

BBC gender pay row: Selective outrage of wealthy women

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An ongoing gender pay dispute at the BBC provides a case study in gender-based identity politics, showing how it serves as a springboard for the most affluent sections of the upper middle class.

Should anyone seriously be worried that the BBC's top paid female star, *Strictly Come Dancing's* Claudia Winkelman pocketed "only" £450,000 to £499,000 in pay in 2016/17, as opposed to £2.5 million for its top male presenter Chris Evans? Or, that *One Show* host Alex Jones, the second highest paid female, received £400,000 to £449,000 while her fellow presenter, Matt Baker, was paid £450,000 to £499,000?

The salaries for all concerned are obscene. Yet grievances of this nature, with accusations of a "gender pay chasm" among the BBC's highest earners, have obsessed the media and a vocal group of BBC female presenters for seven months, in what has been dubbed "the revolt of the BBC women."

The "revolt" followed publication by the BBC of a list of its top paid stars who earn more than £150,000. Of the 96 listed—who raked in £30 million between them—two thirds were men.

Forty BBC women fired off a letter of protest to BBC Director General Tony Hall on July 22. "The pay details released in the Annual report showed what many of us have suspected for many years... that women at the BBC are being paid less than men for the same work."

Most of the letter's signatories, including Victoria Derbyshire, Mishal Husain and Emily Maitlis, had already been confirmed among the BBC's 96 highest paid staff. "Compared to many women and men," they acknowledged, "we are very well compensated and fortunate. However, this is an age of equality and the BBC is an organisation that prides itself on its values."

Leaving aside for one moment the "values" of the BBC and what these might be, the claim by the signatories that we live in "an age of equality" is a staggering one.

Grotesque social inequality determines life for billions of people across the globe. The 42 richest people control the same wealth as 3.7 billion of the poorest, according to figures released by Oxfam in January. In Britain, the richest 0.1 percent (50,000 people) have doubled their share of wealth since 1984. A survey by Oxfam of 77,000 people across 10 countries showed that two thirds—72 percent in Britain—want urgent measures to tackle income inequality.

The equality envisioned by the BBC's letter writers is of an entirely different order. It is not social equality they seek, but a form of gender-based income redistribution, with gender quotas and other measures opening-up lucrative new avenues for promotion.

The BBC pay list provides only a partial glimpse of the vast sums of public money squandered on a handful among both sexes. Excluded from the list are incomes generated by independent production companies contracted by the BBC, along with salaries and bonuses paid by the BBC's commercial arm, BBC Worldwide.

Graham Norton, for example—ranked third on the list with a salary of £850,000 to £899,999—earned an extra £2.5 million in "presenter fees,

production fees and royalties" in 2015 from So Television, the production company he co-founded and later sold to ITV Studios for £17 million.

Also excluded are the huge salaries paid to BBC executives and managerial staff. Lord Hall of Birkenhead receives £450,000 a year, three times more than the prime minister. Deputy Director Anne Bulford is paid £435,000 and received £15,000 more than her male predecessor when she became Managing Director, Finance and Operations in June 2013.

The most revealing aspect of the BBC pay list from the standpoint of its impact on political life is the money lavished on senior news and current affairs presenters: John Humphrys (£600,000-£649,999), Huw Edwards (£550,000-£599,999), Andrew Marr (£400,000-£449,999), Andrew Neil, Laura Kuennsberg and Jon Sopel (£200,000-£249,999). The BBC's Director of News and Current Affairs James Harding is paid £340,000. The saying, "He who pays the piper calls the tune" could not be more apt. Pro-war lies and state propaganda are in safe hands, with the BBC's most rewarded journalists ensuring that oppositional views are suppressed, distorted and ridiculed.

The working class has no stake in the current fight over BBC gender pay. According to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the median pre-tax income in the UK is around £22,400. Those earning over £70,000 a year are in the top five percent of all UK earners, while those earning £150,000 (the entry point for the BBC's list) are in the richest 2.5 percent.

