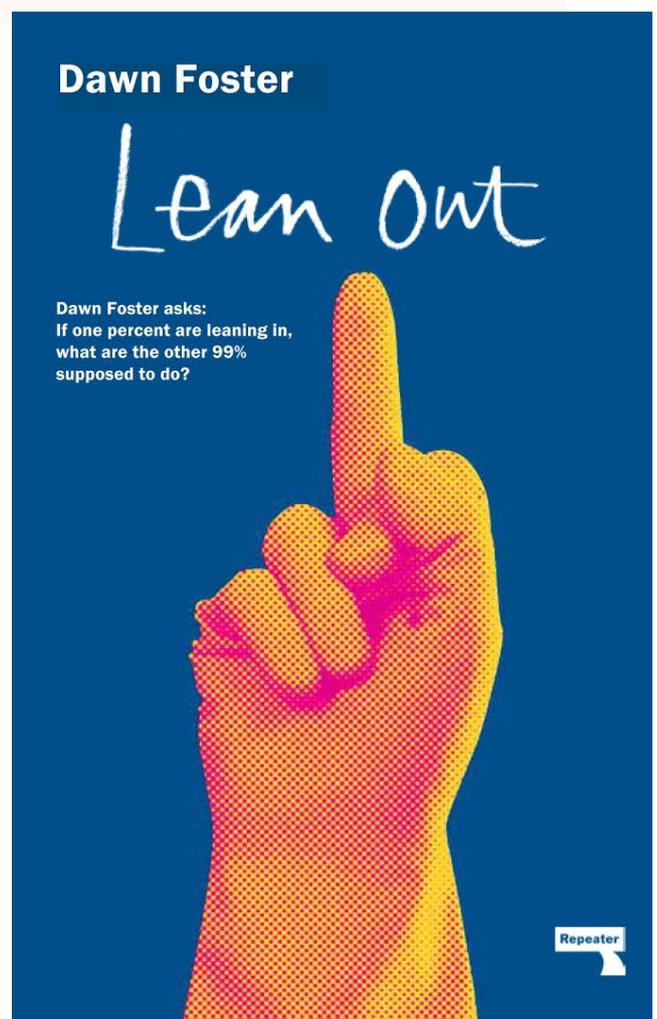
The results for universities and further education colleges are likely to raise similar questions.

Without these reports we would never have known that gender pay inequalities in education might be wider than average. We would have continued to kid ourselves that we were more enlightened than most workplaces.

Our educational leaders will no doubt respond with bluster. Men at the top will continue to believe they are worth it. If a woman is in the top post and the gender pay gap remains large, she may still be “leaning in” to the macho culture of old. She might have had to, in order to get where she is today.²

If your bosses tell you there are only a tiny number of people with their immense talents in the global labour market, try not to roll your eyes and wonder quite how they ended up working in education.

In 2018 we could hit peak income inequality. The last time the UK hit such a peak was 1913, just before women aged 30-plus and men without property were finally awarded the vote. Just over 100 years on, we appear to be stuck in a rut of inequality.



¹ <https://secure.toolkitfiles.co.uk/clients/26519/sitedata/Starter/Gender-pay-gap-March-2017.pdf>

² <https://repeaterbooks.com/product/lean-out/>

One way to fix things now would be to suggest that whenever a top job has to be refilled, the senior management think of filling that post with two people, possibly each working part-time. One could be a woman and the other a man, but it doesn't necessarily have to be that way. They can share the responsibility, and the pay. We all need to learn to share better if the gaps are to narrow.

In education, we are meant to be clever enough to be able to fix problems such as pay gaps. We're also meant to set an example to our students. Instead, the message we've given young people has been: women are worth less than men. We are morally bound to find solutions. Each year the gaps must be narrowed. We did it a century before.

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