

Shauna Walden Egeh column: Misconceptions found in gender pay gap

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I was very disappointed to read Brian Farmer's May 27 commentary in The Post-Crescent regarding the gender gap in wages.

I do appreciate that Mr. Farmer acknowledges that the gender gap exists, since there are many who still don't. I'm just alarmed at the lack of concern for this well-documented inequality between the sexes.

Many of the reasons for the inequality, as outlined by Mr. Farmer, are somewhat true. However, there are some facts that still remain to be told.

It's true that the gender pay gap issue is complicated. It's fraught with misconceptions and a misguided assumption about the American family.

The misconceptions: The pay gap exists simply because of the types of jobs selected by women; the jobs men do are physically more demanding and have more risk of injury and therefore should be compensated at a higher rate; and finally, the work cannot be compared because it's too different, i.e. garbage collector vs. childcare worker.

The reality: Even when studies account for hours worked, occupation, parenthood and other factors normally associated with pay, women still earn less than their male counterparts.

The assumption about the American family: Men and women will marry and have children.

The misguided assumption: The man is the breadwinner of the family and the mother will stay home to raise the children and, since women leave the work force when the children arrive, they're less valuable as an employee to an organization.

The reality is that, according to the U.S. Census, in 61 percent of American families, both parents work.

According to "Families and Living Arrangements: 2006," nationally there are 12.9 million one-parent families and 81 percent of these households are headed by women. Only 64 percent of these female-headed households have support agreements in place and then only 45 percent of those receive all the support due from the second parent, at an average of \$5,176 annually. This leaves 75 percent of female-headed households reliant on the income of the mother to live.

In fact, the misguided assumption that men and women will take on stereotypical family roles is so prevalent that it impacts the salaries of college-educated men and women one-year after college, prior to the life events that are so often used to explain the gender gap.

A recent study by the American Association of University Women's Educational Foundation found that, one year out of college, women working full-time earn 80 percent as much as their male colleagues, with this gap widening to 69 percent 10 years after graduation.

The results of this study show that, on average, mothers earn less than women without children but both groups earn less than men earn.

It's true that life choices can have a significant impact on the size of the gender gap. The challenge is that assumptions about the life choices a woman might make has an even greater effect:

Even if a women chooses a traditionally male-dominated profession, has no children and subsequently no interruptions of service, she will still make less money over her lifetime than her male counterpart.

Even if a women goes to college, her educational accomplishments, while increasing her lifetime earnings overall, will not close the pay gap between her and her male peers.

Even in fields dominated by women, such as education, women earn 95 percent of what their male colleagues earn.

Currently, there is no college major, career or family lifestyle choice that a woman can select that will allow her to avoid the pay gap.

Finally, in response to Mr. Farmer's comments that, "in situations where a man and a woman are doing the same job in the same company are paid differently, it's rare that it can't be accounted for by differences in education, training, experience, seniority and other reasons not related to gender."

I believe it's this philosophy that accounts for the apathy around this issue.

If it's the "same" job, why do all of these other things matter? Aren't the performance expectations the same? Shouldn't we be compensated based on the quality of our work and productivity, rather than penalized because of gender or life choices, or potential life choices?

Why is it so radical to believe that men and women should be compensated equitably when they perform the same or comparable work? In addition, why is it that someone who feels this inequality is wrong is labeled a militant feminist?

Even with every factor accounted for, there's still a 12 percent wage gap between men and women. I'm not as concerned with labeling the gap (i.e. calling it discrimination) as I am with everyone working together to eliminate it.

Stereotyping men and women isn't fair to either gender. When everyone is compensated fairly, families' needs can be met, communities thrive and all of society benefits.