**Title**

Equality is not just about ticking boxes – tapping into our talent benefits us all

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**Article**

In February, the United Kingdom marked 100 years since some women achieved the right to vote. On this centennial anniversary, it is important to reflect on how far we have come and what needs to be done in the next century to achieve true gender equality.

As members of the RSE Young Academy of Scotland, we are proud to be part of an organisation whose membership is fairly evenly split, 50:50 between men and women. This national Scottish academy provides a platform for emerging young leaders from all sectors to work together to address global challenges.

Despite all the progress, women still face numerous barriers. An Equality and Human Rights Commission report in 2017 highlighted that up to 54,000 women a year were forced out of their jobs due to pregnancy or maternity related discrimination1. The recent #metoo and #timesup social media campaigns demonstrate that sexual violence and sexual harassment against women are still commonplace.

The challenge for the next 100 years is to build on the basic human rights women have achieved and break down the barriers and social pressures which prevent women and girls fully reaching their potential.

In 2012, a report by the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) recognised that the majority of women with qualifications in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects did not work in STEM areas, in contrast to men. Through this “*Tapping all our Talents*” report, the RSE challenged the UK and Scottish Governments, industry, employers and others to address the huge loss to the economy and society that occurs due to the lack of women in STEM roles.

Today, what is clear is that having a critical mass of women in the workplace and having women in senior positions can make a huge difference to the culture, creativity and productivity of any organisation and, indeed, wider society. The more women who participate in the workplace, the more the workplace will reflect the reality of women’s lives and society in general.

In terms of real equality for women, well-funded, flexible and affordable childcare is key. That means childcare that reflects the reality of women’s lives. Not the basic 9am to 5pm childcare that is currently available. This simply does not reflect the flexibility expected in the 21st century. Too often women are left trying to fit their employment around childcare rather than the other way around.

The sharing of the childcare burden is also crucial to changing the way women are viewed in the workplace. Properly funded paternity leave would mean it is as likely for men to take time off work to care for a new born child as women.

The introduction of Shared Parental Leave in 2015 allows mothers to end their maternity leave/pay early so that one or both parents can take leave in a more flexible way. However, fathers’ uptake of shared parental leave is low.

There are a wide range of conditions which must be fulfilled by both parents before this is granted, plus the gender pay gap means that fathers will, on average, earn more than the mother. It can therefore be simply unaffordable for the father to take a significant period of time off work. Furthermore, men can be stigmatised for wanting to take time off to care for children and women can be stigmatised for giving the role of early-years care to the father. We need to encourage men to take parental leave by addressing these issues.

Consideration should be given to the Scandinavian model, where the full period of parental leave is only possible if both parents take significant amounts of time off. Making these necessary changes would make a huge difference to the lives of women in the workplace.

On 19 March, colleagues in the RSE and Young Academy of Scotland launched “*Tapping All Our Talents: Six Years On*”, a review into the progress that has been made towards gender equality in the Scottish STEM workplace over the past six years (<https://www.rse.org.uk/inquiries/womeninstem-2018/>).

The Young Academy of Scotland will also continue its work more broadly in this area, and would encourage other organisations and individuals to do likewise. Let us ensure that a century on from today, this battle has been won and gender equality is firmly embedded.

**References**

1. Equality and Human Rights Commission. <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/our-research/list-all-our-research-reports>
2. Royal Society of Edinburgh. <https://www.rse.org.uk/cms/files/advice-papers/inquiry/women_in_stem/tapping_talents.pdf>