

THE GENDER WAGE GAP: SOCIALIZATION  
AND THE ROLE OF CHOICE

by

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AND THE ROLE OF CHOICE

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## INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge that women in America earn quite a bit less than their male contemporaries. Specifically, according to a 2013 study by the American Association of University Women, in 2011, this gender wage gap was an estimated 23 percent, which means for every dollar earned by men, only 77 cents were earned by women (p. 3). Understandably, this value for the raw wage gap is often interpreted “as a clear indication of overt wage discrimination against women” (CONSAD, 2009, p. 4); however, this indictment actually neglects the “observable differences in the attributes of men and women” (p. 1) which account for a significant portion of the raw wage gap.

Economists especially endorse this alternative viewpoint, and largely argue that the gender wage gap is not a matter of labor market discrimination, but rather the result of differences in the choices made by men and women regarding their own human capital. Specifically, these critics assert that the raw gender wage gap in America “is primarily a result of the gendered division of labor, gendered power dynamics within the household, [and] gender inequalities in the labor market” (Chang, 2010, p. 1). Thus, this portion of the wage gap is considered explained and the raw gap can be adjusted accordingly.

This explained portion of the raw wage gap must then be addressed if society hopes to eliminate the raw wage gap as a whole. To this end, researchers argue that men and women to varying degrees make differing economic choices as a result of socialization. The result is that the corresponding institutionalized rewards based on these gender differences make it easier for men to build wealth. Thus, elimination of the wage gap may require addressing socialization practices which are themselves discriminatory.

These economic choices contribute largely to the wage gap. Thus, in order to eliminate the explained portion of the raw wage gap, we as a society must both equalize our gendered socialization practices and reevaluate our market valuation of these practices, which in their current state impose economic vulnerability on American women and their families.

### THE GENDER WAGE GAP

The American Association of University Women (AAUW, 2013) recently analyzed the raw gender wage gap in order to advance their mission of gender equity and the “economic security of American women and their families” (p. 2) through education and advocacy. According to their research, although the wage gap has narrowed since the 1970s, in 2011, “women working full time in the United States typically were paid just 77 percent of what men were paid, a gap of 23 percent” (p. 3).

The AAUW (2013) reports this pay gap as “the difference in men’s and women’s typical earnings, usually reported as either the earnings ratio between men and women or as an actual pay gap, as defined below...

$$\text{Earnings ratio} = \frac{\text{Women's median earnings}}{\text{Men's median earnings}}$$

$$\text{Pay gap} = \frac{[\text{Men's median earnings} - \text{Women's median earnings}]}{\text{Men's median earnings}}$$

In 2011, median *annual* earnings in the United States for women and men working full time, year round were \$37,118 and \$48,202, respectively” (AAUW, 2013, p. 5). Thus the 2011 earnings ratio and pay gap were:

$$2011 \text{ earnings ratio} = \frac{\$37,118}{\$48,202} = 77\%$$

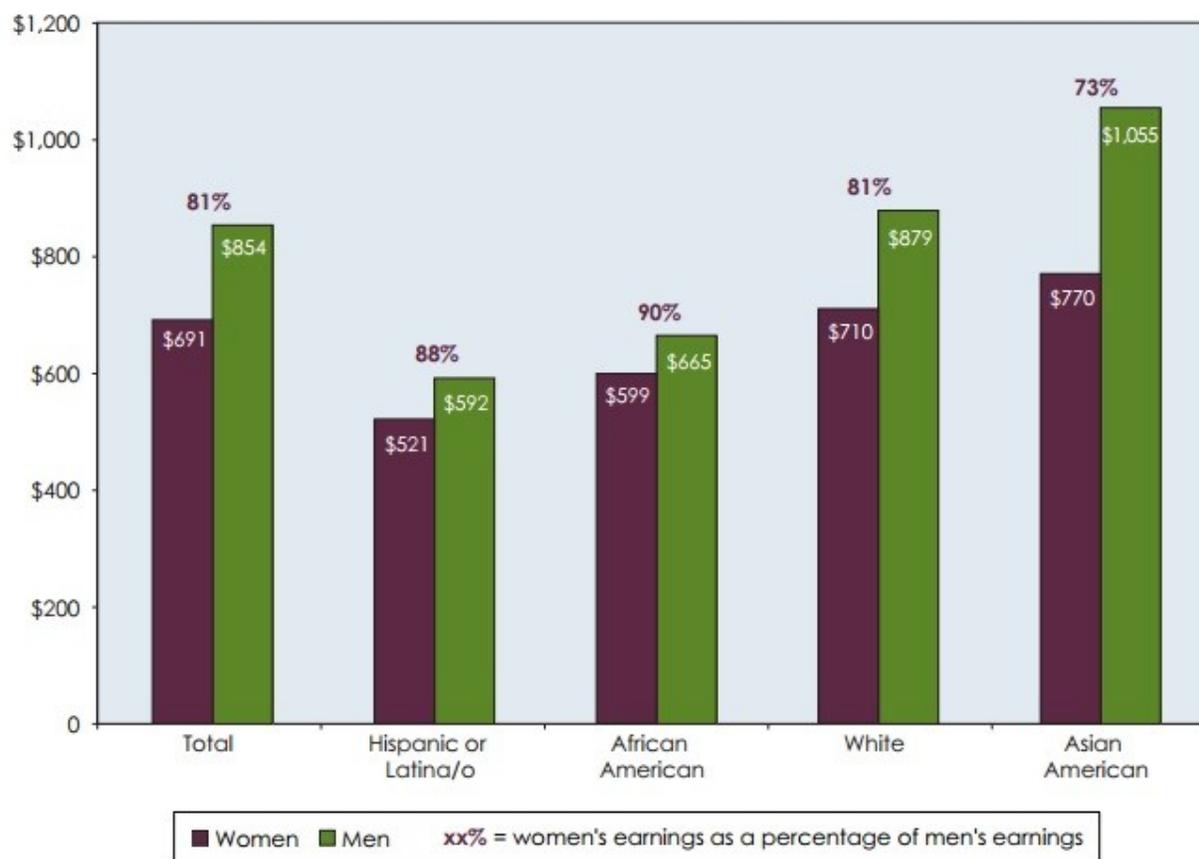
$$2011 \text{ pay gap} = \frac{[\$48,202 - \$37,118]}{\$48,202} = 23\%$$

