

### What's Hidden Within the Pay Gap?

Is there really an insidious plot by employers to keep women economically oppressed, as some would have us believe? When overall gendered incomes are compared, it is found that women earn 77 percent of what men earn (Misra and Strader). Institutional feminists, those who lead feminist organizations, write feminist centered articles, and lobby for feminist issues, and their advocates accept this statistic as proof that women are being harmed by and are in need of protection from gender discrimination in the workplace. Over the years numerous articles have used the existence of the pay gap, almost without exception, to support the claim that women are discriminately paid less than men for the same work. The outward appearance of this single statistic does not, however, tell the full story. While feminists would have the public believe otherwise, discrimination is the least of many factors that contribute to the gender pay gap.

It is easy to come away from an immersion in feminist doctrine with the impression that the pay gap is directly and almost exclusively due to workplace discrimination. One telling article by Heidi Hartmann, the president of the Institute for Women's Policy Research, the leading think tank in the United States focusing primarily on domestic women's issues, while at first admitting to the fact that the real earnings of women had continued to grow over a 25 year period during which the real earnings of men had stagnated, then offering economic reasons for this condition, concludes with the following: "Now it seems as if the (economic) current is finally overpowering women, making it increasingly difficult for them to swim upstream. This is not to say that discrimination is any worse than it has been in the past, but progress in reducing discrimination is no longer being made." Not only does the article commit a classic bait and switch here by presenting the economic forces behind the stalled real earnings of women and then, inexplicably, blaming it on discrimination, but the very idea that discrimination is involved

is duplicitous considering the fact that the real earnings of men had succumbed to these same forces a full 25 years prior. Yet another typical use of the pay gap is its treatment in a report by the National Women's Law Center, a 40-year-old women's legal advocacy organization. The report makes the claim that "women working full time, year round were typically paid just 77 cents for every dollar paid to their male counterparts—a loss of \$11,084" ("50 Years").

Characterizing the pay gap as a "loss" creates the impression that the discrepancy is something rightfully owed but is being wrongfully withheld and, therefore, a simple matter of discrimination. Feminist proponents muddy the water in much the same way. President Obama, after citing the 77 percent earnings figure in his recent State of the Union address, immediately followed up with the appeal that "A woman deserves equal pay for equal work." Pairing these two statements creates the impression that women are being discriminated against enmasse, by being paid a much lower wage while performing the same work as men. The evidence, however, paints a distinctly different picture.

While the 77 cents on the dollar figure is used frequently when discussing the pay gap, more equitable figures exist. When comparing weekly wages instead of annual wages, the pay gap reduces to 81 cents (Brugger). Taking the next logical step and accounting for the fact that men, on average, work more hours per day, a comparison of hourly wages reduces the gap to only 86 cents (Brugger). This is a simple and more honest shift from the 77 cent statistic. Even more telling is the fact that women of the Millennial generation, being more educated, participating in greater numbers, and having an increased presence in higher paying occupations, are closing the pay gap at an unprecedented pace ("Young Women" 19). According to *HR Magazine*, the largest circulating human resources publication in the world, "In 2012, women ages 25 to 34 earned 93 percent of what their male counterparts made, up from 89 percent in

2005” (“Young Women” 19). Another segment of women who buck the 77 cent statistic, according to *The Wall Street Journal* citing the Bureau of Labor Statistics report *Highlights of Women's Earnings in 2012*, are women who have never married or had children. This segment of women earns 96 percent of what their unmarried male counterparts earn (Perry and Biggs). The much publicized book *Creating a Life*, which has been featured on the cover of *Time Magazine*, reflects this fact in its premise that the more successful a woman is the less likely she is to have married or had children (Belkin). As such, it can be assumed that, while it is possible that discrimination may play a minor role, spousal support, caring for a household, and raising children are much more significant contributors to the pay gap.

Research concerning time spent on household tasks and child rearing show that it has a negative impact on the wages of both women and men (Misra and Strader). Since women tend to engage in these tasks more than men, this has a disproportionate impact on their earnings. As well, married men with stay-at-home spouses have more time to provide in a financial capacity and earn a noticeable wage bonus. Conversely, for each hour a man’s spouse works, his wage bonus suffers a decrease (Misra and Strader). The decision over who stays home to mind the household and care for the children is a private matter between a husband and wife. One of the factors in such a decision, however, is the fact that male-dominated occupations tend to pay more than female-dominated occupations (Hegewisch and Matite). The odds that the husband holds a higher paying job due to this fact are quite good since only six percent of women work in traditionally male occupations and less than five percent of men work in traditionally female occupations (Hegewisch and Matite). This situation is unlikely to change any time soon.

No matter the efforts made to reduce the pay gap by attracting more women into traditionally male-dominated occupations, women refuse to be pushed into careers that they do

not want. After compiling the results of a 250 question survey of 15-year-olds from 35 countries in different parts of the world, researchers from the University of Oslo, Norway found that girls from wealthier, more egalitarian countries are far less likely to desire a career in male-dominated fields than either boys overall or girls from developing countries without similar opportunities. In parallel, girls from countries with the lowest poverty rates show a preference, in greater numbers, for careers in traditionally female occupations (Sjøberg and Schreiner).

Women are speaking through their actions, no matter the social agenda others insist they subscribe to, and making their own life choices. They are opting for traditionally female careers, prioritizing family over career advancement, and creating a more flexible, fulfilling lifestyle than one that is centered exclusively on earnings. As the *New York Times Magazine* article *The Opt-Out Revolution* relates, “(instead of using) the male definition of money and power,... when women talk about success they use words like satisfaction, balance and sanity” (Belkin 45). This seems to be a more enlightened approach to one’s life choices. However, none of this is to say that there is nothing that could be done to help women achieve a greater degree of economic parity with men. Maternity leave, family leave, subsidized childcare, universal health care, raising the minimum wage, flextime—all could play a part in reducing the gender pay gap. Perhaps by knowing what women find important and directing our efforts towards helping them to achieve these goals, without being sidetracked by phantom distractions, we can better serve everyone, both women and men—and the families they create—in the process.

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