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Gender Discrimination? Yes but No.

A funny thing happened to me the other day. I was in a beautiful old house in Buckinghamshire. With the floor creaking and also tilting delightfully -- this way and that way -- I noticed something strange overhead. Because the doors and beams were so low, I had constantly to keep ducking my head. It was like being a full-size human caught in a Tolkien-like house for posh Home Counties hobbits. In Buckinghamshire, I was with somebody much shorter, and for him there was no problem, and all appeared perfect about the house.

It set me thinking. Would you say I experienced a kind of discrimination against the tall? Yes, I suppose. But that would be an unreasonably conspiratorial way to put it. Short people had not deliberately chosen, in order to be horrid, to design a house that was a pain for tall folk. It is simply that short people came first in history (this house was at least 500 years old and typical heights were then less), and precedence in time gave small men and women an advantage over those who came later. They got to decide the rules, you might say. Hence many homes of that era were designed for people about 5 feet tall.

This seems a useful way to think when considering a modern issue that is often described, with some justification, as discrimination – the way that women are treated in the workplace.

What is happening to gender in the modern world? Changes. I discovered the other day, for instance, that 88% of Icelandic women have a job.

What do you mean, I must have very dull dinner-party conversations? I got this fact from a handbook called *Employment Outlook*, which is produced by the Paris-based think tank the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). It is available from bookshops and is fascinating reading.

Among the industrialized nations, Iceland has the largest proportion of women in the labour force. Next highest are Sweden and Norway, both on 82% of women working. The lowest numbers? They turn out to be in Italy, Spain and Greece, which have around 50% of women in the workforce. In the United Kingdom, 73% of women have jobs. Our figure is almost exactly the same as the USA.

This fairly high level of women in employment is, of course, a remarkable transformation from our grandmothers' time. Even in 1980, the proportion of

women working was about 10 percentage points less.

Are women employees getting a fair deal in 2003? I think the honest answer is that they are not. But this is not really anyone's fault, or at least it is not sensibly viewed like that. Just as in the case of the lovely Buckinghamshire home with the low ceilings, things were chosen by a previous generation, who just did not stop and think. And in the case of the labour market, that was a generation of males. Men made the rules for promotion and what counted as good work and good workers.

The OECD report calculates that in the industrialized nations a woman typically now earns 16% less per hour than an identically qualified man (the pay 'penalty' from being a woman is actually bigger, at 24%, in the UK), will get promoted about half as quickly as the average man, and is much less likely to be counted among the elite occupational category 'Legislators, senior officials and managers'.

This is wrong and unfair. Things need to change for female workers, and fortunately have been changing.

But in my opinion there is no point in viewing gender imbalance as a deep, planned conspiracy. Without being consciously discriminatory, men made the rules. Think of the Buckinghamshire beams.