## Demographics

According to the AAUW (2013) although the gender wage gap affects women of all backgrounds, ages, and levels of educational achievement, “earnings and the [raw] gap vary depending on a woman’s individual situation” (p. 10).

### Race and ethnicity.

#### Median Weekly Earnings, by Race/Ethnicity and Gender, 2012<sup>12</sup>



Note: Based on median usual weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers, ages 16 and older, 2012 annual averages

Figure 1 (AAUW, 2013, p. 10)

A study by the AAUW (2013) examined median weekly earnings of full-time workers in 2012. Overall, Hispanic, Latina, and African American women earned substantially lower

median weekly wages compared with white and Asian American women. However, "within racial/ethnic groups, African American and Hispanic or Latina women experienced a smaller gender pay gap compared with men in the same group than did white and Asian American women" (p. 10). Thus, as depicted in Figure 1, Asian American women experienced the largest wage gap—earnings of seventy-three percent compared with men in the same group—whereas African American women experienced the smallest—earnings of ninety percent compared with men in the same group.

It should be noted, however, that this smaller wage gap among "African Americans, Hispanics, and Latinos is due solely to the fact that African American, Hispanic and Latino men were paid substantially less than white men in 2012" (p. 11). Thus, an alternative way to view this gap is to compare salary information for women of each race with that of white male workers—for example, as depicted in Figure 2, "Asian women's salaries show the smallest gender pay gap at 88 percent of white men's earnings. Alternatively, the gap was largest for Hispanic and Latina women, who were paid only 59 percent of what white men were paid in 2012.

### Earnings Ratio, by Race/Ethnicity, 2012<sup>13</sup>

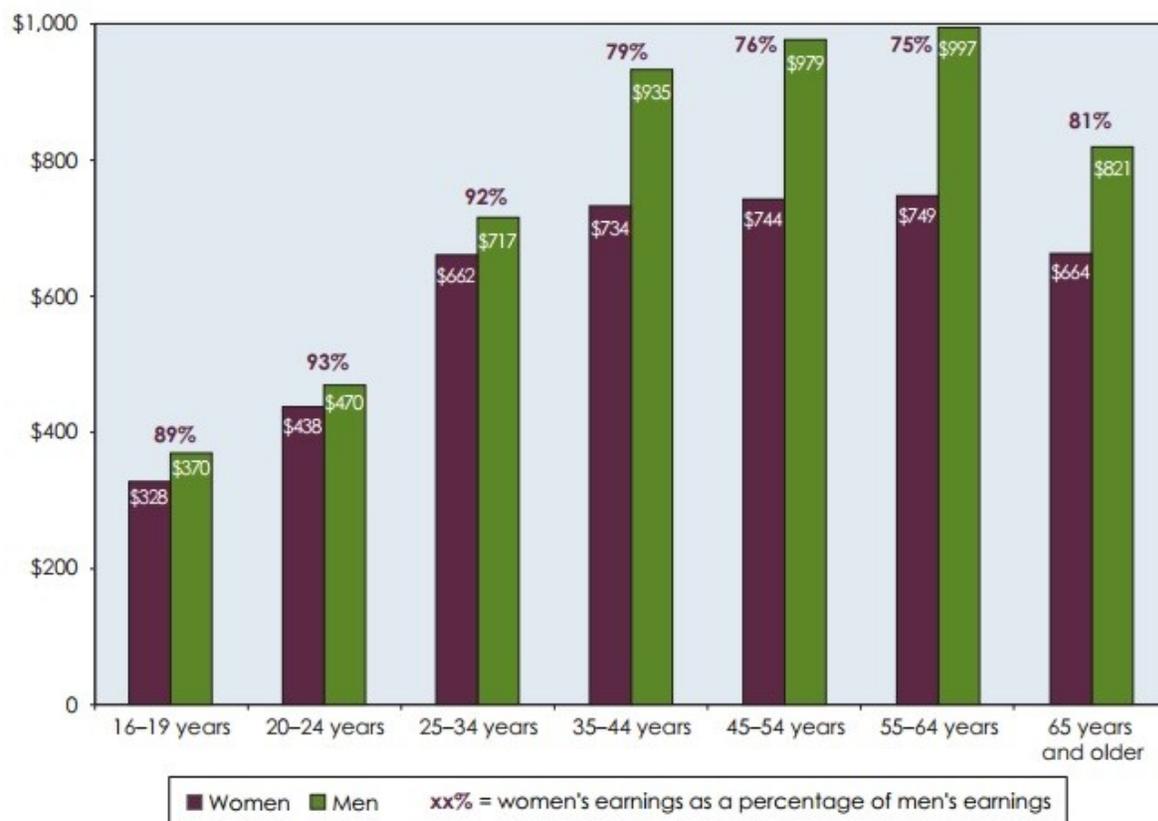
|                    | Women's earnings as a percentage of men's earnings within race/ethnicity | Women's earnings as a percentage of white men's earnings |
|--------------------|--|--|
| Hispanic or Latina | 88%  | 59%  |
| African American   | 90%  | 68%  |
| White              | 81%  | 81%  |
| Asian American     | 73%  | 88%  |

