50 Down, 50 to Go? Myth Busting the Pay Gap Revisited

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Even though equal pay for women is a legal right, it is not yet a reality. President Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act almost exactly a half-century ago, on June 10, 1963. The very next year Congress passed Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned sex discrimination at work. Yet today, women still earn less than men. Even more shocking, one study has suggested it will take nearly another 50 years to close the gap completely.

Some of us, myself included, find that unacceptable. As I wrote in this space just last year,

We live today in a world where women run Fortune 500 companies, sit on the Supreme Court, and push back the frontiers of knowledge. We live during a time when more young women than men hold bachelor’s degrees, and when women make up almost half of all new law school graduates. Given all our progress, there must be some explanation behind the fact that women still lag behind men when it comes to pay equity.... Despite the evidence, myths that women’s choices or other legitimate factors are the ‘real’ cause of the pay gap persist. So does confusion about how to measure the gap and what figures to use.

I also explained how there are different ways to measure the gap – it is about 77 cents on the dollar based on annual earnings, and more like 81 cents on the dollar based on weekly wages. Once you factor in race, the pay gap for women of color compared with white men is even larger.

So has the gap shrunk at all since last year? Nope. In fact, the data show our progress closing the gender pay gap has stalled, putting off the projected date the gap will close until 2057.

The other thing that hasn’t changed much since last year? The myth that you won’t find any gap if you just compare women and men who have the same kinds of jobs, the same experience or the same advanced education. Decades of research consistently conclude that discrimination is the best explanation of the remaining difference in pay.

As I said last year, there is a persistent myth that once you account for the jobs that require specialized skills or education, the pay gap goes away. But here’s the reality: The gap for women in high-paying, high-skill jobs, as well as for those with advanced degrees, is still just as real as the gap for workers overall.

Last year I cited research showing women earn less than men even within the same occupations. Since then, new research continues to show that the pay gap can’t be “explained away.” When women just one year out of college earn less than men, even after accounting for college major, occupation, hours worked and other factors, we know that explanations only take us so far.
The toughest myth, and one that still needs to be busted, is that women are responsible for the pay gap because they seek out flexible jobs or choose to work fewer hours. In fact, the stereotype that women will put family above work may lead employers to undervalue them. Research on the “motherhood penalty” shows that the mere status of being a mother (but not a father) can lead to perceptions of lower competence and commitment, as well as lower salary offers. Simply assuming women will work less once they have children, but not men? That’s not choice, that’s discrimination.

Putting aside whether it’s right to ask women (or men) to sacrifice financially in order to work and have a family, we also know the gender gap in pay exists for women working full time. Taking time off for children also doesn’t explain gaps at the start of a career. And although researchers have addressed various ways that work hours or schedule or work history might or might not explain some portion of the wage gap, it doesn’t explain it all – controlling for hours or time out of the workforce still leaves an unexplained gap in pay. In other words, even if women work just as much after having children as before, they may still be paid less for the same amount of work.

It’s true that all of these potential explanations make the size of the pay gap smaller than 23 cents. But that just raises more questions about the “explanations,” like the long history of discrimination and other barriers to women entering more highly paid occupations.

As I wrote last year, “If high school girls are discouraged from taking the math and science classes that lead to high-paying STEM jobs, shouldn’t we in some way count that as a lost equal earnings opportunity? As one commentator put it recently, ‘I don’t think that simply saying we have 9 cents of discrimination and then 14 cents of life choices is very satisfying.’”

Here at the Department of Labor we don’t plan to just sit back and wait five more decades. We are working to give women the tools they need today to know their worth. We are rescinding outdated and ineffective guidance to better protect workers from pay discrimination. And we continue to team up with other members of the National Equal Pay Task Force to ensure a coordinated federal response to equal pay enforcement. You can read about our work on equal pay here.

The pay gap isn’t a myth, it’s a reality – and we’re all responsible to help fix it.

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