

The 'Gender Wage Gap' Is a Dangerous Myth

Tuesday was Equal Pay Day, a day set aside to perpetuate the myth of the "gender pay gap," which claims that, because of gender discrimination, women receive about 22 percent lower pay on average for doing the same work as men.

The observance was started in 1996 by the National Committee on Pay Equity, and yet after 21 years and hundreds of articles debunking the claim, the idea that gender pay gap is a real problem is a myth that just won't die.

At this point it's difficult not to assume that some organizations are either too dishonest or too ideologically motivated to recognize the truth. For example, the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) claims that, "On average in 2016, women were paid 22 percent less than men, after controlling for race and ethnicity, education, experience and location." That claim is so unsupportable that the EPI has to resort to some creative obfuscation.

For instance, critics of the pay gap myth frequently point out that a significant reason men, on average, earn higher wages than women is because they are willing to take more dangerous jobs. As Andrew Biggs and Mark Perry explain, "Economists have long found that, all else equal, more dangerous jobs pay higher average wages than safer jobs. And the 20 jobs with the highest occupational fatality rates tracked by the Bureau of Labor Statistics are on average 93 percent male."

EPI implies that the reason little girls don't grow up and take dangerous jobs like fishing and logging is because of gender-based discrimination:

Gender discrimination doesn't happen only in the pay-setting practices of employers making wage offers to nearly

identical workers of different genders. It can happen at every stage of a woman's life, from steering her away from science and technology education to shouldering her with home responsibilities that impede her capacity to work the long hours of demanding professions.

Get that? It's not that women prefer to take jobs that allow them more time at home with their kids. No, it's because at every stage of woman's life, she is being pushed away from having trees fall on them in a logging camp toward the safety of home. (Yes, I realize that EPI only mentions "science and technology" and not high-paying deadly jobs. They intentional downplay and ignore industries where the wage gap is most significant.)

This sort of diversion from "employers are discriminating against women" to "society caused the wage gap" is necessary for wage-gap mythmakers. If there was truly a 22 percent wage gap caused by discrimination against women by businesses, we'd be able to point out businesses that actually engage in this practice. We would be seeing corporations shamed in the news because of their blatant discriminatory pay practices. But we don't, because such examples are so rare as to be statistically insignificant.

To be able to maintain the illusion the wage-gap is real, advocates have to claim women must be being discriminated against somewhere else other than the workplace. For instance, the average male in the U.S. spends 4,500 more minutes commuting to work each year. Why don't women make the same choice? Obviously, it must be discrimination. If such discrimination didn't exist would be free to get stuck in traffic at the same high rates as men.

But why does this myth matter? Why can't we just ignore this issue until April 4 rolls around next year? One reason is because if the wage gap is caused in part by women's choices then "closing the gap" will require taking away such choices.

Recently the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released a report on Australia claiming stay-at-home mothers were the “greatest untapped potential” for Australia’s workforce and that they were creating “potentially large losses to the economy.”

Sarrah Le Marquand, the editor-in-chief of *Stellar* magazine, used the report to make the argument that “It should be illegal to be a stay-at-home mum”:

Rather than wail about the supposed liberation in a woman’s right to choose to shun paid employment, we should make it a legal requirement that all parents of children of school-age or older are gainfully employed.

[...]

[I]t’s time for a serious rethink of this kid-glove approach to women of child-bearing and child-rearing age. Holding us less accountable when it comes to our employment responsibilities is not doing anyone any favors. Not children, not fathers, not bosses—and certainly not women.

Only when the female half of the population is expected to hold down a job and earn money to pay the bills in the same way that men are routinely expected to do will we see things change for the better for either gender.

While you may find Le Marquand’s op-ed ridiculous, she’s presenting a view shared by far too many people: If an individual’s life choices are “bad” for the economy, then those choices must be restricted. This is also the hidden logic that sustains the gender wage gap myth. Initially, the advocates claim that women don’t choose certain jobs because of the inherent biases of society. Then the logical next step is to encourage women to take such job—even if they don’t want to—for the good of “society.”

And if there aren’t enough women willing to comply? Well,

what's the purpose of having a government if you can't use its power to force people to do what it best for the nation's economy? {eoa}

Joe Carter is a Senior Editor at the Acton Institute. Joe also serves as an editor at the The Gospel Coalition, a communications specialist for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, and as an adjunct professor of journalism at Patrick Henry College. He is the editor of the NIV Lifehacks Bible and co-author of *How to Argue like Jesus: Learning Persuasion from History's Greatest Communicator* (Crossway).

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