Note: Based on median usual weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers, 2012 annual averages

Figure 2 (AAUW, 2013, p. 11)

**Age.**

### Median Weekly Earnings, by Age and Gender, 2011<sup>14</sup>



Note: Based on median usual weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers, 2011 annual averages

Figure 3 (AAUW, 2013, p. 12)

Another significant factor in determining wage rate is age. According to the AAUW 2013 report, “earnings for both female and male full-time workers tend to increase with age, with a plateau after 45 and a drop after age 65. The gender pay gap also grows with age, and differences among older workers are considerably larger than gaps among younger workers” (p. 12).

Thus, as depicted in Figure 3, in 2011, full-time workers ages 20-24 years experienced the smallest wage gap—“women were paid 93 percent of what men were paid on a weekly basis”—whereas among full-time workers ages 55-64,

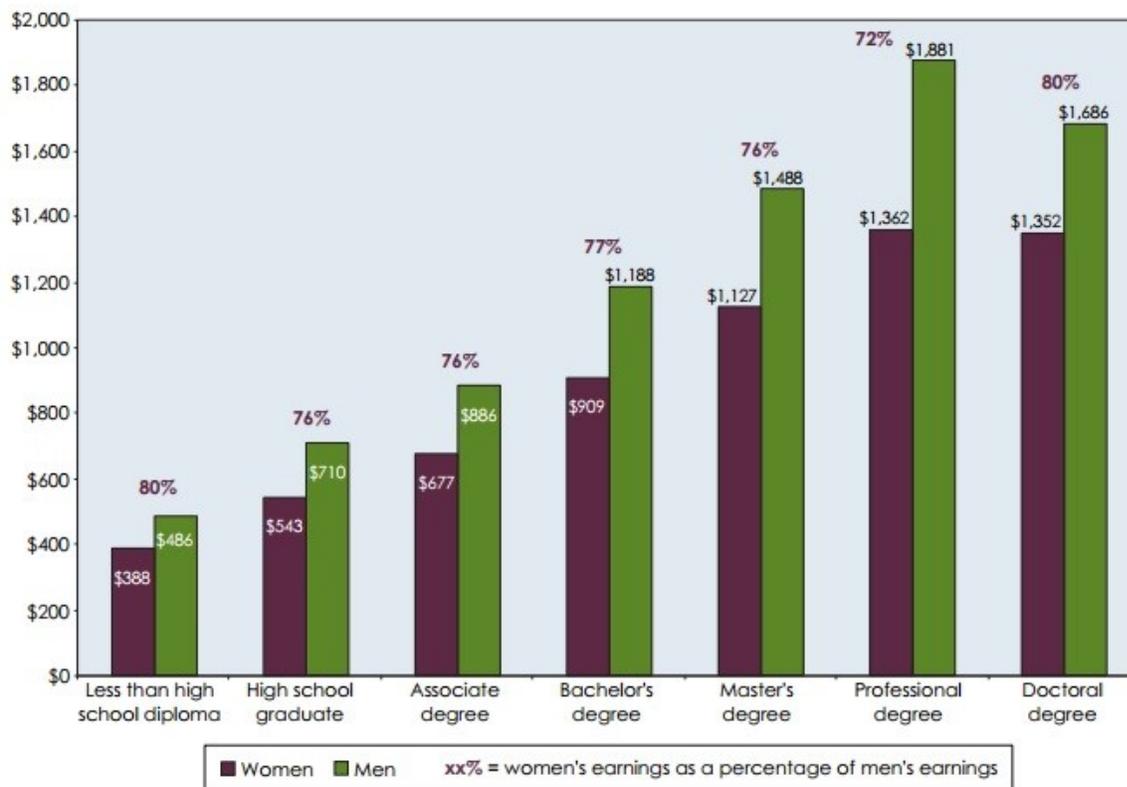
women were paid only 75 percent of what their male peers were paid. Women typically are paid about 90 percent of what men are paid until around the age of 35, at which point

median earnings for women start to grow much more slowly than median earnings for men. From around age 35 through retirement, women are typically paid about 75 to 80 percent of what men are paid. (p. 12-13)

Thus, age is a significant factor in determining the gender wage gap.

