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Michigan among worst in equal pay for women

Michigan women who work full-time make 67 cents for every dollar earned by men

By Brad Heath / The Detroit News

Women in Michigan bring home paychecks far leaner than men's, a statewide income gap that is among the deepest and most stubborn in the nation.

While every state made progress in closing the so-called "gender gap" during the past decade, Michigan's strides were among the slowest. Michigan women who work full time make 67 cents for every dollar earned by men, a figure that budged less than 5 cents in the 1990s, an analysis of U.S. Census Bureau numbers shows. Nationwide, women who worked full time in 1999 earned 73 cents for each dollar men earned.

But there is little agreement about why Metro Detroit and the rest of the state lag so far behind the nation. To some, it's proof that the state's workplaces remain rife with discrimination, forcing women into low-paying jobs. To others, it's a reflection of a state economy skewed toward high-paying industries that tend to be dominated by men.

Ina Fernandez cracked her share of glass ceilings in the financial world before landing a job as a portfolio manager at Munder Capital Management in Birmingham. But along the way, she has seen women who were passed over for plum as-



Robin Buckson / The Detroit News

Annette Wilson works for GM in an industry where collective bargaining deals have effectively evened the pay.

signments and others who have dodged those obstacles and climbed to the top.

"Things are better for women than they used to be, but the progress has been slow," said Fernandez, president of the Detroit's Women's Economic Club. "A lot of businesses are still reluctant to give women the more demanding opportunities you need to get ahead."

The gender pay gap findings were drawn from the Census Bureau's long-form survey of Americans in 2000, the results of which offer the most detailed economic and demographic snapshot in a decade. The questionnaire was sent to roughly one

of every six households nationwide.

What it found suggests the gap between men and women's paychecks is rooted at least in part in the careers they choose and the education they receive. Men still dominate high-paying manufacturing, finance and management jobs; women are more likely to work as secretaries, teachers or in health care. Meanwhile, men are still more likely than women to have a college degree — something economists say is closely tied to income — though women are catching up.

But when it comes to why Michigan ranks so low, experts disagree. There's been little research done to

find out why women's economic progress is slower in some places than others.

"People choose to go into different occupations, but they don't choose not to have the same pay," said Meg Lewis-Sidime, a spokeswoman for 9to5, National Association of Working Women, which has lobbied for tougher equal-pay laws. "The problem is there's still really nothing that requires equal wages."

Whatever the reason, the results are stark. Michigan is the third worst in the nation when it comes to men and women bringing home equal paychecks. Only in Wyoming and Louisiana are those earnings disparities more lopsided. In some parts of southeast Michigan, including Lapeer, Livingston and Monroe counties, women earn 59 cents on the dollar, a gap equal to the one that first sparked the nation's equal-pay movement four decades ago.

Family demands are a factor

The roots of the gender gap in pay are wide and strong.

Researchers who have studied it can tick off hundreds of cases in which women have been denied promotions, turned down for raises or even been drummed out of the workplace altogether. But they say the income disparity between men and women has just as much to do with the jobs we choose and how we raise our families.

Mary Denning took her pay cut by choice. She quit her job as a manager at the Farmer Jack supermarket chain to open a cake shop in Westland a decade ago. That meant less money in her pocket, but it also means she is her own boss in a business she loves.

"When I started out, nobody thought I was the one in charge.

They'd all be talking to my husband, and I'd have to correct them," she said.

Now her husband works for her, as one of the 15 members of her cake-making staff.

"I'm never going to be rich this way, but I'm happy," she said. "That's what's important."

Family demands also play a big role.

"Most women have children. And most women who have children aren't going to work 24 hours a day," said Joan Williams, executive director of the Program on Gender, Work and Family at American University's law school in Washington. "Most mothers don't work such long hours as the traditional executive schedule during the key career-building years. But a lot of professional jobs have defined the ideal worker as someone who does work that much, so that definition systematically excludes most women."

Williams and others say those factors weigh heavily in what have become women's careers. They see women being pushed into so-called "pink collar" work and other careers that tend to have more stable hours and more time off for raising families but don't come with the financial rewards of other occupations.

"There's a lot of sex segregation in the workplace — and that doesn't just reflect people's career choices," Williams said.

Christine Stolba, a senior fellow at the Independent Women's Forum in Washington doesn't see anything so problematic. People pick the careers that suit their lives, she said, and those choices reflect the fact that women typically play a bigger role in raising kids.

"Until men decide they want to spend as much time with the kids as women do, you're not going to see



Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

Ina Fernandez cracked her share of glass ceilings in the financial world before landing her current job.

Where to get help

There are a number of Web sites designed for women seeking career advice. They include:

- * <http://www.operationable.org/>
- * <http://www.career-intelligence.com/>
- * www.womenfuture.com/
- * www.advancingwomen.com/
- * <http://www.womanowned.com/>



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Mary Denning took her pay cut by choice. She quit her job as a manager at the Farmer Jack supermarket chain to open a cake shop in Westland.

the wage gap close,” she said. “It’s not going to happen.”

Still, there are steps that have helped. Civil service pay scales and labor unions’ collective bargaining deals have effectively evened the pay scales in some fields.

Some studies suggest that states with a higher concentration of union jobs tend to have narrower pay gaps. While Michigan is highly unionized, most of the traditional manufacturing jobs belong to men.

Sharon Byrd is a junior computer programmer for the City of Detroit. She left [General Motors Corp.](#) to work for the city because she wanted a job that guaranteed a little more stability, and government work seemed to offer her more opportunities to get ahead.

”I wanted something permanent,” said Byrd, who lives on Detroit’s east side.

No consensus on solution

The gap in pay is almost universal. Women out-earn men in only 15 of the nation’s more than 3,100 counties.

But no one has been able to explain why it runs much deeper in some states than in others. In the District of Columbia and Hawaii, women earn nearly as much as men.

It probably has something to do with differences in state economies — some rely more on manufacturing than others, for example. But researchers still haven’t pinned down what makes that gap wider in Michigan than in neighboring states, said Jennifer Wooley, who studies women’s economic issues at the Center for Policy Alternatives in Washington.

”There’s no easy answer,” she said.

Michigan’s economy is still heavily dependent on manufacturing. Those jobs offer good wages and their heavy unionization means the pay scales stay fairly equal for men and women. But more than three-quarters of the state’s manufacturing jobs belong to men.

And there’s no consensus on what to do about the disparity.

Some groups are lobbying Congress to toughen anti-discrimination laws. Others want to beef up the 1963 Equal Pay Act that ordered employers to provide equal paychecks for equal work.

”What the wage gap really measures is that opportunities for men and women still aren’t equal,” said Vicky Lowell, a study director at the Institute for Women’s Policy Research. “That’s the problem that has to be fixed.”

Stolba, of the Independent Women’s Forum in Washington, doesn’t see a need for dramatic solutions. “When you look at all the factors involved, you realize discrimination isn’t necessarily to blame. If there’s a problem to solve, it’s probably to make sure we’re enforcing existing laws.”

”But we’ll never close the gap all the way,” she said.

Ruth Malachowski chalks her success up to hard work. She’s a clerk at the Mediation Tribunal Association in Detroit, which helps settle lawsuits out of court.

After 22 years on the job, she’s making more than her husband, who’s a driver for Detroit’s Department of Transportation.

”You’ve got to do the job right and stick with it,” she said. “I’ve come a long way.”

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