

**Commentary-Equal pay is about more than fairness**  
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**By Sally Babcock Guest Columnist**

Earlier this week marked the national observance of Equal Pay Day. Because, on average, full-time working women in the United States earn 77 cents for every dollar a male earns, a working woman must work until mid-April before her earnings equal what an equivalent working man earned last year.

Here in Montana it is even worse. The median income for a woman is only 71.5 percent of a man's, pushing the catch-up date into mid-May. A Montana woman working full time at median wage is shortchanged \$11,369 per year and hundreds of thousands of dollars over a lifetime.

Though most young women may not expect to face sex discrimination in their careers, the wage gap is very real and stubbornly persistent. It works in two ways.

First, in occupations where women tend to work, wages are lower. Comparing traditionally male and female occupations with equal levels of skill, effort and responsibility, one finds that "women's work" like education and health care is still undervalued compared to male-dominated areas like computer programmers. In fact, the same exact job elicits lower pay expectations when performed within a traditionally female occupational setting.

Second, women earn less than men within almost every occupation - they are paid less for the same job. Many reasons have been suggested, including: male-female differences in human capital like education and work experience; work patterns like hours, tenure and flexibility; job choice such as the occupation, industry and location; personal characteristics like marital and parental status; a time allocation related to childcare, eldercare, or maternity leave. But controlling for all of these factors explains little of the gap, leaving a wage gap of 81 to 88 cents. Women simply earn less.

Paying workers equitably is not just a matter of fairness; it is also a matter of economic success for businesses and economic security for families. Women are now half the workforce. Meritocracy in pay is fundamental to attracting the best talent to a business, to driving productivity and innovation, and to a strong economy.

Women are also now breadwinners for 67 percent of Montana families, and the primary breadwinners in 40 percent of families - \$11,369 in lost income has a significant impact on the family budget. In one year it would cover 18 months of average rent; nine months of mortgage and utilities; 18 months' food bills for a family of three. In just two years it could add up to a down payment on a home. If invested each year over her career, it would produce retirement savings of almost \$1.5 million - the nest egg that most Montana families lack.

Legislation at both the state and federal level could promote progress in this area. Unfortunately, the federal Paycheck Fairness Act was blocked in the national Senate in 2010 and pay equity legislation introduced by Rep. Franke Wilmer in Helena this year was tabled in committee.

We must also encourage businesses to remain mindful of what they pay their employees. And we must give women the knowledge, tools and courage to achieve pay equity at work by continuing to step into male-dominated occupations, negotiating better pay and advancement, and advocating for awareness and improvements.

The wage gap for Montana women should concern us all - it hurts women, families and the economy. Those who wish to reduce safety net programs like WIC, food stamps, Medicaid and Medicare should appreciate the importance of fair wages in allowing hard-working Montanans to support themselves. Those who care about the economic security of families must appreciate that the wage gap not only causes short-term hardship for family budgets but also compounds into long-term asset poverty for women and families. Those who care about the strength of our economy must surely support fair, merit-based pay for high-quality workers, regardless of their gender. Turn a fresh eye to your own place of employment and work for pay equity in Montana.

Sally Babcock serves as the legislative chairperson for Bozeman Business and Professional Women.

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