### Education.

#### Median Weekly Earnings, by Level of Education and Gender, 2010<sup>15</sup>



Note: Based on median usual weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers, ages 25 and older, 2010 annual averages

Figure 4 (AAUW, 2013, p. 12)

Furthermore, as depicted in Figure 4, earnings generally "increase as years of education increase for both men and women" (AAUW, 2013, p. 13). However, although education is an effective tool for increasing earnings, it is not an effective tool against the gender [wage] gap. At every level of academic achievement, women's median earnings

are less than men's median earnings, and in some cases, the gender pay gap is larger at higher levels of education. (AAUW, 2013, p. 13)

This gender wage gap by education level is largely explained by gender differences in fields of study, and corresponding occupational segregation (CONSAD, 2009).

## **Consequences**

### **Financial vulnerability.**

In order to achieve gender equity in America, the wage gap must be eliminated entirely. According to Chang (2010), due to wealth inequalities, "women experience greater economic vulnerability than men. [They] have less wealth to support themselves in retirement and to help them weather economic, familial, and medical crises" (p. 3). Consequently, "women have less bargaining power in marriage" and their "financial dependency makes it more difficult for them to leave abusive relationships" (p. 3). Furthermore, "because black and Hispanic women are less likely to marry and more likely to be single parents than white women, the racial wealth gap cannot close unless the gender wealth gap closes" (p. 3).

### **Effects on the family.**

Furthermore, as the AAUW (2013) asserts, "Equal pay is not simply a women's issue—it's a family issue" (p. 4) that ultimately affects society as a whole. To begin with,

families increasingly rely on women's make ends meet. In typical married households, women's incomes accounted for 36 percent of total family income in 2008, up from 29 percent in 1983. A large majority of mothers are in the paid labor force, and about one-third of employed mothers are the sole breadwinners for their families. (p. 4)

The "34 percent of working mothers who are their families' sole bread-winner—either because they are single parents or their spouses are not in the labor force" (p. 4) are especially affected by

this gap as it "can contribute to poor living conditions, poor nutrition, and fewer opportunities for their children" (p. 4). As Chang (2010) argues, where a wage gap prevails, "children receive fewer financial resources and educational opportunities" (p. 3).

### THE ROLE OF CHOICE

In order to eliminate the gender wage gap then, society must evaluate the criticisms which assert that the majority of the raw gender wage gap is simply the result of differences in the choices men and women make, rather than a matter of labor market discrimination. For example, Steven Horwitz argues via Learn Liberty (2011) that the wages earned by men and women fairly reflect each gender's investment in their own human capital. For example, while men tend to choose fields like engineering, women tend to study the social sciences. As a result of these choices, these men and women are paid differently although they have attended school for the same amount of years.

The American Association of Women (AAUW) addresses this 'choice' argument in several studies (2007, 2012, 2013). In particular, the report "Graduating to a Pay Gap: The Earnings of Women and Men One Year after College Graduation" (2012) analyzed pay differentiation upon graduation, and

found that just one year after college graduation, women were paid just 82 percent of what their male counterparts were paid. An earlier report, 'Behind the Pay Gap' (AAUW, 2007), found that [ten] years after graduation, the pay gap widened, and women were paid only 69 percent of what men were paid. (p. 8)

Thus, the raw wage gap for full-time workers one year after graduation is 18 percent, while full-time workers ten years after graduation experience a gap of 31 percent.

In order to explain these differences, the AAUW (2012) then made the comparison while accounting for the explanatory factors of college major, occupation, economic sector, hours worked, months unemployed since graduation, GPA, type of undergraduate institution, institution selectivity, age, geographical region, and marital status. The report “Graduating to a Pay Gap” concluded that up to 11 percent of the difference in earnings between male and female college graduates one year after graduation were explained by these factors, while the report “Behind the Pay Gap” concluded that only 19 percent of the difference in earnings were explained by these factors for full-time workers ten years after college graduation. Thus, the adjusted wage gap for full-time workers one year after graduation is 7 percent, while full-time workers ten years after graduation experience an adjusted gap of 12 percent.

Thus, although between 7-12 percent of these pay differences remain unexplained, this paper continues by focusing on the portion of the gap that *is* explained (11-19 percent, depending on the amount of time after graduation), and further analyzes why women and men make these different choices when investing in their own human capital.

