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Male-Female Pay Gap Hasn't Moved Much in Years

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Women earned 76.5 cents for every dollar that men did last year, moving no closer to narrowing a gender pay gap that has barely budged in almost a decade.

Male full-time workers notched median annual earnings of \$49,398 in 2012, compared with \$37,791 for female workers, according to a Census Bureau report Tuesday. In 2011, women earned 77 cents for every \$1 men earned.

The wage gap narrowed steadily through the 1980s and 1990s but the convergence slowed in the early 2000s. That may signal that two factors credited with advancing gender pay parity — education and legislation — lost some of their firepower.

“Women’s increasing education is certainly a plus, but it’s not enough to totally change these trends,” said Francine Blau, an economics professor at Cornell University. “The really golden period was the 1980s, when the wage gap was consistently narrowing. Since then, progress has continued, but it has been more fitful and uneven.”

In 1980, women earned 60.2 cents for every \$1 men did; by 1990, that had climbed to 71.6 cents. During that time, women were pursuing more education, breaking into higher-paying occupations and racking up more hours on the job. They also were benefiting from the 1963 Equal Pay Act, as well as measures granting equal access to education and prohibiting sex discrimination.

The most recent data reflect that younger workers are making inroads. In 2012, women between 15 and 24 years old earned 88 cents for every dollar that men did; the amount fell to 81 cents for women ages 25 to 44, and 74 cents for women ages 45 to 64.

Although women now outnumber men in U.S. colleges, economists cite a number of reasons why pay differences persist. Among them is time, with women on average working fewer hours than men, often to care for children or other family members.

Analysts caution that the annual earnings comparison is a crude measure of a complex reality. The raw wage-gap figure doesn't reflect meaningful nuances such as whether women negotiate their pay as much as men do, which can influence earnings over an entire career. The pay comparison also fails to capture intangibles such as health-care benefits as well as some women's choices to forgo salary in favor of fulfilling work and more flexible schedules.

The pay gap persists in part because men are more likely to pursue college majors and advanced degrees in fields that lead to higher-paying careers.

"Women are getting graduate degrees, but not necessarily in fields that give the best salaries," said Sarah Jane Glynn, associate director of women's economic policy at the Center for American Progress, a liberal group in Washington.

Discrimination remains a factor, albeit one that is difficult to document and measure. Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, a libertarian think tank, said, "There's no doubt that some level of residual discrimination exists out there."

Meridith Pushnik, a 30-year-old web designer, said she experienced such discrimination early in her career. In 2007, Ms. Pushnik and a male friend with similar education and experience both landed jobs designing web sites and creating software applications for a Denver firm. Four years later, she learned from the colleague that he earned \$20,000 more a year than she did.

Ms. Pushnik didn't bring up the matter with her manager because company guidelines prohibited employees from discussing wages among themselves. She left in December and in March joined EffectiveUI, Inc., another Denver technology firm.

At EffectiveUI, "when we discussed pay, I got offered a really fair wage, reflective of how anyone with my experience, male or female, should be paid," Ms. Pushnik said.

Studies show that her experience isn't isolated. Research published last year by the American Association of University Women found a pay gap emerging one year after college. A year after graduating with engineering degrees from similarly competitive institutions, men were earning annual salaries of \$55,142 and women \$48,493. That translates into women earning 88 cents for every \$1 men did.