The Gender Pay Gap in the Labor Force

By Millicent Ef and Dr. Dennis Kalob

According to the American Community Survey, men earned $12,739 more on average than women in 2017. Pay inequality between men and women is not a new problem, but one that has seen too little progress. In fact, since 1947, the gap between men and women’s average earnings has only closed by about $100.

Women have lower earnings than men at all levels of education. In Louisiana and Mississippi, a man without a high school diploma or GED earns more annually than a woman with some college or an associate’s degree. In Alabama, a woman with a bachelor’s degree earns $21,021 less annually than a man with a bachelor’s degree. In Florida, the average pay increase from a bachelor’s degree to a graduate degree is $10,600 annually for women and $21,735 for men. And in Texas, a man with a graduate degree earns $32,823 more annually than a female with a graduate degree.

Although the issue of pay inequality between men and women is a general problem, the more glaring is the pay gap between white men and women of color. White women overall earn 80% of what men earn. African American and Hispanic women earn only 61% and 58%, respectively, of what white men earn.

Historical explanations behind gender pay inequality largely center on the notion that women had little to contribute outside of their roles in the home. Women were seen as not intellectually or emotionally capable of handling complex tasks or making difficult decisions (which led to women being denied the right to vote until 1920). Their work was derated, because they were derated.

Eventually, women were seen by employers as a potential source of cheap labor and were brought into some factories and offices. For example, clerical work was typically a male occupation more than a century ago. That changed when employers realized women could do that work—particularly, they thought, the more repetitive and lower status part of—so and could be paid less, even because they were women. And so began the long paid female world of secretarial work.[1]

While it’s true that women often take time off work to have children, in most cases this time is of only temporary, yet it can have permanent consequences for a woman’s career trajectory and future earnings potential. In any case, why must women pay a professional price for having children, especially when studies show that many married men with children actually get a ‘fatherhood bonus’ in the form of promotions and raises that increase with each subsequent child?[2]

The gender pay gap is imbedded in our culture and economy and it will take more than non-discrimination laws to address it. We as a society need to reassess how we have determined over time the value of different types of work and then take steps to correct these old calculations that have left female-dominated occupations undervalued.

We also need to stop forcing women to pay a professional price for starting families. Men and women would benefit financially and emotionally from generous paid family leave and substantiated, quality childcare. We need to support a whole array of public and corporate policies that promote gender equality, as well as a healthy work-life balance for all.


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