### **Human Capital**

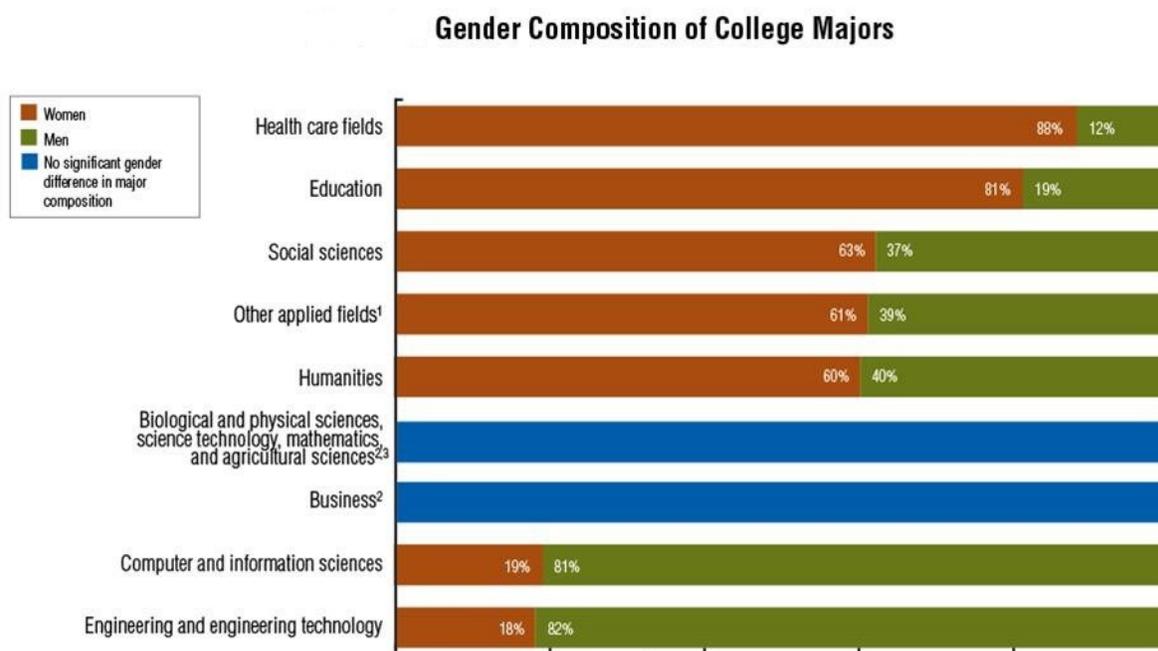
Economists who appeal to choice theory argue that there is little statistical evidence to support the claim that labor markets discriminate against women. Rather, as Horwitz (2011) suggests, “markets tend to pay people based on their anticipated productivity, and the difference between men’s and women’s pay largely derives from different choices that lead to differences in productivity”. These choices, then, are primarily different investments in individuals’ human capital.

According to Horwitz (2011), “human capital refers to the skills, knowledge, and experience people have that make them productive. The amount and type of such human capital

is central to determining the wage one is likely to be paid.” The argument continues that men invest more heavily in the type of human capital valued by the economy. For both men and women, these choices fall into three main categories: education, occupation, and family.

### Educational choices.

Men and women make very different educational choices. While a college degree improves earnings considerably, not all degrees are equally financially beneficial. Although men and women choose similar educational institutions, women on average earn slightly higher grades than men, and are more likely to attend graduate school (AAUW, 2012), "deep-rooted gender differences remain in field of study" (p. 11).



*Note:* This chart shows undergraduate majors among 2007–08 bachelor's degree recipients and excludes graduates older than age 35 at bachelor's degree completion.

*Source:* Authors' analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008–09 *Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study* data.

<sup>1</sup> Includes architecture, communications, public administration and human services, design and applied arts, law and legal studies, library sciences, and theology and religious vocations.

<sup>2</sup> Women and men each make up about half of graduates who majored in these fields. Percentages are not significantly different for men and women ( $p < 0.05$ , two-tailed  $F$ -test).

<sup>3</sup> Although these majors are gender balanced as a group, the representation of women varies substantially among the majors included in this category. Women are more likely than men to major in the biological sciences, and men are more likely to major in the physical sciences, agricultural sciences, and mathematics (National Science Foundation, 2011, table 5-1).

Figure 5 (AAUW, 2012, p. 12)

For example, as can be seen in Figure 5, according to a 2012 report by the AAUW, among 2007–08 college graduates, women made up the large majority in the health care fields

(88 percent) and education (81 percent), while making up the distinct minority in engineering and engineering technology (18 percent) and computer and information sciences (19 percent).

Furthermore, a similar study by the AAUW in 2013 found that,

In 2011, the U.S. civilian workforce included approximately 140 million full- and part-time employed workers; 53 percent were men, and 47 percent were women. Just over 40 percent of working women were employed in traditionally female occupations such as social work, nursing, and teaching. In contrast, fewer than 5 percent of men worked these jobs. [44] percent of working men were in traditionally male occupations, such as computer programming, aerospace engineering, and firefighting, compared with just under 6 percent of women in these jobs. (p. 15)

Differences in college major therefore account for a significant portion of the choices referred to by economists.

Most significantly, men are more likely to invest in “majors that generate higher pay (such as computer science and engineering), while women tend toward psychology and education, which do not pay as well” (Horwitz, 2011). To this end, a study by Joy (2006) found that

the sorting of men and women among occupations [often] begins with their choice of major academic discipline...where there are strong practical links between specific academic disciplines and specific occupations, the differential enrollment of males and females in those disciplines serves as the foundation for the prevalence of men or women in the linked occupations. (CONSAD, 2009, p. 7)

Thus, the high concentration of women in certain academic disciplines is “a major factor behind the pay gap” (AAUW, 2013, p. 15), especially since “jobs traditionally associated with men tend to pay better than traditionally female jobs for the same level of skill required” (p. 15).

### **Occupational choices.**

A historical norm of occupational segregation seems to further exacerbate the explained portion of the wage gap. As CONSAD (2009) argues, “historically, men and women have worked in notably different occupations... Researchers have used several terms to characterize this phenomenon, including occupational selection, occupational sorting, occupational segregation, and occupational crowding” (p. 6). This trend is especially notable, “because women have disproportionately worked in occupations with relatively low wages (e.g., teachers, nurses, secretaries, retail sales clerks)... [while] men have disproportionately worked in occupations with comparatively high wages (e.g., executives, managers, doctors, lawyers engineers, scientists)” (p. 6). Thus, differences in occupation account for a considerable portion of the wage gap—as much as 60 percent, according to a 1991 study by Groshen.

