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Monday, May 30, 2005

Making Some Progress

Gender wage gap still prevails; however, the void has started to close the past few decades

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Women have made considerable strides in the workplace in recent decades, but the paychecks they receive continue to be less than those of their male counterparts.

In 2003, the median weekly income for full-time working women was \$552 compared with \$695 for men, according to a report issued late last year by the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics. That translates to a ratio of 80 percent. The ratio was 78 percent in 2002.

As a group, the report shows women are still paid less on average in almost all occupational categories. For example, in the management and professional classification women earned \$758 per week compared with \$1,059 for men -- a ratio of less than 72 percent. And in sales and office jobs, women earned \$502 compared with \$658 for men -- a ratio of less than 77 percent.

So how can women effectively deal with the disparity?

Linda Burrs, president of Dayton-based Step Up To Success!, which specializes in organization and leadership strategy and business and executive coaching, said women need to come together over the issue.

"Part of the problem is the secrecy surrounding salaries," Burrs said. "Unfair policies have to be exposed, and women are going to have to work together and support each other in the quest to achieve equal pay. The louder the voice, the more people will start paying attention."

Besides calling attention to inequities, women can help alleviate the long-term problem by mentoring young girls and teaching them how to negotiate at an early age, according to Burrs.

Women can help their own situations by attending workshops on salary negotiations and asking high-profile men to mentor them, which Burrs said can lead to breaking down the stereotype surrounding women who are assertive.

"Part of devaluing women is seeing them as negative when they behave like that, whereas men are seen as breadwinners when they do it," she said. "In order to create some positive energy around the gender wage gap, I think women have to be involved and men have to be involved too."

Although there are some minor factors that contribute to the gender wage gap -- things such as women still catching up with men in areas like experience, skills and education -- it's simple discrimination in terms of hiring, promotions and pay that is probably the largest factor, said Amy Caiazza, study director of democracy and society programs for the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

Her main advice for women to improve their salaries is to get more education, skills and experience while paying attention to where they are on the pay scale in their organization.

"Try to find out, if you can, what other people in your type of job make," Caiazza said. "Unfortunately, companies are not required in most states to disclose this information, and some will not, but it can be worth a try."

And if you still can't close the gap, it may be time for a change.

"If you can, look for another job at a place with more fairness, including companies that pride themselves in advancing women and/or building diversity," Caiazza said.

Experts agree the problem of pay inequities for women won't disappear anytime soon, but that doesn't mean you have to be miserable if you are making less than what you should.

Burrs suggests networking with positive people and keeping a log of your successes. The log not only will be good for your morale, it will show what you have to bring to the table when asking for more money.

"Women have to know what their value is," Burrs said. "Keep a track record of your successes so that when you do bring up the issue (of a higher salary), you're not basing it on anything but your value and your merit."

Women have fared better than men when it comes to earnings growth, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics report. Earnings of women with a college degree have increased 34 percent since 1979, when adjusted for inflation, while earnings for their male counterparts rose just 22 percent.

And while both men and women with less than a high school diploma saw their inflation-adjusted earnings decline during the same period, the drop for women was significantly less than men -- 8 percent compared with 28 percent.

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