Since the swinging 60’s it has been illegal for an employer to “discriminate between employees on the basis of sex by paying wages at a rate less than the rate at which he pays wages to employees of the opposite sex in such for equal work” (Equal Pay Act, 1963). In the following year, the Civil Rights Act prohibited “employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin”. In the four decades since these milestones in human rights, has the gender gap closed for earnings and career choice?

The Gender Earnings Gap
Data from the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) indicates that women are still paid less than their male counterparts. For example, female physicians and surgeons can expect to earn around 60% as much as male physicians and surgeons. In hard cash this is the difference between earning approximately $2,000 per week and $1,200 per week. Even in traditionally female careers, such as secretaries and administrative assistants, the fairer sex can expect to earn only 85% ($550 compared to $650) as much as men. There are only five careers in the BLS list of over 250 occupations where women earn more than men.

The Gender Career Gap
Forty years after the equal opportunity doors were opened, men and women continue to pursue different careers. Further analysis of the BLS data reveals that women comprise nearly 90% of all “secretaries and administrative assistants,” “elementary and middle school teachers,” and “registered nurses.” Men comprise nearly 85% of all “drivers/sales workers and truck drivers,” “first-line supervisors/managers of retail sales workers,” and “carpenters.” Is this because employers continue (illegally) to discriminate because of gender? Or is it out of personal choice?

The Gender Choice Gap
It seems obvious that men and women should have equal opportunity and equal pay for the same job. The crux of the matter is that “same title” does not mean “same job”. Women “fail” to reach the same career heights as men for some very good reasons. It might gall a female marketing manager to see her male counterpart promoted and paid more; but would she (could she?) really choose to work late consistently and endure frequent trips away from home? Men, it seems, accept these trappings of a successful career more easily. Women who choose careers over family should expect and demand equal prospects and compensation. Women who choose family over career (at any level) cannot expect the same. This is not failing; it is choosing. They have different priorities (thank heavens).

Conventional wisdom, old wives' tales, and scientific research all agree that men and women are different. Perhaps if we could convince ourselves to attribute apparent inequalities to personal choice instead of gender discrimination we would all be much happier. Unfortunately, most of us suffer from that universal human failing—believing that the grass is always greener on the other side.

Sources:

About the Author: Katrina Boydon is Editor-in-Chief of QuinStreet Media, Inc. She combines a demanding career with three small children, a husband, and two dogs. It ain’t easy.

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