Furthermore, according to a 2009 report by CONSAD, another significant factor which determines the explained wage gap is a worker’s “cumulative work experience (measured as their estimated total number of years of employment) or their tenure on their current jobs (measured as the employment by the current employer without interruption by work for another employer” (p. 8). For both men and women, the wage rate increases as a worker’s experience increases. However, as CONSAD notes,

the wages paid to workers are affected not only by the amount of work experience that a worker has accumulated, but also by the continuity of the accumulation... [Thus,] leave

taken from a career, such as leave for childbirth or for raising children, is associated with reduced income. (CONSAD, 2009, p. 9)

Thus, these different choices in career, and in regard to raising a family, lead to women more often than men having a reduced income due to interruptions in work.

### **Familial choices.**

It is interesting to note that “becoming a parent is an example of a choice that often has different outcomes for men and women” (AAUW, 2012, p. 9). Horwitz (2011) argues that any parent who takes time off to care for children tends to “fall behind their cohort in job experience and in keeping current in their profession. Their wages thereby fall behind their cohort’s and are lower than they would have been had they not cared for kids”. Therefore, since women more often than men take time off for their children, mothers are more likely to incur a wage gap than are fathers. To this end, a 2012 study by the AAUW found that “[ten] years after graduation, 23 percent of mothers in [the] sample were out of the workforce, and 17 percent worked part time. Among fathers, only 1 percent were out of the workforce, and only 2 percent worked part time” (AAUW, 2013, p. 9).

The effect of motherhood extends beyond that of job experience however. The AAUW (2013) describes a “motherhood penalty” which often extends “beyond the actual time out of the workforce” (p. 9). The penalty, documented by experimental research, is that employers are less likely to hire mothers compared with childless women, and when employers do make an offer to a mother, they offer her a lower salary than they do other women. Fathers, in contrast, do not suffer a penalty compared with other men. Clearly, parenthood often affects men and women very differently in terms of labor force

participation and how they are viewed by employers, and that difference may be reflected in a worker's salary. (p. 9)

Thus, due to societal norms of gendered child-rearing, employer incentives are skewed when hiring mothers and fathers, and women are more likely to incur a wage gap.

Furthermore, because women tend to take on the majority of child-care responsibilities, Horwitz (2011) argues

that they tend to have different work preferences from men. For example, women tend to prefer jobs with flexible hours and fewer travel demands. Such jobs tend to pay less than ones with less flexible hours and more travel. Women more than men also tend to prefer part-time work, which pays less, and are less likely to work overtime than men.

In this sense, it appears that women have incentive to make choices based on marriage and family rather than the labor market.

### **Choice Theory: Revisited**

Thus, researchers tend to agree that the aforementioned factors of occupation, human capital development, work experience, career interruption, motherhood, and industry sector, explain the majority of the gender wage gap (CONSAD, 2009). And, in truth, although there is great interest for researchers to continue to examine the unexplained difference in the wage gap, between 11 and 19 percent (depending on the amount of time following college graduation) of the raw gap is explained by these different choices men and women make when investing in their own human capital.

However, while this adjusted wage gap may show that there is little overt wage discrimination against women, this author argues that the portion of the wage gap which is explained (11-19 percent) is still the result of discriminatory socialization practices. To this end,

Horwitz (2011) suggests that society may prepare men and women differently for the job market, "leading to a wage differential".

### SOCIALIZATION

One need look no further than our vocabulary for this topic to find evidence that society plays a role in this wage differential. For example, the wage gap is referred to as a "Gender Gap" rather than a "Sex Gap". This differentiation suggests that society influences what wages are paid to men and women, not only by placing economic value on certain types of work, but also by encouraging men and women to invest in their own human capital differently. Thus, in order to ensure equity for men, women, and families, society must examine its gender socialization process to be sure we are indeed giving the same 'choice' to men and women.

### **Gender**

Although male and female behavior is largely determined by cultural expectations of gender, the public is often unconscious of these assumptions and how greatly they affect their everyday lives. Most significantly, according to West and Zimmerman (1987),

In Western societies, the accepted cultural perspective on gender views women and men as naturally and unequivocally defined categories of being with distinctive psychological and behavioral propensities that can be predicted from their reproductive functions.

Competent adult members of these societies see differences between the two as fundamental and enduring—differences seemingly supported by the division of labor into women's and men's work and an often elaborate differentiation of feminine and masculine attitudes and behaviors that are prominent features of social organization.

Things are the way they are by virtue of the fact that men are men and women are women—a division perceived to be natural and rooted in biology, producing in turn

profound psychological, behavioral and social consequences. The structural arrangements of a society are presumed to be responsive to these differences. (p. 128)

Thus, even the indistinction between sex and gender has economic consequences. Before men and women can be expected to make similar choices, we as a society must “introduce the difference between” (p. 125) 'gender' and 'sex'.

