editorial

Taking a cue from our lead article on 'Women in the political science profession' by Akhtar, Fawcett, Legrand, Marsh and Taylor, we dedicate this editorial to the subject of working conditions and pay in the academic profession. Akhtar *et al*.'s analysis identifies a number of reasons that might deter women from entering the political science profession – a stereotyping of its ivory tower nature, the dominance of the male role model, and the importance for women of family commitments that may not be compatible with the instability and earnings insecurity of an academic career. Akhtar *et al*. recommend that political science departments devote more time to informing undergraduates about graduate opportunities and dispel some of their misconceptions about academic life.

We have no argument with that conclusion. Studies of the gender balance in other parts of the academic profession (economics) show that there is an important role for mentoring for new female entrants (Blackaby *et al*., 2005). We would simply wish to place it in the wider context of deteriorating working conditions and pay and to emphasise that, while affecting both men and women, the gender impact of these developments is clearly skewed against the latter. For that reason, it is not surprising that academia faces difficulties in recruiting more women into its ranks.

The share of women in the academic profession has grown across Europe during the last two decades. But cross-national research reveals that still only around a quarter of academic staff in the UK, Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands are female, falling to less than ten per cent at the full professor level (Enders, 2000). Moreover, during the same period, there has been a gradual erosion of academic remuneration affecting both men and women. Partly due to their predominance at the lower end of the academic employment ladder, there is also a persistent pay gap to the latter's disadvantage.

In the absence of good comparative data for European countries, we rely in the following on available evidence from the UK and US. In the UK, academic salaries have fallen well behind relative to non-manual averages in all other industries and services since the early 1980s. The real purchasing power of the average academic fell by thirty per cent on the pay index between 1981 and 1998 (Greenaway and Haynes, 2000). The salaries of UK academics have also fallen well behind their US counterparts, although just how large that difference is depends on which study one consults: while OxCHEPS (2000) estimates that similar positions provide double the purchasing power in the US, Stevens (2004) presents evidence for a twenty-five to forty per cent difference, depending on age. New academics in many parts of the UK (and even their older counterparts in the Southeast) now find themselves unable to enter the housing market, and their capacities for establishing homes and families are therefore also reduced. Housing bubbles since the late 1990s in other parts of Europe (the Netherlands, France and Spain in particular) mean that this problem is not restricted solely to the UK.

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The relative position of female academics is even worse, however, given what the UK's *Education Guardian* has dubbed the 'gender pay gap "scandal"' (MacLeod, 2003). Figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA — http://www.hesa.ac.uk/) reveal that in 2001–2002 there was a gender pay gap of fifteen per cent between male and female academics aged thirty-one to fifty-six. This gap can be attributed to the larger number of women in lower professional ranks, as well as to discrimination in promotion procedures and glass ceilings. Academic studies on the pay gap confirm that the perceptions and fears expressed by female respondents in Akhtar *et al*'s survey are not at all misplaced: 'Evidence suggests a limited opportunity for female academics to combine career and family, despite the flexibility of an academic job…' (Ward, 1999: 1). Stevens (2004) shows that the largest disparities between an average graduate working in the higher education sector and their counterpart in non-academic sectors are in the earlier and middle career period – precisely when the costs relative to income of setting up a home and building a family are at their highest.

A comparison with the US reveals some interesting differences. Although there is also evidence of similar gender pay gaps in US academia, compared with other social science disciplines, women working in political science in the US face few disparities in salaries and promotion relative to men. As reported by Ginther (2004), while the gender salary gap for associate professors is four per cent (compared to sixteen per cent for economics), women full professors earn five per cent more on average than their male colleagues. Accounting for thirty-two per cent of doctorates awarded between 1995 and 2000, by 2001 thirty-three per cent of assistant professors in political science were women, as against sixteen per cent in economics.

Poor salaries and low returns to skills investment affect the life chances and opportunities of everybody, and ultimately create problems for academic recruitment and retention and the reproduction of the 'knowledge class': the decline in the numbers of good-quality applicants to PhD programmes in the UK and across Europe is a symptom of this larger problem (see British Academy (2002) for a survey). Beyond the particular problems facing women who seek a career in the political science profession, there is the still more serious issue – afflicting both the life sciences and social sciences – of investing in and sustaining the knowledge base of the European economies.

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