

# **The Gender Wage Gap in the US: Reasons Behind this Injustice and How to Stop the Theft of Women's Hard-Earned Livelihoods**

## **Introduction**

In 1998, Lilly Ledbetter, a hardworking mother, received an anonymous note stating that she was paid \$500 to \$1,500 less than 3 of her male co-workers who were either of same or less seniority as her every month. Seeing this, Lilly knew that she had to make things right. This wasn't just a fight for her pay, but a fight for the equality of all women. This journey would take Lilly on a decade of hardship, frustration, and eventually victory when the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act was signed by President Barack Obama on January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009 (National Archives and Records Administration). This is just one example of how a woman was treated unfairly just because she was a female. Lilly Ledbetter did get her due justice, but millions of women in the US don't; most don't even realize what is happening to them. The wage gap has been a problem in the US for decades. Although the Equal Pay Act was signed 58 years ago, wage discrimination is still present all over the nation to this day. On average, in America, women make about 80 cents for every dollar earned of their male counterpart, or about 80% (Safronova). This gap has been present in our nation, ever since women started to enter the workforce. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem as if the gap has plans on closing anytime soon. At the rate we are going now, it will take the US until 2059 to reach parity, and that is best-case scenario. In the following four states, North Dakota, Utah, Louisiana, and Wyoming, the gap isn't expected to close until the 22<sup>nd</sup> century (Women in the States). The best way to close off the gender wage gap in the US is by teaching girls to lead, giving mothers more flexible work schedules and cheap child care, having companies disclosing annual pay statistics publicly, banning employers from forcing salary history out of a candidate, and educating on how to negotiate better and more often.

## **Why Does the Wage Gap Exist?**

In 1963, the year the Equal Pay Act was signed into law by President John F. Kennedy, a woman would have made 59 cents for every dollar a man made. That is about 21 cents less than what they make today. The New York Times reports that in the mid-1990s, women were making about 75% of what men were making at the time. If you crunch the numbers, you will find that between 1963 and 1995, we had made progress, and lots of it. The gap had improved by more than 16 cents. But between then and now, the gap has only shrunk by about 5 cents. What happened? The answer to this question is a difficult one. According to data reported by the Labor Department in 2005, the number of college-educated mothers staying at home with children had phenomenally increased, and so had the number of women going into higher, usually male dominated, positions. Several studies also cite the economic boom which lasted from the 80s into the 90s (Leonhardt). The slowdown of the narrowing of the wage gap may be a reason it still exists today. If not for the pullback on women streaming into higher paying, traditionally male dominated, professions, the wage gap would be much smaller today.

The wage gap affects most women in almost every single job in the US, especially in the highest paying ones. Back in 2014, women in the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile of highest paying jobs were

making about 79 cents for every dollar a man made, while in the lowest 10<sup>th</sup> percentile, women were making 91 cents for every dollar a man made. The main reason is corporate norms often dictate the policies of companies, resulting in women getting paid less when they work in jobs with higher wages, while minimum wage rules really apply to everyone in lower wage jobs, which results in pretty comparative results. Another reason for the drastic change may be that the higher up the job ladder you go, the more male dominated professions there are (New York Times Editorial). Male domination in certain professions is a huge part of why this large gap between the sexes remains. One of the most male dominated professions, airline piloting, is a good example. It is the profession with one of the largest pay gaps between males and females, and this is largely because it is so male dominated. Females only make up about 7% certified pilots, which makes it quite easy to stereotype against them. In 2019, male pilots were found to make 26.6% more than female pilots, making aviation the career with the largest pay gap of 2019 (Anderson). Male domination in profession is having a huge impact on how large the gender pay gap is and will continue to be.

Another reason for the huge disparity is what many social scientists call the motherhood penalty. The motherhood penalty is a discriminatory assumption believing mothers are not as reliable or hardworking because they have children. This results in mothers getting paid less because they are stereotyped into the category of untrustworthy as they may need to rush out at any moment or quit their job without much notice. While it is true that women who have children may need to take time off work frequently for several reasons, many employers only make these assumptions for mothers and not fathers. The opposite phenomenon to the motherhood penalty is in fact the fatherhood bonus. Instead of expecting the same thing from fathers, the average employer will instead do the opposite of paying men with children less, and instead give them more money because of the old belief that men with children will work harder and put in more hours at work as they need to provide for their family. These hypocritical, although sometimes unconscious, beliefs are what lead to females with children losing income and fathers making more. On average, for every child a female has, her income goes down by 4% while her husband's income increases by 6% overall. This happening also pushes down women's average pay for men as it accounts for a large portion of the gap (Miller).

Unconscious discrimination also plays a huge role in the gap. Although there are still people who will discriminate on purpose because they have a bias, it is much less common now days as people are more educated on this issue. Oftentimes, employers will pay women less without realizing it. This is quite common in more male dominated professions like financing or law. It may not only happen with salary; it can also happen with things like promotions or bonuses. Crazy enough, women are thought of as less hardworking, frailer, and unable to perform as high-quality work as men very frequently. A large part of the gap is because of these unconscious biases.

