It is time to stop accepting the gender wage disparity. Equal Pay Day, which marks the average number of extra days that women must work to earn what men had earned the year before, was March 15, 2022. When comparing wages to White, non-Hispanic men, the Equal Pay Day was May 9 for Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander women, but it is even later for others: September 21 for Black women, November 30 for Native women, and December 8 for Latina women.1

Globally, women make 77 cents for every dollar men earn, and it would take until 2069, at the current rate, to gain equal pay.2 In 2020, US women who worked for full-time wage and salary earned 82% of male full-time wage and salary workers’ pay.3 While slow gains were made in the 1980s and 1990s, little progress has occurred since 2004, when women first earned 80% compared to men.3

Longitudinal data analysis reveals equivalent work is devalued for women. Levananon and colleagues examined this gap using 1950-2000 census data and found substantial evidence for decreased pay due to devaluing of the work when done by women.4 Devaluation can occur when jobs require similar education, responsibilities, or skills but are differentiated by predominant gender, with men paid more than women (ie, janitor vs maids and housecleaners, or information technology managers vs human resource managers). This supports discrimination that happens from the employer who assigns lower value, and therefore wages, for occupations with high participation by females.

More recently, gender pay gaps have been found in optometry,5 anesthesiology,6 vascular surgery,7 and public health,8 among others. The feminization of the health workforce, which is occurring in countries of all income levels and in both clinical and allied health professions, is associated with a wage gap for women of 26% to 36% less than men.9 Decreasing wage conditions were also found in lower and upper-middle income countries.9

An excellent overview of the many variables that affect gender pay gaps, including education, property rights, and household decisions, can be found in the data-rich article by Ortiz-Opina and Roser.10 We encourage these economic gains for women in all countries, but we also demand equity. We are overrepresented at the lower wage jobs and greatly underrepresented in top income groups. At the top income levels, the gender equity gap remains. What explains this continued gap?

First, we can gain insight from the wage gap in Denmark, a country noted for its progressive social policies for both maternity and family leave, child and elder care support, and funding for university education. These policies address the flexibility needed for people to balance work and home. Yet, Gallen and colleagues have found in their examination of the Denmark labor market over the past 30 years that having children affects men and women differently in the labor market.11 Men, who have had children, have higher wages and higher earnings, and the opposite holds for women. This impact for women was roughly equal in a decline in labor force participation, decline in work hours, and decline in wages.

An interesting study by Keller of gender pay differences among top business executives did find that temporal flexibility and a female-friendly corporate culture results in better hiring and retention of female executives.12 However, it was the corporate culture that explained the gender pay gap. This is due to the higher non-salary compensation that men receive, such as bonuses, stocks, options, and other compensation.12 This discretionary compensation is influenced by personal connections and insider relationships, an insider network shared by male workers.12 In female-friendly firms—those that promote gender and racial diversity compensation—the gender pay gap disappears.12

What must be done? We must pay attention to gender pay equity; without continued effort women’s pay will stagnate. Supporting education and entry into any profession is necessary but not enough to reach gender wage equity.1,2,9 Changing our social culture to expect flexible working conditions that balance home and work is appreciated by all workers, but especially women.12,13 Importantly, we must be skilled in discussing and negotiating our salary and compensation throughout our careers.7,12 Lastly, creating a work environment that supports diversity results in worker satisfaction and wage equity.12 We have waited long enough, now we must act.

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REFERENCES


