



## Equal Pay Day: Surprising gender pay gap opinions held by women

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Some regard this Tuesday, April 4, as Equal Pay Day, or "how far into the year women must work to earn what men earned in the previous year." And yet even though most women are convinced that *other* women are getting paid less than men for doing the same work, new polling data show that most women also believe their *own* employers treat men and women equally.

In other words, many women have come to believe the myth, touted by celebrities and politicians, that other women actually make 79 cents for every dollar a man makes for doing the *same work*. However, most don't believe that it impacts them at their own jobs.

A Pew Research Center survey found that 62 percent of women believe that women "generally" get paid less than men for doing the same work. However, when asked about their *own* companies, far fewer — just 14 percent total — believe women are getting paid less than men where they work, and 17 percent say women have fewer opportunities for promotions where they work.

These are nearly 50-point shifts in perception from what women believe is generally happening in society at-large, and what they collectively report is happening based on their experiences in their own jobs.

This in no way discounts the negative experiences women have had, and we should not shy from denouncing inequitable treatment. Yet these data also reveal that although most women believe they are being treated fairly, they also believe that most other women aren't.

Empirical research finds that gender discrimination is not largely impacting wages. Although Census data show that women make less money on average than men, this fails to consider any information about how women and men choose to pursue a work/life balance, whether they enter a career that requires 80-hour work weeks or 40-hour work weeks, whether they take time out of the workforce to raise children, how much education they attain, whether they go into careers like investment banking or education, surgery or nursing, etc.

Studies that take these other factors into account find that the gender pay gap narrows to about 95 cents on the dollar. The remaining 5 cent difference might be due to discrimination, or it might be due to differences in salary negotiations, or other reasons. Harvard economist Claudia Goldin writes, "The gender gap in pay would be considerably reduced and might even

vanish if firms did not have an incentive to disproportionately reward individuals who worked long hours and who worked particular hours."

Aside from the empirical research, the Pew survey probed Americans to find out what they think might explain differences in wages between men and women. The most common "major reason," selected by 60 percent of women, was "different choices about how to balance work and family." Discrimination followed, with 54 percent of women labeling it a major reason for pay differences. Less than half of female respondents attributed it to women working fewer hours or in different occupations than men.

Thus, some explanations for the gender pay gap are more believable than others. Women may find it insulting when told that the pay gap derives in part from differences in hours worked—since it may sound like accusing women of being lazy. However, most find it believable that different choices women and men make about work/life balance drive wages apart.

So is there any harm in fostering the widespread belief that gender discrimination in pay and opportunity is the rule, rather than the exception? Allowing women to believe that a large part of their success is beyond their control, or that they are systemically undervalued, could harm them by undermining initiative, hope, risk-taking, and accountability.

Convincing women of widespread, overwhelming injustice against them isn't helping. Instead, it risks holding women back by causing the very injury that equal rights advocates fight against.

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