In 27 states and one territory, at least in some city or municipality, it is illegal for employers to ask their candidate about their salary history while interviewing them (Paycor). Why? This is for a variety of reasons. First off, there is no need to ask about how much someone got paid at their last job. Everything on a candidate's résumé is enough for an employer to find a

reasonable amount to pay someone for a job they are doing. On a résumé, you have everything from a person's level of education, to where they have worked, even how long they have stayed at a job. This is satisfactory enough to decide what an employee's wage should be. Another reason it is illegal in so many places is because women are much more likely to have worked in a job which pays a lower salary such as a non-profit. Women also may have taken time off work to take care of children, which may have had an impact on their pay (Miller).

Negotiation is a key part of having a job, especially when it comes to someone's pay. It is quite misunderstood, though, especially when it comes from a woman. Often, when a man is negotiating with his employer, he is seen as skillful, smart, and cunning while a woman looks angry, impatient, and ungrateful while doing the same. The assumption stems from the old-fashioned belief limiting girls to be timid and do whatever they are told to do. Basically, they should not ask for more than they are given. Females tend to shy away from negotiating, because they will be liked less or it will appear unladylike. Even when females do choose to negotiate on the topic of their pay, they ask for about 30% less than their male counterpart. On average, women make anywhere from 750,000 to 2 million dollars less (depending on what the job is) because of this obstacle (Miller).

### **Steps I Will Take to Combat Each of These Factors**

The first step in my plan for reaching parity between men and women is to teach young girls how to be a leader. With the right number of resources, I would create several groups of people to go around the country and inspire young girls to lead. Positions such as CEOs and board members have a lack of women; these positions make some of the highest amounts of money out of all careers. You can become a leader for any profession, whether it is as a president of a technology company or the director of an art museum. If these groups teach girls how to lead, and they hear stories of how one woman beat all the odds and made her way to the top, they will be inspired too. These groups will push girls to aim higher and understand the right tactics of how to create your own path.

Another tier to my plan would be to combat the motherhood penalty in two ways. The first of these is to require employers to give mothers more flexible schedules. It has been proven that when schedules are more flexible, as in tech jobs where employees may cover for one another, the pay gap shrinks between childless women and mothers, which pushes women's overall pay towards their male counterpart (Miller). Another solution I propose is for the government to offer cheap, maybe even free, childcare for working moms who make less than \$100,000 a year. Child care is insanely expensive in the US, about \$215 a week on average for daycare services. This would mean that to have one child in a child care service program, families would need to pay \$11,180 a year. The US Department of Health and Human Services has calculated that families would need to earn at least \$175,000, if not more, to sustain two children in a program that is, or similar to, a daycare. According to the US Census Bureau, in 2018, the average income of a US household was only \$61,937, so the government program I am proposing would be a huge help to many working mothers. It would also help employers feel

more confident about the reliability of mothers with children, as their employee's child would be taken care of, and they wouldn't have as much need to take time off or quit their job without notice.

A third layer to my idea is to stop unconscious bias through showing companies how large their own gap is. The biggest culprit behind the persistence of unconscious bias towards the pay gap between male and females in a work place is that employers do not notice how significantly a women's pay differs from a man's pay. The best solution is to publish pay publicly (Miller). Publishing the pay of male and female employees in a work place would show employers and business owners with these unconscious biases the statistics of this gap and would also push them to present solutions to the problem. And if they decide not to do anything about the problem, the pay would be available to everyone, so activist groups and potentially the government could step in if needed. Congress should decide to create a law that requires all companies to report annual statistics of pay publicly. There is no reason not to, especially if you don't have anything to hide. It is true that it may take slightly more work, but all of it contributes to solving a huge problem; stealing from the livelihoods of so many hardworking females.

The next major step in my plan for closing the gender pay gap is outlawing employers being able to ask questions about a candidate's salary history. Illegalizing this would make it so managers and owners cannot base pay on previous wages, since females are more likely to work in lower paying jobs (Miller). In order to really make sure that we are doing our best to ban salary history questions, I would take the following steps. Lobby the government to make a federal law which cannot be revoked during the change of administrations banning employers to demand salary history; spread the word about companies who are not following these regulations; and finally make sure we are electing the right officials as members of congress and the senate to make sure they keep their word to do what the public wants them to do.

A continuation of my action plan is to put together groups of people who teach younger girls to negotiate smarter and harder all over the country. The new generation is the future of this country, and if we don't know how to make deals and negotiate with their employers, disparity will remain. Groups will also host sessions for currently employed girls, to share their work experiences and figure out the best tips and tricks to raise their pay. Being constantly surrounded by women who push for more, and being taught by these same people will show the girls attending these sessions they can absolutely achieve what they want to achieve, and they don't need to be limited to the norms of trying to be "proper" and "acting like a lady".

The final, and definitely the most important step, of my proposition is to inspire young people, not even just girls, to take action. The best way to do this would be to educate kids in grades 3-12 on how important it is to stop the pay gap, and just discrimination against females overall. Women play just as much of an important role in society as men do, making up 50.4% of the workforce according to time.com. At this early age, studies have proven it is easiest to shape the brain of people and inspire them to work towards a cause. Imagine the difference we could make if all of the new generation wants to solve the pay gap. Education about the topic is the most effective way to get through to the minds of young people.

## Conclusion

Though the gender pay gap has cost billions of dollars' worth of livelihoods for women, there is hope for the future. I believe that if everything in my 6-step plan were to be done well, the pay gap would close faster than it will on its own. I cannot stress this enough; it is extremely important to keep working to fight this injustice every day and make sure women get what they deserve! Not doing anything is not an option.

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