PAY GAP STEADY WITH WOMEN EARNING 20 PERCENT LESS THAN MEN IN 2008

The pay gap between women and men who work full time holds roughly steady in 2008 at 20 percent, about the same as the prior year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Among 106.7 million full-time wage and salary workers, women had median usual weekly earnings of $638 on average last year, or 80 percent of the $798 per week usually earned by men.

The gender pay difference did not widen significantly in 2008, although men's median usual weekly earnings increased slightly more than those of women from the previous year (4.2 percent versus 3.9 percent). Among workers who were paid by the hour, both full-time and part-time, the pay gap was narrower. Women had median earnings of $11.49 per hour on average in 2008, or 85 percent of the $13.46 per hour earned by men.

Similarly, among workers who were union-represented, women who worked full time earned a median of $800 per week on average in 2008, or 85 percent of the $937 per week earned by their male counterparts.

The ratio of women's earnings to those of men was about the same for all educational attainment groups, ranging from 73 percent for those with a high school degree but no college to 76 percent for those without a high school degree. On the other hand, median usual weekly earnings were significantly higher for women with college degrees who worked full time than for men with only a high school degree ($955 versus $709), while women with less than a high school education earned the least ($378).

Among racial and ethnic groups, the female-to-male earnings ratio was higher for black and Hispanic women age 16 and older who worked full time (89 percent and 90 percent, respectively) than for Asian and white women (78 percent and 79 percent, respectively). On the other hand, Asian and white women had higher median usual weekly earnings ($753 and $654, respectively), than their black and Hispanic counterparts ($554 and $501, respectively).

The pay gap tends to increase with age. Among 16-to-24-year-old full-time workers, women earned 91 percent as much as their male counterparts, while the ratio declined to 89 percent among workers ages 25 to 34 and dropped to around 75 percent for those age 35 and older. Earnings were higher, however, for older women workers, with those ages 35 to 64 earning more than $900 per week, while usual median weekly earnings were lower for those ages 25 to 34 ($704) and ages 16 to 24 ($461).

During the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, the gender pay gap among all full-time workers gradually narrowed, as women's earnings rose faster than men's. The ratio of women's pay to that of men rose from 62.5 percent in 1979 to a high of 81 percent in 2005 and 2006. Over the past three decades, women workers generally have fared better than their male counterparts at all levels of education. Among workers ages 25 and older, inflation-adjusted earnings of those with less than a high school diploma have fallen since 1979, but the drop was significantly less for women than for men (10 percent versus 29 percent). Similarly, earnings growth for workers with college degrees has been higher for women than men (31 percent versus 18 percent).

In general, the growth in women's earnings over the last three decades reflects in part their gains in education levels and their movement into higher-paying occupations, the BLS states. "Although men's educational attainment also has improved since 1979, the relative gains have not been as great, nor has men's occupational distribution changed as significantly as it has for women."
