

Is the Gender Pay Gap Over?

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Forget toil and drudgery. Women's work, it turns out, can be rewarding after all. For one, [women have fared better during the recession](#). With male-dominated fields such as manufacturing and construction hit especially hard, [women are on the verge of holding the majority of full-time jobs](#), and they have seen their [pay rise faster than men's during the downturn](#). What's more, women make up 58 percent of college students. So as women approach a workplace takeover, will the gap between what women and men earn — currently, 80 cents on the dollar — disappear for good?

Alison Kearns thinks so. The 23-year-old student at the University of Montana in Missoula, who is earning her doctorate in biomedical sciences, says her professors often talk about the changing demographics of her field. In the biomedical department at Montana, which was overwhelmingly male 10 years ago, women now make up the majority of graduate students — a key reason Kearns expects to earn as much as her male counterparts when she graduates in five years and hopes to find work at a pharmaceutical company. "It's an even playing field," she says.

Carina Serrezis is one of the lucky ones — male or female — to get a job out of college during the economic slowdown. After graduating from Dartmouth in 2009 and landing a consulting position in Stamford, Conn., she considers her employment outlook bright and equal to that of men. "The opportunities are the same for anyone who is willing to get out there and work their ass off," she says.

Equal Ambition

Kearns and Serrezis are typical of high-achieving, twentysomething women. Among workers under 29 — a group researchers refer to as "Millennials" — women are just as likely as men to want jobs with more authority, according to a 2008 study by the Families and Work Institute (FWI), a research group based in New York. By contrast, in 1992 more men under 29 wanted jobs with bigger roles (80 percent) than women in the same age group did (72 percent). "Men's ambitions have dropped and women's have risen," says Ellen Galinsky, FWI's president and founder.

Female Millennials also seem less keen on being stuck on the Mommy Track, Galinsky says. Under-29 women who have children and their still-childless peers share the same job ambitions. When FWI conducted similar research in 1992, the report concluded that young women with

kids were “significantly less likely to want to move to jobs with greater responsibility than women without children.”

The Weight of History

The [pay gap has closed since 1979](#), when the Bureau of Labor Statistics first started tracking it. Back then, the typical woman earned 62 percent of what men made. But after narrowing to 81 percent in the mid-2000s, the gap has slipped back to 80 percent.

Part of the wage gap can be attributed to the career choices women make. Teaching and nursing are called pink-collar jobs for a reason — 13.1 percent of female workers worked in these relatively low-paying fields in 2008, compared with just 3.2 percent of male workers (looked at another way, 98 percent of preschool and kindergarten teachers were women). The wage gap doesn't compare, say, lawyers to lawyers and doctors to doctors; it compares all working women with all working men. So until a woman gets Jamie Dimon's job or the best teachers start getting [\\$17 million bonuses](#), there's going to be a gap. But not surprisingly, even when women go head to head with men in the same field, they under-earn their male colleagues.

A 2008 study of University of Chicago business school graduates found that while men and women started out with jobs that paid about the same, the men were significantly out-earning their female classmates after 10 years. The key reason, according to the study, was motherhood, which led the women MBAs to work fewer hours than their male colleagues and/or [take breaks from their careers](#).

Serrezis, the newly employed consultant, says she'd like to marry someone who would split parenting duties with her equally so it wouldn't hurt her career development. “My ideal is to find a husband to share in child rearing,” she says. Still, that's no guarantee motherhood won't remain a barrier to wage equality. Researchers at Cornell University found that [when hiring managers looked at resumes from two equally qualified candidates](#) — one childless, one a mom — the mother was less likely to be hired.

Workplace expert Cali Williams Yost, founder of consulting firm [Work+Life Fit](#), says today's young women will experience culture shock if society's perceptions about motherhood and careers do not change. Men need to step up and share the parenting — and eldercare — burdens with women, she argues. “We have to stop talking about work-life issues from the motherhood perspective,” she says. “It's an ‘everyone’ issue.”

Rays of Hope

It's too early to say that the pay gap will disappear once and for all. But some believe that the wage gains women have made during the recession will stick, because many of the more lucrative, male-dominated jobs disappear altogether — especially in the construction, transportation, and production sectors. Women are moving toward more parity in marriages, too. In 1970, 4 percent of women made at least as much or more than their husbands. Today, [22 percent of wives out-earn their spouses](#), according to the Pew Research Center.

And the gap is narrowing in certain industries. Take the legal profession. According to the National Association of Women Lawyers, the typical female partner earned 19 percent less than a male partner in 2006. In 2009, that gap had narrowed to 12 percent.

Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and president of Flex-Time Lawyers, a national consulting firm based in Philadelphia, says that the compensation gap has particularly shrunk in the past 18 months likely because men's pay has shrunk. But as the legal industry moves away from the long-held practice of billable hours as the sole revenue model, the pay disparities may flatten further. "The billable hour has been an enemy to women because it penalizes women for being efficient," Henry says.