Of the BBC's 19,357 broadcast staff, those earning over £150,000 (if we restrict ourselves to the published list) comprise just 0.5 percent of its total workforce. Figures released under Freedom of Information laws, show the median BBC pay grade starts at £28,806 in London and £24,291 outside London. The first three pay grades (2, 3 and 4) are £20,047, £21,857 and £24,267 in London, and £15,532, £17,342, £19,752 for those outside the capital. Four hundred broadcast workers earn less than £20,000 according to production workers' union BECTU. It would take an employee among this group at least 125 years to earn as much as Chris Evans (at £2.5 million); 12 years to earn as much as Laura Kuennsberg (£249,000); and seven years to earn as much as Kirsty Wark or Naga Munchetty (£150,000). Barely a word about the fate of these low wage workers has been uttered by any of the BBC's gender warriors.

The grandiose claims by the BBC women letter writers that they would use their "loud and strong voices... on behalf of all" are window-dressing. For over seven months, these "voices" and their supporters in the pages of the *Guardian*, *Huffington Post* et al. have focused exclusively on the fate of women in the top 10 to 15 percent of income earners who believe they have been unjustly excluded from greater wealth. The only form of equality they are interested in is equality of privilege.

After the BBC's China editor Carrie Gracie (£130,000) resigned in January, protesting the BBC's refusal to grant her pay parity with male colleagues, including North America editor Jon Sopel (£200,000-£249,999), Gracie was portrayed as a modern-day Joan of Arc. The *Guardian* described her as "a hero for our times" who had "struck a blow for women everywhere by her brave stand for pay transparency and

equality.”

The *Guardian*’s editorial amounted to an unabashed defence of privilege: “Her principled stand cannot be dismissed just because the sums involved are way beyond most people’s wildest dreams.”

“She is very well paid” the *Guardian* continued, “But her argument is about fairness: she wants the BBC to stick to the law. It must value men and women equally. Nearly 50 years after the equal pay act, it is shocking that it still needs saying.”

The *Guardian*, the official voice of English liberalism, is today the mouthpiece for an avaricious upper middle class whose appetites are duly re-packaged, in this instance, as a struggle for... “equality of women and men before the law.”

Socialists oppose all forms of discrimination and uphold the democratic principle of equal pay for equal work, but this means fighting for the unity of the working class. The privileged advocates of identity politics are not remotely interested in the problems faced by most women in the workforce. The pressures of juggling work and family life, inadequate maternity leave, low wages, poorly paid part-time work, inflexible shifts and the high costs of childcare are not created by “the patriarchy.” They are a product of capitalism and they exact a heavy toll on working class women and men, and their children.

The National Union of Journalists is currently representing 121 women in dispute with the BBC over equal pay “across a broad range of salaries.” But no faith can be placed in the union, which has collaborated with BBC management over decades to destroy thousands of jobs and implement pay agreements that have effectively frozen compensation for those on the lowest grades.

In September, the BBC announced three separate reviews into equal pay and gender pay. The first of these, the BBC Statutory Gender Pay Report 2017, was published in October. All companies with 250 or more employees must publish their gender pay gap under legislation that came into force in April 2017. The gender pay gap measures the difference between average hourly earnings for men and women, irrespective of their roles. The BBC’s review, covering standard and senior manager pay grades, found a 9.6 percent gender pay gap, against a national average of 18 percent.

Of those employed in the bottom quartile of pay grades, 58.1 percent are women; in the lower middle quartile 49.5 percent are women; in the upper middle quartile 41.5 percent; and in the top quartile 37.8 percent. According to the report’s authors, the largest percentage of the BBC’s gender pay gap “has arisen because we have a lower proportion of women in leadership and senior roles.” The entire thrust of the new gender pay reporting regime is to push for greater representation at the top.

