
December 24, 2006

Gender Pay Gap, Once Narrowing, Is Stuck in Place

By DAVID LEONHARDT

Throughout the 1980s and early '90s, women of all economic levels — poor, middle class and rich — were steadily gaining ground on their male counterparts in the work force. By the mid-'90s, women earned more than 75 cents for every dollar in hourly pay that men did, up from 65 cents just 15 years earlier.

Largely without notice, however, one big group of women has stopped making progress: those with a four-year college degree. The gap between their pay and the pay of male college graduates has actually widened slightly since the mid-'90s.

For women without a college education, the pay gap with men has narrowed only slightly over the same span.

These trends suggest that all the recent high-profile achievements — the first female secretary of state, the first female lead anchor of a nightly newscast, the first female president of Princeton, and, next month, the first female speaker of the House — do not reflect what is happening to most women, researchers say.

A decade ago, it was possible to imagine that men and women with similar qualifications might one day soon be making nearly identical salaries. Today, that is far harder to envision.

“Nothing happened to the pay gap from the mid-1950s to the late '70s,” said Francine D. Blau, an economist at Cornell and a leading researcher of gender and pay. “Then the '80s stood out as a period of sharp increases in women’s pay. And it’s much less impressive after that.”

Last year, college-educated women between 36 and 45 years old, for example, earned 74.7 cents in hourly pay for every dollar that men in the same group did, according to Labor Department data analyzed by the Economic Policy Institute. A decade earlier, the women earned 75.7 cents.

The reasons for the stagnation are complicated and appear to include both discrimination and women’s own choices. The number of women staying home with young children has risen

recently, according to the Labor Department; the increase has been sharpest among highly educated mothers, who might otherwise be earning high salaries. The pace at which women are flowing into highly paid fields also appears to have slowed.

Like so much about gender and the workplace, there are at least two ways to view these trends. One is that women, faced with most of the burden for taking care of families, are forced to choose jobs that pay less — or, in the case of stay-at-home mothers, nothing at all.

If the government offered day-care programs similar to those in other countries or men spent more time caring for family members, women would have greater opportunity to pursue whatever job they wanted, according to this view.

The other view is that women consider money a top priority less often than men do. Many may relish the chance to care for children or parents and prefer jobs, like those in the nonprofit sector, that offer more opportunity to influence other people's lives.

Both views, economists note, could have some truth to them.

“Is equality of income what we really want?” asked Claudia Goldin, an economist at Harvard who has written about the revolution in women's work over the last generation. “Do we want everyone to have an equal chance to work 80 hours in their prime reproductive years? Yes, but we don't expect them to take that chance equally often.”

Whatever role their own preferences may play in the pay gap, many women say they continue to battle subtle forms of lingering prejudice. Indeed, the pay gap between men and women who have similar qualifications and work in the same occupation — which economists say is one of the purest measures of gender equality — has barely budged since 1990.

Today, the discrimination often comes from bosses who believe they treat everyone equally, women say, but it can still create a glass ceiling that keeps them from reaching the best jobs at a company.

“I don't think anyone would ever say I couldn't do the job as well as a man,” said Christine Kwapnoski, a 42-year-old bakery manager at a Sam's Club in Northern California who will make \$63,000 this year, including overtime. Still, Ms. Kwapnoski said she was paid significantly less than men in similar jobs, and she has joined a class-action lawsuit against Wal-Mart Stores, which owns Sam's Club.

The lawsuit is part of a spurt of cases in recent years contending gender discrimination at large

companies, including Boeing, Costco, Merrill Lynch and Morgan Stanley. Last month, the Supreme Court heard arguments in a case against Goodyear Tire and Rubber.

At Sam's Club, Ms. Kwapnoski said that when she was a dock supervisor, she discovered that a man she supervised was making as much as she was. She was later promoted with no raise, even though men who received such a promotion did get more money, she said.

"Basically, I was told it was none of my business, that there was nothing I could do about it," she said.

Ms. Kwapnoski does not have a bachelor's degree, but her allegations are typical of the recent trends in another way: the pay gap is now largest among workers earning relatively good salaries.

At Wal-Mart, the percentage of women dwindles at each successive management level. They hold almost 75 percent of department-head positions, according to the company. But only about 20 percent of store managers, who can make significantly more than \$100,000, are women.

