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Social Movement Analysis

16 December 2019

**Black Women Historically Underpaid in America: Will There Ever Be Significant Gains?**

For decades, black women in the U.S. have historically been underpaid. And today, the wage gap for black women doesn’t seem like it is closing or will ever close. Scholars have discussed and analyzed the pay gap for black women for years trying to find a sole source to the reason behind the pay gap. The pay gap has been such an issue, that during the 1950s and 1960s, public policies were put in place to help alleviate the disparity in pay for black women. Some of these policies included Affirmative Action and Equal Employment Opportunity law. However, despite these efforts, almost 70 years later, black women are still underpaid regardless of education in all professional areas of the workforce. Black women in the U.S. are paid 61 to 68 percent to the dollar compared to their white male counterparts, even though black women make up most women in the workforce. According to Census data, on average, black women were paid 61 percent of what non-Hispanic white men were paid in 2017. That means it takes the typical black woman 19 months to be paid what the average white man takes home in 12 months. That’s even worse than the national earnings ratio for all women, 80 percent, as reported in AAUW’s The Simple Truth about the Gender Pay Gap. Several scholarly articles attempt to dissect this trend and attribute the pay gap to black women being single, uneducated and having a history of growing up in low-income areas. However, this pay gap persists despite, the fact that black women participate in the workforce at much higher rates than most other women; and black women have recently been named as some of the highest education in America by obtaining higher education. The root of the wage gap is vaguely mentioned in several articles. Though scholars have danced around the true root of the issue of the pay gap, the pay gap exists because of discrimination and racism.

**Black Women Historically Have Had to Work**

According to the American Association of University Women (AAUW), 80 percent of black mothers are the sole or primary breadwinners for their households. AAUW notes that a fair salary can mean the difference between struggling and sustainability for a family. I agree with this statement, though many people may not realize that black women often times don’t have a choice in if they should work to make a living for their families. It’s their only option. In a lot of cases, white men are the usually the main source for contributing financially to their families. If they are married to a woman, she often doesn’t have to work as her spouse may make enough money to support and care for their family. Though this logic is disconnected from our American culture today, as a married couple is not the status-quo for everyone. The fact still remains that in many cases, white women don’t have to work to make a living, as their spouse usually is economically more stable and can contribute to a household significantly. According to the 2010 census, one out of three U.S. black households (29%) is headed by a single woman. For a lot of black women, they become the sole breadwinner by choice or due to many unforeseen circumstances.

In Beck Pettit and Stephanie Ewert’s research article “Employment Gains and Wage Declines: The Erosion of Black Women’s Relative Wage Since 1980 (474 Demography, Volume 46-Number 3, August 2009),” there were endless points made about how policy related to welfare and singleness equated to black women receiving lower wages. The authors noted that “affirmative action” and “antidiscrimination laws” helped to foster black wage gains by helping black women secure employment in government jobs and professional occupations. However, the authors repeatedly noted that the pay gap was based on black women being more uneducated than their counterparts and unmarried.

“Growth in the wage gap by education (e.g., Bernhardt et al. 2001; McCall 2001), coupled with black women’s concentration among the poorly educated segment of the population, can help explain relative wage declines of black women through the 1980s and 1990s. Black women are much less likely than white women to graduate from high school, attend college, or complete college. Depending on when it is measured, the race gap in high school graduation among young women can vary from as many as 5 to 15 percentage points. Although black women’s educational attainment has increased since 1980, by the close of the twentieth century, employed white women were over 13% more likely than employed black women to have attended some college.”

I believe the research in this article is dated and new research shows that black women are more educated than ever before. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, between 2009 and 2010, black women earned 68 percent of all associate degrees awarded to black students, as well as 66 percent of bachelor’s degrees, 71 percent of master’s degrees and 65 percent of all doctorates awarded to black students.

However, despite the gains in education, black women still earn lower wages.

According to LeanIn.org, more than 1 in 3 Americans are not aware of the pay gap between Black women and white men. Fifty-three percent of Americans are not aware of the pay gap between Black women and white women. Only half of Americans think that obstacles to advancement for Black women are gone. LeanIn.org also notes that black women ask for promotions and raises at about the same rates as white women, but they get worse results.

