

A Socialist Feminist Analysis of the Gender Pay Gap



The question of pay equity, obscured by Mitt Romney’s “binders of women” remark in the presidential candidates’ debate, remains critical to American families—two-parent and female-headed households alike. According to the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR) analysis of the gender wage gap by occupation, despite progress since the 1970s, the median wage for women employed full time in 2010 was only 81% male full time worker, a gap of 19%. Not surprisingly, for Latinas, it’s 59.8% of the average white male’s pay, and for African American women, 69.6%. (The gap is considerably smaller *within* these groups.)

The gender pay gap exists at all levels. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010 data, women earn more than men in only 4 of the 111 occupations for which there is enough data to calculate gender pay comparisons. And these include jobs that keep you barely above the poverty line. Women on average earn less than men in the 10 occupations in which women are most commonly found. They also earn less than men in the ten occupations that pay the most and the ten that pay the least.

Liberal feminists have claimed that gender discrimination is irrational. Socialist feminists respond that, like racial and ethnic discrimination, it’s entirely rational. It generates larger profits by way of super-exploitation. It reinforces divisions among workers. And, the policies and gender norms that contribute to the gender pay gap also privatize, on the backs primarily of women, care of nonworkers (children, the elderly, the disabled or ill).

What are the causes of the gender pay gap? Is it inevitable? A glance at other countries shows us that no, the gap is not inevitable. The 2009 pay gap comparison of 26 developed economies by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) places the OECD-26 average at about 16 percentage points. (That is, the average female earns about 84% compared to the average male.) Korea is worst, at about 38%; the U.S. is at about 19% (larger than the OECD average) and Hungary is best at 4%.

Neoliberals claim that the cause of the gender pay gap is not discrimination but rather women’s choices. Christina Hoff Sommers so argued in 2010 in the *New York Times*. Her evidence? A study published by the Department of Labor, conducted by CONSAD Research Corporation, that concluded, “The differences in raw wages may be almost entirely the result of the individual choices being made by both male and female workers.” Sounds devastating—except that this was the Bush Department of Labor contracting with CONSAD, whose other clients include conservative Christian James Dobson’s Family Research Council, the Business Roundtable, and the Global Climate Coalition, which opposes legislation to limit greenhouse gases. Perhaps we should explore a bit further.

The causes are multiple and complex.

IWPR finds that actual discrimination in hiring, pay, and promotion exists, despite being illegal. Legal avenues are being foreclosed as the judicial system, from the Supreme Court down, makes it harder to file and win class-action suits.

A second factor is the gender segregation of the labor force. Forty one per cent of women work in female-dominated occupations, compared with 49% of men working in male-dominated occupations. (“Dominated” here means at least 75% of workers are female or male, respectively.) “Pink collar” jobs, in the past and now, tend to pay less than traditional male jobs; hence, opening “male” jobs to women is one strategy for lessening the pay gap.

Third, the neoliberal explanation of “choice” begs the question of how/why people make choices. For example, entrance into more lucrative fields of math, science, and engineering requires math skills. Girls, even girls in school systems that have good math teachers, often are turned off to math (by peer pressure, by teachers with sexist assumptions, by parents with conservative gender values).

Fourth, women often “choose” to have children or care for elderly parents. When women drop out of the labor force to bearing and raise children, they typically suffer consequences in terms of career progression and retirement/Social Security benefits, not just a few years’ earnings. Whether it results from hormonal or biological predispositions or internalized gender norms, this “choice” is made in the absence of publicly funded social supports for family. The impact of our privatization of care falls disproportionately on women.

Enforcing laws against sex discrimination is not enough to dismantle to gender pay gap. Until all workers earn a living wage and the U.S. adopts policies and gender expectations that enable women *and men* to care for families (publicly funded health care, paid family leave for men and women, flexible work schedules, child care, elder care), the pay gap will continue.

Returning to the OECD statistics, it is not by accident that Norway’s gap is about 8% compared to the U.S.’s 19%. While it has not eliminated gender inequity, Norway promotes social democratic policies that the U.S. should emulate—substantial paid maternity and paternity leave being just the start.

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