How the Wage Gap Hurts Women and Families

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Women who work full time, year round in the United States are paid only 78 cents for every dollar paid to their male counterparts. This gap in earnings translates into $10,876 less per year in median earnings, leaving women and their families shortchanged. Although enforcement of the Equal Pay Act and civil rights laws has helped narrow the wage gap over time, addressing the significant pay disparities that remain is critical for women and their families.

Fair Pay is Crucial for All Women

Women of color are paid less than white, non-Hispanic men.

- African American women working full time, year round typically make only 64 cents for every dollar paid to their white, non-Hispanic male counterparts. For Latinas this figure is only 56 cents.

Mothers are paid less than fathers.

- Mothers who work full time, year round typically have lower earnings than fathers ($40,000 compared to $56,999), meaning mothers only make 70 cents for every dollar paid to fathers.

Lesbian women still earn less than men, regardless of their sexual orientation.

- Women in same-sex couples have a median personal income of $38,000, compared to $47,000 for men in same-sex couples and $48,000 for men in different-sex couples.

- Lesbian women are far more likely than gay men to support children – 49 percent of lesbian and bisexual women report having a child compared to 19 percent of gay and bisexual men.
Women with disabilities have a wider wage gap than the wage gap between women and men overall.

- Women with disabilities working full time, year round are typically paid just 69.5 percent of what men without disabilities working full time, year round are typically paid.⁸

- Women with disabilities working full time, year round are typically paid just 80.8 percent of what their male counterparts with disabilities are paid.

Women are affected by the wage gap as soon as they enter the labor force.

- The wage gap is smaller for younger women than older women, but it begins right when women enter the labor force. Women 15-24 working full time, year round are typically paid just 91.1 percent of what their male counterparts are paid. Among older women, the gap is even larger. Women 45-64 working full time, year round are typically paid just 73.6 percent of what their male counterparts are paid. For women still working at age 65 and older the figure is 76.4 percent.⁹

Older women also experience a wage gap in retirement income, due in large part to the wage gap they experienced during their working years.

- Based on today’s wage gap, a woman who worked full time, year round would typically lose $435,049 in a 40-year period due to the wage gap.¹⁰ This woman would have to work more than eleven years longer to make up this gap. A typical woman working full time, year round who starts, but does not finish high school would lose $332,704 over a 40-year period, an enormous amount of money for women who are typically paid $22,248 a year. This woman would have to work nearly fifteen years longer to make up this gap. These lost wages severely reduce women’s ability to save for retirement.

- As a result of lower lifetime earnings and different work patterns, the average Social Security benefit for women 65 and older was about $13,466 per year, compared to $17,598 for men of the same age in 2013.¹²

- In 2010, women 50 and older received only 56 cents for every dollar received by men in income from pensions and annuities.¹³ One study found that the typical woman worker near retirement with a defined contribution plan or individual retirement account had accumulated $34,000 in savings, while her male counterpart held $70,000—more than twice as much.¹⁴

Women and their Families Count on Women’s Earnings

In 2013, women working full time, year round typically had lower earnings than men ($30,157 compared to $50,033).¹⁵ Women’s lower wages hurt women and families who rely on women’s earnings for all or part of their income.

Lower earnings have a serious impact on the economic security of the more than 7.3 million families headed by working single mothers.¹⁶

- Working single mothers with children struggled to make ends meet in 2013. Over a quarter, or more than 2.0 million, of all such families were poor. Almost an additional 2.5 million working single mother families were struggling to make ends meet, falling between 100 and 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), meaning that more than six in ten (61.9 percent) of working single mother families lived below 200 percent of the FPL.¹⁷ In 2013, the FPL for a single mother with two children was just under $18,800.¹⁸

Most two-parent families depend on women’s wages, and so also suffer when women receive unfair pay.

- Nearly 1.4 million married couples with children relied exclusively on women’s earnings at some point in 2013, representing 5.6 percent of all married couples with children.¹⁹

- In 2013, more than 14.8 million married couples with children relied on both parents’ earnings, representing 59.7 percent of all married couples with children.²⁰

The wage gap impacts single women with no children as well, who are also working to support themselves.

- In 2013, the typical never-married woman with no children working full time, year round was paid 70.0 percent of what a man working full time, year round was paid.²¹

Fair pay impacts married women with no children who are more likely to be solely supporting their family than married women with children.
• Nearly 4.2 million married couples with no children relied exclusively on women’s earnings at some point in 2013, representing 11.3 percent of all married couples with no children.22

• In 2013, almost 14.6 million married couples with no children relied on both partners’ earnings, representing 39.2 percent of all married couples with no children.23

Closing the Wage Gap Would Significantly Improve Families’ Finances

Women have higher rates of economic insecurity than do men. In 2013, women were more likely to live in poverty (14.5 percent of women compared to 11.0 percent of men).24 Women are thus more likely to rely on public benefits like Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps), and housing assistance.25 Bringing women’s earnings in line with men’s earnings would greatly improve the economic situation for women and their families. An additional $10,876 per year is enough to:

...pay the median cost of rent and utilities for a year with nearly $700 to spare, or the median mortgage payment and utilities for nearly a year,26

Almost 1.4 million properties nationwide defaulted on a mortgage in 2013.27 Earnings lost due to the wage gap could have made a substantial difference in helping these families stay in their homes. They could also affect whether a family can afford to pay rent.