This is true even though women receive better evaluations than men on average and have longer job tenure, said Brad Seligman, the lead plaintiffs' lawyer in the lawsuit.

Theodore J. Boutros Jr., a lawyer for Wal-Mart, said the company did not discriminate. "It's really a leap of logic to assume that the data is a product of discrimination," Mr. Boutros said. "People have different interests, different priorities, different career paths" — and different levels of desire to go into management, he added.

The other companies that have been sued also say they do not discriminate.

Economists say that the recent pay trends have been overlooked because the overall pay gap, as measured by the government, continues to narrow. The average hourly pay of all female workers rose to 80.1 percent of men's pay last year, from 77.3 percent in 2000.

But that is largely because women continue to close the qualifications gap. More women than men now graduate from college, and the number of women with decades of work experience is still growing rapidly. Within many demographic groups, though, women are no longer gaining ground.

Ms. Blau and her husband, Lawrence M. Kahn, another Cornell economist, have done some of the most detailed studies of gender and pay, comparing men and women who have the same

occupation, education, experience, race and labor-union status. At the end of the late 1970s, women earned about 82 percent as much each hour as men with a similar profile. A decade later, the number had shot up to 91 percent, offering reason to wonder if women would reach parity.

But by the late '90s, the number remained at 91 percent. Ms. Blau and Mr. Kahn have not yet examined the current decade in detail, but she said other data suggested that there had been little movement.

During the 1990s boom, college-educated men received larger raises than women on average. Women have done slightly better than the men in the last few years, but not enough to make up for the late '90s, the Economic Policy Institute analysis found.

There is no proof that discrimination is the cause of the remaining pay gap, Ms. Blau said. It is possible that the average man, brought up to view himself the main breadwinner, is more committed to his job than the average woman.

But researchers note that government efforts to reduce sex discrimination have ebbed over the period that the pay gap has stagnated. In the 1960s and '70s, laws like Title VII and Title IX prohibited discrimination at work and in school and may have helped close the pay gap in subsequent years. There have been no similar pushes in the last couple of decades.

Women have continued to pour into high-paid professions like law, medicine and corporate management where they were once rare, but the increases seem to have slowed, noted Reeve Vanneman, a sociologist at the University of Maryland.

Medicine offers a particularly good window on these changes. Roughly 40 percent of medical school graduates are women today. Yet many of the highest paid specialties, the ones in which salaries often exceed \$400,000, remain dominated by men and will be for decades to come, based on the pipeline of residents.

Only 28 percent of radiology residents in 2004-5 were women, the Association of American Medical Colleges has reported. Only 10 percent of orthopedic surgery residents were female. The specialties in which more than half of new doctors are women, like dermatology, family medicine and pediatrics, tend to pay less.

Melanie Kingsley, a 28-year-old resident at the Indiana University School of Medicine, said she had wanted to be a doctor for as long as she could recall. For a party celebrating her graduation from medical school, her mother printed up invitations with a photo of Dr. Kingsley wearing a

stethoscope — when she was a toddler.

As the first doctor in her family, though, she did not have a clear idea of which specialty she would choose until she spent a summer working alongside a female dermatologist in Chicago. There, she saw that dermatologists worked with everyone from newborns to the elderly and worked on nearly every part of the body, and she was hooked.

“You get paid enough to support your family and enjoy life,” said Dr. Kingsley, a lifelong Indiana resident. “Yeah, maybe I won’t make a lot of money. But I’ll be happy with my day-to-day job, and that’s the reason I went into medicine — to help other people.” She added: “I have seen people do it for the money, and they’re not very happy.”

The gender differences among medical specialties point to another aspect of the current pay gap. In earlier decades, the size of the gap was similar among middle-class and affluent workers. At times, it was actually smaller at the top.

But the gap is now widest among highly paid workers. A woman making more than 95 percent of all other women earned the equivalent of \$36 an hour last year, or about \$90,000 a year for working 50 hours a week. A man making more than 95 percent of all other men, putting in the same hours, would have earned \$115,000 — a difference of 28 percent.

At the very top of the income ladder, the gap is probably even larger. The official statistics do not capture the nation’s highest earners, and in many fields where pay has soared — Wall Street, hedge funds, technology — the top jobs are overwhelmingly held by men.

Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
