Sixty Cents to a Man's Dollar
By Ann Crittenden

RECONSTRUCTING GENDER
A Multicultural Anthology

Third Edition

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In the Bible, in Leviticus, God instructs Moses to tell the Israelites that women, for purposes of tithing, are worth thirty shekels while men are worth fifty—a ratio of 60 percent.¹ For fifty years, from about 1930 to 1980, the value of employed women eerily reflected that biblical ratio: The earnings of full-time working women were only 60 percent of men’s earnings. In the 1980s, that ratio began to change. By 1993, women working full-time were earning an average of seventy-seven cents for every dollar men earned. (In 1997, the gap widened again, as the median weekly earnings of full-time working women fell to 75 percent of men’s earnings.)

But lo and behold, when we look closer, we find the same old sixty cents to a man’s dollar. The usual way to measure the gender wage gap is by comparing the hourly earnings of men and women who work full-time year-round. But this compares only the women who work like men with men—a method that neatly excludes most women. As we have

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seen, only about half of the mothers of children under eighteen have full-time, year-round paying jobs.²

To find the real difference between men's and women's earnings, one would have to compare the earnings of all male and female workers, both full- and part-time. And guess what one discovers? The average earnings of all female workers in 1999 were 59 percent of men's earnings.³ Women who work for pay are still stuck at the age-old biblical value put on their labor.

My research turned up other intriguing reflections of the 60 percent ratio: A survey of 1982 graduates of the Stanford Business School found that ten years after graduation, the median income of the full- and part-time employed female M.B.A.s amounted to $81,300, against the men's median income of $139,100. Again, the women's share is 58 percent. Another study, of 1974 graduates of the University of Michigan Law School, revealed that in the late 1980s the women's average earnings were 61 percent of the men's—despite the fact that 96 percent of the women were working, and that the men and women were virtually identical in terms of training. The authors of this study concluded that the women's family responsibilities were "certainly the most important single cause of sex differences in earnings."⁴

Conservatives frequently tout women's economic gains in order to charge that women's advocates who haven't folded their tents and gone home must be making up things to complain about. In a polemic titled *Who Stole Feminism?* Christina Hoff Sommers lambasts feminist activists for wearing a button stating that women earn fifty-nine cents to a man's dollar, which, she claims, is "highly misleading and now egregiously out of date."⁵ Sommers is right if we skim over what she calls such "prosaic matters" as the fact that people who have primary responsibility for a child have different work patterns from people without caring responsibilities. But if we are interested in the real differences in the earnings of employed men and women, those buttons still tell the real story.

The Cost of Being a Mother

A small group of mostly female academic economists has added another twist to the story. Their research reveals that working mothers not only earn less than men, but also less per hour than childless women, even after such differences as education and experience are factored out. The pay gap between mothers and nonmothers under age thirty-five is now larger than the wage gap between young men and women.
The first comprehensive estimates of the cost of motherhood in terms of lost income were made in England by Heather Joshi of the City University in London and Hugh Davies of Birkbeck College of the University of London. The two economists estimated that a typical middle-class British mother of two forfeits almost half of her potential lifetime earnings.  

In the United States, similar work has been done by Jane Waldfogel at Columbia University. Waldfogel set out to assess the opportunity cost of motherhood by asking exactly how much of the dramatic wage gains made by women in the 1980s went to women without family responsibilities. How many of the female winners in the 1980s were people like Donna Shalala, Janet Reno, Elizabeth Dole, and Carole Bellamy, the director of UNICEF: childless women whose work patterns were indistinguishable from those of traditional males. Back in the late 1970s, Waldfogel found, the difference between men’s and women’s pay was about the same for all women. Nonmothers earned only slightly higher wages. But over the next decade things changed.  

By 1991, thirty-year-old American women without children were making 90 percent of men’s wages, while comparable women with children were making only 70 percent. Even when Waldfogel factored out all the women’s differences, the disparity in their incomes remained—something she dubbed the “family wage gap.”

Why do working mothers earn so much less than childless women? Academic researchers have worried over this question like a dog over a bone but haven’t turned up a single, definitive answer.

Waldfogel argues that the failure of employers to provide paid maternity leaves is one factor that leads to the family wage gap in the United States. This country is one of only six nations in the world that does not require a paid leave. (The others are Australia, New Zealand, Lesotho, Swaziland, and Papua New Guinea.) With no right to a paid leave, many American mothers who want to stay at home with a new baby simply quit their jobs, and this interruption in employment costs them dearly in terms of lost income. Research in Europe reveals that when paid maternity leaves were mandated, the percentage of women remaining employed rose, and women’s wages were higher, unless the leaves lasted more than a few months.

