Reports: Gender Pay Gap Persists

Forty-seven years have passed since President John F. Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act. But women's pay still isn't equal to men's, and the gender wage gap emerges as early as one year after college graduation, according to reports.

In 1963, women received 59 cents to every $1 paid to men. By 2009, the wage ratio had narrowed to 80.2% or to a gender wage gap of 19.8%, according to an analysis of U.S. median earnings data by the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

A separate analysis titled “Behind the Pay Gap,” by the AAUW (American Association of University Women) Educational Foundation, found that one year after graduation women made 80% of men’s earnings. By 10 years after graduation, the gap had widened to 69%.

So, why does the gender wage gap persist?

Researchers and academics think occupation segregation is part of the problem. Four out of 10 women work in lower-paying occupations where at least 75% of the workers are female, according to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research. Choice of college majors is another factor. AAUW found, for example, that women who majored in computer science made 37% more than those who majored in education, administrative, clerical, or legal support occupations.

Family responsibilities also affect women’s earnings. And implicit bias is still a problem despite many gains for women in society and the workplace. But less-obvious elements play a role, too.

“We don’t negotiate like men do,” says Barbara Allison, program director for Business Administration at South University — Montgomery. “That happens straight out of the gate, and it continues. That is a big, big factor. Gender alone is not enough to explain the gap — it’s not the deciding factor. It appears to be these other things like responsibilities that we have outside” of the workplace.

Whether children, elderly parents, spouses or housework occupy women’s so-called “second shift,” they don’t work as many hours (for pay, anyway) as men during their lifetimes. Employers’ perceptions of women’s competing responsibilities also can hold them back.

Some women also “self-select” themselves out of careers and promotions, says Allison, who has a doctorate in business administration from Louisiana Tech University and an MBA from the University of Alabama.

“Part of it is about working hours and the ability to work full time, and what it means to work full time,” says Ariane Hegewisch, a study director for the Institute for Women’s Policy Research. “Over the past 15 to 20 years, working hours in the higher professions have grown a lot. Mid-career lawyers, accountants, business people, and information technology specialists are often expected to work 60 hours a week.”

The demands put “real pressure” on professionals who want families, Hegewisch says. “Though some change is under way (family-friendly workplace policies, for example), I think women move into professions where it’s somewhat easier to manage those work/family issues.”

In academia as a whole, faculty appear to lose earning power by trying to balance family demands. Hegewisch described one analysis of a university system where faculty members were allowed to use their half- and full-year sabbaticals for parental leave. “When women or men took the leave for child-related reasons, afterwards they lagged behind in wage increases and promotion rates,” she says. “Something’s got to give.”

Meanwhile, AAUW and other advocacy groups are trying to interest girls and young women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics — STEM, for short.

Biology is the top science major for women, says Catherine Hill, AAUW’s director of research. Take biology out of the mix, and just 5% of women want to major in STEM fields, she says. But some STEM fields offer tinier wage gaps — 7% for computer programmers, for example.
More women are going to college than men, and they’re making strides in male-dominated fields like medicine and law, Hill says.

“We’ve got that part of the equation right,” she says. “What’s not happening is that women are not choosing fields that are the most lucrative. They’re emerging with the same debt as men but without the skills and experience to pay off that debt.”

The Institute for Women’s Policy Research found that even though one-third of doctors and surgeons are women, their pay is 64.2% of their male colleagues’ earnings.

Even when women earn the same college degrees and have the same years of experience, AAUW found that their earnings lagged men’s. Hill and her colleagues ran a number of regression analyses that held constant the variables affecting women’s earnings.

“When we control for all those factors, we found something else going on — a 12% gap that could not be explained by any of those factors that affect earnings,” she says. “Yes, part of the pay gap can be explained by these differences, by the choices women make. But a part of it can’t be explained. They’re still running into bias, the preconceptions, somebody’s unconscious bias.”

Are there any fields where women fare better than their male counterparts? According to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, those jobs are baker, food preparation worker, cafeteria assistant, and teacher assistant.

So, what to do? Hill, Hegewisch and Allison say more transparency about pay in the American workplace would be a start. That doesn’t mean everyone’s salary would be posted for all to see, but that the “metrics of what a person can anticipate” is available, Allison says. Then women must be willing to negotiate for better wages.

The proposed Paycheck Fairness Act, which has passed the U.S. House but not the Senate, also offers hope to women’s advocacy groups. In a June 10 press release on the anniversary of the Equal Pay Act of 1963, President Barack Obama called on the Senate to follow the House’s lead and pass the legislation. The act, he says, would ease pay discrimination by “closing loopholes, providing incentives for compliance, and barring certain types of retaliation against workers by employers.”