Several organizations have pushed the Black Women’s Pay Gap social movement into the forefront, recently enacting August 22nd as Black Women’s Equal Pay Day. The day recognize the disparity in the wages of black women. People across different social media platforms and websites shared information, hashtags and resources noting and recognizing the Black Women’s Pay Gap. The Lean In organization, a private 501(c)(3), focuses on creating an equal workforce for all women. However, they have several resources of information involving the Black Women’s Pay Gap. There are several other sites that include data and several resources detailing the pay gap in each state and by each race. Is there a sole source for the disparity in black women’s pay?

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Additional Information and Articles

The Black Women’s Pay Gap by the Numbers

August 22 was Black Women’s Equal Pay Day. That means Black women had to work all of 2018 and until that day in 2019 to catch up with what white men earned in 2018 alone. Regardless of their occupation, level of education, or years of experience, Black women are still paid less than men.2 Get the facts about the pay gap and its impact on Black women and their families.

WOMEN OF COLOR FACE EVEN WIDER GAPS IN OPPORTUNITY

To understand the opportunity gap for women of color, we must first establish the baseline. In our sample, 56 percent of White men were individual contributors (ICs). The proportion of ICs goes up to 62 percent for White women, 61 percent for Native Hawaiian women, 63 percent for American Indian women, 66 percent for Hispanic Women, 67 percent for Black women and 72 percent for Asian women. This implies that women of color are more likely to stagnate in their careers than White women.

Black Women and the Pay Gap

According to Census data, on average, black women were paid 61 percent of what non-Hispanic white men were paid in 2017. That means it takes the typical black woman 19 months to be paid what the average white man takes home in 12 months. That’s even worse than the national earnings ratio for all women, 80 percent, as reported in AAUW’s The Simple Truth about the Gender Pay Gap. This gap persists despite the fact that black women participate in the workforce at much higher rates than most other women.

Intersecting injustice

Black women and girls live at the intersection of sexism and racism. While sexism and racism are distinct forms of discrimination that manifest differently, their effects are compounded when a person experiences both at the same time. Intersectional discrimination perpetuates the racial and gender wealth gaps, limits black women’s access to educational opportunities, and negatively impacts their career advancement.

When it comes to the pay gap and the way it impacts different groups of women, an intersectional analysis is necessary for seeing the whole picture.

Wealth gap

The wealth gap can help us to understand why black women’s earnings are so far behind those of both white men and white women. In 2013 the median white household had 13 times the wealth (“wealth” refers to total assets minus debts) of the median black household — specifically, the median white household had about $134,000 to the median black household’s $11,000. The wealth gap black families experience can be traced back to such historic injustices as slavery, segregation, redlining (the practice of differentiating areas of a city or town by race, often leading to the denial of necessary goods and services to people who live in those areas), unequal access to government programs like welfare and the GI Bill, and ongoing institutionalized and systematic discrimination. This disparity in wealth spans generations and perpetuates unequal pay and diminished opportunities, decreasing the amount of resources black families can devote to education and career advancement.

Occupational segregation

Looking at industry also helps us understand some of the gap — but not all of it. Black women are more likely to work in lower-paying service occupations (like food service, domestic work, and health care assistance) than any other industry and less likely to work in the higher-paying engineering and tech fields or managerial positions.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that the percentage of black women who are full-time minimum-wage workers is higher than that of any other racial group. To make matters worse, there’s an even bigger pay gap in the service industry, where women make less per week than women working full-time across all occupations. That’s why a livable minimum wage is crucial to all women (who make up two-thirds of tipped workers), and especially black women. In addition to being overrepresented at the low-paying end of the spectrum, black women are underrepresented at the top. Black women make up a scant 1 percent of the high-paying engineering workforce and 3 percent of computing. And these, unfortunately, are the fields where the gender pay gap is the smallest. Among the few black women who do break into these careers, discriminatory pay and promotion practices drive many out.

Education

While education is often thought of as a great equalizer, it does not shield women of color from the pay gap or the wealth gap. Recent research by Demos found that the median white adult who dropped out of high school has 70 percent more wealth than the median black adult with some college education. That means relying on education alone to close the pay gap alone will not work for women, especially black women, who trail behind in terms of wealth no matter how closely they follow societal guidelines of how to earn more and be successful.

Given the barriers black women face in being admitted to college, paying for college, and managing student loans, higher education can seem like a massive undertaking without any guaranteed future benefit.

The pay and wealth disparities black women do not only affect individual women, but also the people around them. Since 80 percent of black mothers are the sole or primary breadwinners

for their households, a fair salary can mean the difference between struggling and sustainability for a family.