

Pay gap closes for some young women

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FULL TEXT

Younger women have closed the pay gap or are outpacing their male counterparts in nearly two dozen U.S. metropolitan areas, according to research published Monday, as gains in higher education and more transparency about what people earn help defy entrenched disparities.

According to a Pew Research Center analysis of Census Bureau data, women younger than 30, on average, earn at least as much or more than men in D.C., New York, Los Angeles and 19 other major metro areas, places where strong job markets attract educated young people looking to build careers. Nationwide, women 30 and younger earn 93 cents for every dollar made by a comparable man.

But when you include all women who works full time and year-round, that number drops to 82 cents, according to the research, which tracked data from 2015 to 2019. That marks a small but steady improvement from a decade earlier, when women were making 77 cents to the dollar.

The findings show that while the gender pay gap is narrowing for young women, common life events such as child-rearing that occur as they age present persistent obstacles to wage growth, said Richard Fry, a senior researcher at Pew who conducted the study.

"This is consistent with a finding that labor economists have well documented - that women suffer a penalty when they become a mom," he said.

Men and women start more or less on an even footing but wage disparities widen over time, according to economists who study gender compensation. Small pay differentials are magnified as raises and promotions stack up over years and decades.

"The older a woman is, the more time she has had to have been passed up for a promotion, to have gotten a slighter smaller raise compared to an equivalent male colleague, or to have made a career sacrifice for her family," said Betsey Stevenson, a professor of public policy and economics at the University of Michigan.

Women are less likely to be mentored at work and less likely to receive management training, says Alexandra Kalev, a professor of anthropology at Tel Aviv University. They also are more likely to be routed to less-valued jobs even when they have sought-after technical skills. And maternity leave can derail them into a "mommy track" with fewer opportunities for promotion, even at companies with generous leave policies.

"In short, because companies' career systems are such that they offer more opportunities to men, men get more opportunities to advance and to keep their jobs longer - and this translates to growing pay gaps as the years pass," Kalev said.

Pew's recent findings, experts say, line up with other research examining women's earnings at different ages. A 2014 study by Harvard University's Claudia Goldin concluded that the pay gap between men and women has narrowed significantly in terms of work hours and earnings, especially for young women.

Experts say the salary gains by young women appear to be driven by a mix of education and awareness. Pay equity laws have pressured employers to justify their decisions with respect to compensation, making it easier for women to bargain for more.

Gains in higher education also appear to be making a difference, especially in urban areas. Women have long performed better when it comes to college admissions and graduation, and the difference is more apparent in big

cities than small towns.

Before motherhood, Fry said, employers are recognizing women's education, expertise and experience increasingly more than that of their male colleagues. As young women outpace men in college education, their wages rise respectively, and they remain in the workforce during times of economic volatility.

Fry tracked workforce participation among men and women with and without college degrees. When the coronavirus pandemic took hold in the United States in early 2020, women without degrees left the workforce at significantly higher rates than their male equivalents. But among college grads, workforce participation rates remained mostly the same regardless of gender.

"College education, as a general statement, it tends to pay," Fry said.

The persistent 6.9 percent gender pay difference for workers younger than 30, he said, can in many cases be attributed to the types of jobs men and women typically hold. Men are more highly concentrated in heavy industry or technology, sectors with frequently competitive wages. Industries such as health care, education and hospitality, which often pay less, have higher concentrations of women.

Gloria Blackwell, chief executive of the American Association of University Women, urged caution when interpreting the data released by Pew. "Those cities are the exception and not the rule," she said, noting that a significant gender pay gap still exists for most women across the country.

To her point, several large cities across the Midwest feature stark pay disparities. In Dayton, Ohio, the average woman's salary is about 80 percent of the average man's, Pew found.

In El Paso, it's roughly 87 percent. And in Baton Rouge, men make roughly 25 percent more; a woman working full-time there earns \$26,978 on average, compared with \$36,190 for men.

Still, the Pew data suggests younger women "are becoming more aware of their own value in the marketplace," Blackwell says.

"When we're talking about major cities, they tend to be places where women with higher education levels, and possibly higher professional ambitions, want to be," Blackwell said.

The Pew research signals progress, said Debra Lancaster, executive director of the Center for Women and Work at Rutgers University. But it also reinforces how life events affect women's careers more than men's.

"You want to be paid what you're worth and a fair wage in the industry that you're in. I think there's some encouraging news in here that men and women are finally in many places starting out their careers with the same wages," Lancaster said. "But I don't know if that would even impress my nieces; I think they expect that."

DETAILS

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