

Career Builders

By Mary-Alane Wiltse

Do Women Choose to Earn Less than Men?

One of the issues I have worked on throughout my career has been promoting gender equity in education and employment. In 1999 I even received a New York State Education Department award for my efforts. However, based on new research released on April 23, 2007 by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) Educational Foundation, I think I should give the award back.

In the report, *Behind the Pay Gap*, the AAUW Educational Foundation found that just one year after college graduation, women earn only 80 percent of what men who graduated at the same time earn. Ten years after graduation, women are earning only 69 percent of what the men make. That figure is the same as it was over 20 years ago.

The study is based on the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study, a nationally representative data set of college graduates produced by the U.S. Department of Education.

Much of the pay gap between men and women can be attributed, not to blatant discrimination, but to the different choices men and women make regarding home and career. This report controlled for those factors including status of the college attended, college major, GPA, occupation, industry sector, hours worked, marital status and parenthood, to name just a few.

On April 24, AAUW's Director of Research, Catherine Hill, gave testimony before the United States Congress' House Committee on Education and Labor. She explained how some of these factors impact earnings.

Dr. Hill said, "Despite some gains, many majors remain strongly dominated by one gender. Female students are concentrated in majors that are associated with lower earnings, such as education, health, and psychology. Male students dominate the higher-paying majors: engineering, mathematics, physical sciences, and business. Both women and men who majored in "male-dominated" majors earn more than those who majored in "female-dominated" or "mixed-gender" majors."

Hill went on to state, "The choice of major is not the full story, however, as a pay gap between recently graduated women and men is found in nearly every field and in every occupation. Women full-time workers earn less than men full-time workers in nearly every major, although the size of the gap varies. In education, a female-dominated major and occupation, women earn 95 percent as much as their male colleagues earn. In biology, a mixed-gender field, women earn only 75 percent as much as men earn, just one year after graduation."

According to the Director, "The kinds of jobs that women and men accept also account for a portion of the gender pay gap. While the choice of major is related to occupation, the relationship is not strict. For example, some mathematics majors teach, while others work in business or computer science. It is important to bear in mind that such choices themselves can be constrained in part by biased assumptions regarding appropriate career paths for men and women. Other differences in type of jobs also affect earnings. For example, women are more likely than men to work in the nonprofit and public sectors, where wages are typically lower than in the for-profit sector."

When all of these factors are taken into account, after one year out of college, there is still a pay gap between men and women of approximately five percent. The AAUW report concludes that this is likely the result of workplace bias.

Unfortunately, the situation only gets worse as time goes on. Ten years after graduation, college-educated men working full time have more authority in the workplace than do the women that have also been working full time. The men are more likely to have been promoted to supervisory positions, including hiring and firing, setting pay rates and having other management related responsibilities. By ten years after graduation, there is a twelve percent difference in the earnings of male and female college graduates that is unexplained and attributable only to gender. Again, the AAUW's analysis controlled for the important "life choice" factors in reaching this conclusion.

"The persistence of the pay gap among young, college-educated, full-time workers suggests that educational achievement alone will not close the pay gap," Hill said. "We need to make workplaces more family-friendly, reduce sex segregation in education and in the workplace, and combat discrimination that continues to hold women back in the workplace."

In concluding her testimony before Congress, Catherine Hill, stated, "Collectively, women have demonstrated that they have the skills and the intelligence to do any job. Women have made enormous gains in education and labor force participation. Now it's time for our paychecks to catch up. "

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