Although West and Zimmerman (1987) note that, in order to combat this ignorance, “role theory has attended to the social construction of gender categories, called ‘sex roles’ or, more recently, ‘gender roles’ and has analyzed how these are learned and enacted” (p. 128), the application of this model produces problems of its own. Specifically, the authors argue that “roles are situated identities—assumed and relinquished as the situation demands—rather than master identities (Hughes 1945), such as sex category, that cut across situations” (p. 128). On the contrary, the situated identity of gender can be constantly modified, as “gender has no specific site or organizational context. Moreover, many roles are already gender marked, so that special qualifiers—such as ‘female doctor’ or ‘male nurse’—must be added to exceptions to the rule” (p. 129). Unfortunately, as Thorne (1980) observes, “conceptualizing gender as a role makes it difficult to assess its influence on other roles and reduces its explanatory usefulness in discussions of power and inequality” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 129). Thus, the authors argue “that gender is not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings of some sort” (p. 129). Although gender is seen as natural, in reality it is “a socially organized achievement” (p. 129).

### **Gender display.**

Goffman (1976) argues that “If gender be defined as the culturally established correlates of sex (whether in consequence of biology or learning), then gender display refers to

conventionalized portrayals of these correlates” (p. 69). Thus, femininity and masculinity “can be conveyed fleetingly in any social situation” (p. 75), and especially at scheduled times or in special locations (e.g., on a date). And, more importantly, although these rituals are disguised as a “testimony to our ‘essential natures’”, in reality, these actions are culturally scripted and optional. Ultimately, “gender depictions are less a consequence of our ‘essential sexual natures’ than interactional portrayals of what we would like to convey about sexual natures, using conventionalized gestures” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p 130).

### **Sex, sex category, and gender.**

Thus, our society functions under the “notion that there are ‘essential’ biological criteria that unequivocally distinguish females from males” (P. 131). This “presumption that essential criteria exist and would or should be there if looked for...provides the basis for sex categorization” (p. 132) despite the fact “that genitalia are conventionally hidden from public inspection in everyday life” (p. 132). Thus, sex categorization has much less to do with the existence of these essential criteria than culturally-appropriate identificatory displays (e.g. “Popular culture abounds with books and magazines that compile idealized depictions of relations between women and men...[often] focused on the etiquette of dating or prevailing standards of feminine comportment”). Only when these displays fail to provide grounds for categorization, factors such as facial hair, tone of voice, body type, etc. “are assessed to determine membership in a sex category” (p. 134).

Thus, West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that gender is “an ongoing activity embedded in everyday interaction” (p. 130). This distinction means that male and female behavior is largely determined by cultural expectations of gender. Parents, especially, have a strong influence on their children in displaying examples of gender-normative behavior to be embodied. While

gender-normative behavior is quickly rewarded, gender-inappropriate behavior is often viewed as punishable and is socially stigmatized. In this sense, gender is a social process.

## **Gender Embodiment**

### **Social learning theory and androcentricity.**

For example, social learning theory asserts that children embody gender differences by observing and modeling the actions of those closest to them. Gender-appropriate behavior is rewarded through positive reinforcement, while gender-inappropriate behavior is actively discouraged (Wharton, 2005).

Active discouragement of gender-inappropriate behavior stresses “gender polarization—the belief that what is acceptable or appropriate for females is not acceptable or appropriate for males (and vice versa) and that anyone who deviates from these standards of appropriate femaleness and maleness is unnatural or immoral” (Wharton, 2005 p. 34). This sentiment is often further magnified by the androcentric belief that males are inherently superior to females.

Psychologist Sandra Bem says androcentrism:

so thoroughly devalues whatever thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are culturally defined as feminine that crossing the gender boundary has a more negative cultural meaning for men than it has for women—which means, in turn, that male gender-boundary-crossers are much more culturally stigmatized than female gender-boundary-crossers. (Wharton, 2005, p. 34-35)

Therefore, society is often quick to institute masculine behavior in its children, as this behavior is perceived as more valuable and is highly desired above feminine behavior (Wharton, 2005).

Sociological authors Lorber and Moore (2007) discuss this gendering of children in their book *Gendered Bodies*. They argue that parents socially produce gendered children through their

teachings of gender-appropriate play. While boys are taught that action figures should fight, girls are taught that dolls should hug. These patterns of gender-appropriate behavior become embodied even at these early ages. Children tend to enact feminine and masculine body practices almost automatically (Lorber & Moore, 2007).

This theory is further reiterated by sociologist Michael A. Messner (2002) in his essay “Barbie Girls vs. Sea Monsters.” Stating the agency of people in the construction of gender, he argues for the situational fluidity of gender. He states that while parents often read children’s performances of gender as biologically natural, “an examination of structural and cultural contexts...reveals there [is] nothing inevitable” about the boundaries of gender (Messner, 2002, p. 67).

### **Responsibility for the Wage Differential**

Thus, gender is not a biological imperative, but rather the result of socialization practices which exist along a spectrum. Consequently, while choice theory can silence the majority of claims of labor market discrimination, it neglects discriminatory socialization practices in other areas of society. Horwitz (2011) reflects this claim when he states, “perhaps our expectations for girls and boys are different and thus we prepare them differently for the world of work...Narrow the differences between men and women, and markets will narrow the wage gap.” In this sense, gender socialization and the resulting wage differential is not a conspiratorial or overt act of discrimination, but rather the result of a lack of awareness for the process of socialization, and a seemingly automatic enactment of gendered identity.