A BBC Equal Pay Audit was published in October by law firm Eversheds Sutherland (ES). Under the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Equality Act 2010, it is illegal to pay men and women different rates of pay for the same or equal work, so the audit had definite legal and financial implications for the BBC. ES reviewed all graded staff levels, excluding senior manager grades, freelancers and those employed via “on air talent” contracts. Accounting giant PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) provided relevant data samples to ES, highlighting instances where pay rates differed by more than 5 percent within the same grade.

Of the 575 job roles examined, ES found that 123 have a median pay gap of greater than or equal to 5 percent in favour of men. A further 100 roles have a pay gap of more than or equal to 5 percent in favour of women (mainly at the lower end of the pay scale). The auditors concluded that “in 91% of comparisons there appears to be a non-gender reason for the pay differential.”

Non-gender factors included “market forces, specialist skills, TUPE transfer protection, experience and differing levels of responsibility.”

The audit confirmed that among the lowest paid BBC staff, any disparity in pay rates between males and females is negligible. They are paid poorly

regardless of gender, with their wages fixed by BBC pay grades negotiated and enforced by the unions. Discretionary pay beyond these grades exists mostly for those at the very top.

There is no fixed salary range for senior management in the SM [senior management] 1 and SM2 pay grades or for a select group of on-air talent whose huge salaries are justified by citing “market rates.”

A separate “On-Air Review” published by PwC in January attests to this discriminatory regime. It examined pay equality for 824 presenters, senior editors and correspondents on BBC radio and television. PwC found that pay rates for this group “lack a consistent evaluation and governance framework,” resulting in “anomalies for both men and women” and that “pay for the highest profile individuals needs to be addressed.” This would likely “involve reducing the pay of some and increasing the pay of others,” PwC suggested.

The audit found that “a slightly higher percentage of men compared to women are paid above the midpoint for their job.” But it concluded, “these are typically driven by material and justifiable factors unrelated to gender,” including “level of experience, skills and market influences.”

While the extortionate salaries commanded by the BBC’s biggest stars are justified by “market rates,” this underlying premise is never challenged by the women who are leading the gender pay fight. They don’t oppose the capitalist market; they just want a bigger slice of the pie, with the working class footing the bill via contributions to the £4 billion annual license fee.

PwC’s on-air audit has been condemned by a group of 170 female staff. In their submission to the House of Commons’ Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the BBC Women campaign group criticised the BBC’s refusal to consult them on the terms of reference and methodology employed by PwC’s on-air review. But their grievances were selectively attuned: “Overall women with comparable skills, experience and profile accounted for only a third of the BBC’s big earners despite many of them doing the same jobs as the men.”

The pay gap between Evans and Winkelman; sports presenters Gary Lineker (£1.75 million-£1.79 million) and Clare Balding (£150,000-£199,999); and news presenters John Humphrys (£600,000-£649,999) and Sarah Montague (below £150,000), had, they claimed, sparked “public outrage and criticism from Ministers and MPs from all parties.”

Public outrage has in fact been directed at the staggering amounts wasted on all those listed. Comment threads were filled with hundreds of messages slamming the pay gap between rich and poor: “How have we allowed a situation where media presenters are paid such vast sums compared with surgeons, teachers, refuse collectors etc. etc.? What do they do with it all? We can never look at them in the same light again. JUST APPALLING!” Another wrote: “We have to stop putting some people above other people—especially to these ridiculous extremes. Everyone should be getting a similar amount of money—we should challenge the people that bang on about ‘talent’, ‘market forces’ and the ‘economy’ all of which magically equate to them cashing in and lording it over the rest of us.”

The “criticism” of the BBC by senior Conservatives, Liberal-Democrats and Labourites has focused on gender as a means of deflecting from the fundamental class divide, which they all fear. “I would sign the letter,” Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn told the *Andrew Marr Show*, “this gender pay gap is appalling—we would insist on a strong gender pay audit of every organisation and we’d also look at a 20:1 [ratio] between the chief executive and the lowest paid staff in every organisation.” In the unlikely event that Corbyn, if elected, enforces this ratio, workers on a £20,000 salary would be left in poverty, with senior executives free to earn £400,000.



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