...or pay for a household of four for a year and a five months with more than $100 to spare,28

The difficult economy has stretched family budgets for basic needs, particularly for households headed by women. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, women were about 61 percent of nonelderly adult recipients and 64 percent of elderly adult recipients. Additionally, more than half (57 percent) of all SNAP households with children were headed by a single adult, 92 percent of whom were women.29 With the continuing economic crisis, SNAP participation remains high: SNAP served 46.5 million people in 22.7 million households on average each month in FY 2014.30

...or pay a year and four months of full-time child care costs for a four-year-old with more than $500 to spare,31

Child care expenditures consume a large percentage of families’ earnings, especially those earned by low-income and single mother families. In Nebraska, the state at the national median for child care costs, providing care for a four-year-old represented 32.3 percent of a single mother’s income and 9.9 percent of a two-parent family’s income.32

In 2011, the most recent year for which data are available, families living in poverty who paid for child care spent an average of 30.3 percent of their income on care, and families earning between 100 and 200 percent of the federal poverty line devoted an average of 18.0 percent of their income to care. Even higher-income families (above 200 percent of the FPL) paying for child care spent 6.3 percent of their income on care.33 If women took home the earnings lost due to the wage gap, this financial pressure would be partly alleviated.

...or pay for two years and five months of family health insurance premiums in an employer-sponsored health insurance program with over $200 to spare,34

Women spend a substantial amount of their income on out-of-pocket health costs and health insurance premiums, and they are more likely than men to experience serious financial hardship as a result of medical bills. In 2010, the most recent year for which these statistics are available, one-third of working-age women spent 10 percent or more of their income on these expenses, and nearly one-third of women who had medical bill or debt problems were unable to pay for basic necessities like food, heat, or rent because of their medical bills.35 Closing the wage gap would provide essential help for women to pay for their medical expenses.

...or pay for two years and seven months of student loan payments with almost $100 to spare.36

Student loan payments can consume a considerable portion of a woman’s earnings, especially in the years immediately following post-secondary education. In 2013, it is estimated that seven in ten college seniors graduated with student loan debt. The average debt for students with loans was $28,400.37 Closing the wage gap would enable women to pay down student loan debt much faster.


1 Id. White, non-Hispanic women make 77 cents for every dollar made by their white, non-Hispanic male counterparts.


4 Gary J. Gates, The Williams Institute, Same-sex and Different-sex Couples in the American Community Survey 2005-2011 (Feb. 2013) http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/ACS-2013.pdf. Figures only include people in labor force. Due to data limitations, they do not include lesbian or gay individuals who are not part of a couple. These figures are median annual personal income for all workers in the labor force—these figures differ from the median annual earnings for full-time, year-round workers reported for the wage gap and are not directly comparable.


7 Surpa note 2.

8 Id. These calculations were not adjusted for inflation and assume a constant wage gap overtime. Assumes a constant gap of $10,876 annually, calculated by subtracting women’s median earnings ($39,157) from that of men ($50,033).

9 NWLC calculations from CPS, 2014 ASEC, Table PINC-03: Educational Attainment—People 25 Years Old and Over, by Total Money Earnings in 2013, Work Experience in 2013, Age, Race, Hispanic Origin, and Sex, available at http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cps/tables/2014/03/perinc/toc.htm (last visited Sept. 30, 2014). This compares median earnings for men and women with some high school who did not graduate or receive a G.E.D., who are 25 and older, and who worked full time, year round. Men in this group had median earnings of $30,565 while women in this group had median earnings of $22,248 for a gap of $8,318 annually. This calculation assumes a constant gap and is not adjusted for inflation.

10 NWLC calculations based on U.S. Social Security Administration, Annual Statistical Supplement to the Social Security Bulletin, 2014 (Feb. 2014), Table 5.A16—Number and average monthly benefit for adult beneficiaries, by sex, type of benefit, and age, December 2013, available at http://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/supplement/2014/5a.html#table5.a16. The average monthly benefit for all female beneficiaries 65 and older was $1,122.20 or about $13,466 per year as of December 2013, compared to $1,466.49 per month, or $17,598 per year for all male beneficiaries 65 and older. Benefits are slightly higher for both women and men receiving benefits as retired workers.


13 Surpa note 2.

14 NWLC calculations from CPS, 2014 ASEC, Table POV-15: Families with related children under 18 by householder’s work experience and family structure, available at http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cps/tables/2014/03/pov/1014_005_100.htm (last visited Sept. 24, 2014). The term “single mothers” refers to female-headed families with children. Figure includes all individuals with work experience during the year, not just full-time, year-round workers.

15 Id. Federal poverty line used in these calculations refers to the Census Bureau’s federal poverty thresholds used to calculate poverty levels.


17 NWLC calculations from U.S. Census Bureau, America’s Families and Living Arrangements Survey: 2014, Table FG1: Married Couple Family Groups, by Family Income, and Labor Force Status of Both Spouses: 2014, available at http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/cps2014/fh1.html (last visited April 8, 2015). Family households are used in this figure to be consistent with the statistics on single mothers. Data are from the CPS, 2014 ASEC but are for the year 2013. No children means no own children under 18 present in the household. There may be older children who could possibly live with these children.

18 Id.

19 NWLC calculations from CPS, 2014 ASEC using CPS Table Creator, available at http://www.census.gov/cps/data/cpstablecreator.html (last visited Oct. 8, 2014). Figure is the ratio of median annual person earnings, compared to men regardless of marital status and number of related children under 18 living in the household. No children means no own children under 18 present in the household. There may be older children who could possibly live with these children.

20 Surpa note 19. Family groups are used in this figure and so these data are not directly comparable to the earlier statistics on single mothers. Data are from the CPS, 2014 ASEC but are for the year 2013. No children means no own children under 18 present in the household. There may be older children who could possibly live with these children.


23 Id.
26 Supra note 1 – Rent and Utilities. Median housing cost for owners was $929 per month in 2013.
28 Supra note 1 – Groceries.
31 Supra note 1 – Child Care.
32 Id. at Appendix 3.
34 Supra note 1 – Health Insurance Premiums.
36 Supra note 1 –Loan Payments.
37 Id.