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Why Girly Jobs Don't Pay Well

By NANCY FOLBRE

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A really good kindergarten teacher is worth $320,000 annually, according to one recent estimate, well publicized in this newspaper. That would reflect the present value of the additional money that students in a really good kindergarten class can expect to earn over their careers.

But average pay for kindergarten teachers is only about $50,380. And even at that level, kindergarten teachers, many employed by public school systems, fare relatively well compared with those in similar jobs.

Preschool teachers, who are typically responsible for only slightly younger children and don't belong to teachers' unions, earn, on average, about $27,450. (Animal trainers, by comparison, take home on average $31,080.) Annual pay estimates are based on 2009 data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

More than 97 percent of employees in kindergarten and preschool teaching are women. Though women now average higher levels of educational attainment than men, many continue to enter occupations dominated by women where wages are relatively low.

Elementary education, special education, social work and child and family studies were recently tallied among the 20 college degrees in the country that lead to the lowest salaries.

As one online discussion of girly jobs explains, some women may just like these jobs despite the low pay.

Some empirical research supports this claim. In a careful analysis of longitudinal data on earnings that includes survey questions regarding attitudes related to work preferences, Nicole Fortin, at economist at the University of British Columbia, finds that women tend to place less importance on money and more importance on people and family than men do.

Those preferences help explain why women often choose to care for children and other family members, knowing full well that this will limit their career opportunities, lower their earnings and increase their economic vulnerability.

Both biological and cultural factors can explain attitudinal differences between women and men. In our society, caring for others has long been considered an essential aspect of femininity (social psychologists devote considerable effort to measuring such things). And sometimes women don't choose girly jobs, but end up in them because they face discrimination or harassment in other jobs.

Caring often entails commitments to dependents such as young children, adults with disabilities or the frail elderly who can't afford to pay directly for the services provided. It doesn't fit easily into the impersonal logic of fee for service or supply and demand.

Further, caring often creates "outputs" that are not easily captured in market transactions, such as the increases in lifetime capabilities created by excellent kindergarten and preschool teachers.

It's hard to imagine an explicit contract that could enable a care worker to "capture" the value-added – which extends well beyond increases in lifetime earnings to many less tangible benefits.

Good care helps create – and maintain – good people.

In recent Economix posts, Uwe Reinhardt argues that health care is different from other things we buy and sell.

I agree. And I argue that child care, elder care, education and many social services resemble health care in this respect. They are not commodities that can be efficiently produced by a purely market-based economic system.

What's striking is the high cost of femininity. Many traits that contribute to women's success in finding a male partner don't pay off in the labor market – and vice versa. As one economic analysis of a speed-dating experiment puts it, "Men do not value women's intelligence or ambition when it exceeds their own." By contrast, intelligence and ambition contribute to men's success in both the "dating market" and the labor market.

But men's attitudes toward women (which are changing, albeit slowly) don't tell the whole story. Another factor is women's affinity for services that aren't rewarded by a market-based economy.

Indeed, market failures in the provision of these services help explain why we rely heavily on a welfare state that is, not incidentally, often dubbed a nanny state.

Many of the best-paying girly jobs – the professional jobs in health care and education that highly educated women are rapidly moving into – are heavily subsidized by the public sector.

Many of the worst-paying girly jobs – like teaching young children

before they enter public kindergarten – pay badly because they get relatively little public support, are poorly regulated and serve families who can't afford to pay for high-quality services.

Women who want to avoid the hazards of girly jobs can move into manly ones like petroleum engineering (the college degree leading to the best salary in 2009). But women have good reason to be more interested in social engineering.

We need to figure out how to honor girly values while earning manly pay.

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