### **Educational and occupational choices.**

As stated earlier, a primary source of wage differentiation is different choices in major, and as a result, occupational segregation. In order to eliminate the wage gap, then, we must push

for men and women to pursue the same kinds of courses, majors, and jobs. If we assume that gender differences are the result of socialization rather than innate biological differences, there is no reason that men and women should inherently desire one industry or occupation over another. We see evidence of this theory in occupation distribution when examining the labor force following World War II. In fact, following the war, many women are known to have been notoriously “forced out of high-paying jobs in traditionally male industries, such as aircraft and machinery, through seniority systems that favored returning servicemen (Goldin, 1991, p. 750).

The literature suggests that occupational choices are highly influenced by society, and thus, a reevaluation of norms may help narrow the wage gap. In fact, a study by Mulligan and Rubinstein (2008) indicates “that most of the observed narrowing of the gender wage gap between the 1970s and the 1990s is attributable to change in the occupational composition of the labor force over that period” (CONSAD, 2009, p. 7). Particularly noteworthy is the fact that women have increased the market orientation of their courses of study in high school and college by increasing their emphasis on courses in mathematics and business. Thus, the median wages of women have risen more rapidly than the median wages of men because the behavior of women in relation to the labor market has become increasingly similar to the behavior of men. (CONSAD, 2009, p. 7).

This study suggests not only that women are equally capable of pursuing traditionally male careers, and enjoy doing so, but also that these choices are primarily the result of a socialization process.

Thus, in order to narrow the wage gap, young girls and boys must be encouraged in similar ways towards the labor market. As a society, we must recognize that girls can become women equally capable of pursuing the maths and sciences; and, just as importantly, we must

give boys the option to become nurturing men who pursue traditionally female careers. This shift will require an attitudinal shift of parents, mentors, and educators, a reevaluation of societal norms, and a reduction in shaming practices by all individuals.

### **Familial choices.**

Equally important to the elimination of the wage gap are the familial choices made by men and women, particularly those in relationships with one another. In order to give these men and women equal chances in the labor market, men should be strongly encouraged to view child rearing as a shared responsibility, rather than assuming that women will be, or are the best, primary caregivers. This change will require a significant attitudinal shift whereby men are willing to work more flexible hours and care for their children. To successfully eliminate the wage gap and further gender equity, society must encourage this ideal.

This attitudinal shift would benefit from a change in public policy as well. For example, several countries have initiated paternity leave acts in order to achieve gender equality in the labor market. Arnarson and Mitra (2001) discuss specifically The Icelandic Act on Maternity/Paternity and Parental Leave of 2000, which extended the leave from six to nine months, while

parents who were active in the labor market were paid 80% of their average salaries during the leave. The 9 months' leave was distributed so that mothers could take 3 months' leave, fathers could take 3 months' leave and the remaining 3 months could be shared by the mother or father in any manner that the parents saw fit. (p. 677)

As a result of acts like these, men devote more time to childcare, and expand the labor market opportunities for women. For example, "women can work longer hours, enter high-paying occupations that demand time and fewer interruptions and find full-time jobs. [In addition,] the

legislation reduces possible discrimination from employers who believe that these young women" (p. 680) may work inconsistently due to childbirth or childcare, or otherwise entirely leave the company sooner than non-mothers would.

### CONCLUSION

Cultural and societal expectations of gender play a significant role in shaping male and female behavior in society. When embodied, these expectations become norms through positive reinforcement. Conversely, gender-inappropriate behavior is actively discouraged—even viewed as punishable—and, thus, socially stigmatized. This gender polarization reinforces the belief that what is acceptable or appropriate for females is not acceptable or appropriate for males (and vice versa), which is especially problematic when coupled with beliefs that one gender is superior to another.

Because the public is often unaware of the assumptions they carry in regard to conventional gender roles, this polarized socialization of men and women plays a large role in the gender-wage gap. Today, gender remains the key factor in determining wage rate. Though the studies presented here indicate that a significant portion of the wage gap may be the result of overt discrimination—between 7-12 percent depending on age—a large portion of the gap is explained by differing investments in human capital.

While this explained portion of the gender wage-gap can is often argued to be the result of free choice—studies have found that college major, occupation, industry, sector, hours worked, workplace flexibility, experience, educational attainment, enrollment status, GPA, institution selectivity, age, race/ethnicity, region, marital status, and number of children account for somewhere between 11 and 19 percent of the differences in men's and women's wage

earnings (AAUW, 2013, p.)—these ‘choices’ themselves may be the result of discriminatory social practices.

While men are socialized almost entirely by, and for, the labor market, women appear to be socialized for marriage and family. Thus, if we hope to attain gender equality, and pay equity, we must encourage men and women to invest similarly in their own human capital. First, all individuals must understand the encompassing impacts of wage discrimination—not only on women, but on society as a whole. Second, women must be educated to the fact that their own choices may lead to economic disadvantages, and, if they so desire, choose different investments in their own human capital. Third, men must accept a greater responsibility in caring for their families. And finally, society must initiate structural policies which encourage these shifts in choice.

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## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the portion of the gender wage gap which is considered explained by various economic factors. Specifically, I examined the socialization practices which lead men and women to make differing choices regarding their own human capital, and thus result in women's economic disadvantage. I argue that in order to eliminate the 'adjusted wage gap,' society must understand and modify the gendered social norms which shape the identities and choices of male and female labor market participants.