In the United States as well, women who are able to take formal paid maternity leave do not suffer the same setback in their wages as comparably placed women who do not have a right to such leaves. This is a significant benefit to mothers in the five states, including California, New York, and New Jersey, that mandate temporary disability insurance coverage for pregnancy and childbirth.

Paid leaves are so valuable because they don’t seem to incur the same penalties that employers impose on even the briefest of unpaid career interruptions. A good example is the experience of the 1974 female graduates of the University of Michigan Law School. During their first fifteen years after law school, these women spent an average of only 3.3 months out of the
workplace, compared with virtually no time out for their male classmates. More than one-quarter of the women had worked part-time, for an average of 10.1 months over the fifteen years, compared with virtually no part-time work among the men. While working full-time, the women put in only 10 percent fewer hours than full-time men, again not a dramatic difference.

But the penalties for these slight distinctions between the men’s and women’s work patterns were strikingly harsh. Fifteen years after graduation, the women’s average earnings were not 10 percent lower, or even 20 percent lower, than the men’s, but almost 40 percent lower. Fewer than one-fifth of the women in law firms who had worked part-time for more than six months had made partner in their firms, while more than four-fifths of the mothers with little or no part-time work had made partner.13

Another survey of almost 200 female M.B.A.s found that those who had taken an average of only 8.8 months out of the job market were less likely to reach upper-middle management and earned 17 percent less than comparable women who had never had a gap in their employment.14

Working-class women are also heavily penalized for job interruptions, although these are the very women who allegedly “choose” less demanding occupations that enable them to move in and out of the job market without undue wage penalties. The authors of one study concluded that the negative repercussions of taking a little time out of the labor force were still discernible after twenty years.15 In blue-collar work, seniority decides who is eligible for better jobs, and who is “bumped” in the event of layoffs. Under current policies, many women lose their seniority forever if they interrupt their employment, as most mothers do. Training programs, required for advancement, often take place after work, excluding the many mothers who can’t find child care.16

Mandatory overtime is another handicap placed on blue-collar mothers. Some 45 percent of American workers reported in a recent survey that they had to work overtime with little or no notice.17 In 1994 factory workers put in the highest levels of overtime ever reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in its thirty-eight years of tracking the data. Where does that leave a woman who has to be home in time for dinner with the kids? Out of a promotion and maybe out of a job. Increasingly in today’s driven workplace, whether she is blue- or white-collar, a woman who goes home when she is supposed to go home is going to endanger her economic well-being.

The fact that many mothers work part-time also explains some of the difference between mother’s and comparable women’s hourly pay. (About 65 percent of part-time workers are women, most of whom are mothers.)18 Employers are not required to offer part-time employees equal pay and benefits for equal work. As a result, nonstandard workers earn on average about 40 percent less an hour than full-time workers, and about half of that wage gap persists even for similar workers in similar jobs.

Many bosses privately believe that mothers who work part-time have a “recreational” attitude toward work, as one Maryland businessman assured me. Presumably, this belief makes it easier to justify their exploitation. But
the working conditions they face don’t sound very much like recreation. A recent survey by Catalyst, a research organization focused on women in business, found that more than half of the people who had switched to part-time jobs and lower pay reported that their workload stayed the same. Ten percent reported an increase in workload after their income had been reduced. Most of these people were mothers.  

Another factor in the family wage gap is the disproportionate number of mothers who operate their own small businesses, a route often taken by women who need flexibility during the child-rearing years. Female-owned small businesses have increased twofold over small businesses owned by men in recent years. In 1999, women owned 38 percent of all U.S. businesses, compared with only 5 percent in 1972, a remarkable increase that is frequently cited as evidence of women’s economic success. One new mother noted that conversations at play groups “center as much on software and modems as they do on teething and ear infections.”

Less frequently mentioned is the fact that many of these women-owned businesses are little more than Mom-minus-Pop operations: one woman trying to earn some money on the side, or keep her career alive, during the years when her children have priority. Forty-five percent of women-owned businesses are home-based. And the more than one-third of businesses owned by women in 1996 generated only 16 percent of the sales of all U.S. businesses in that year.

In 1997, although women were starting new businesses at twice the rate of men, they received only 2 percent of institutional venture capital, a principal source of financing for businesses with serious prospects for growth. Almost one-quarter of female business owners financed their operations the same way that they did their shopping: with their credit cards.

Some researchers have suggested that mothers earn less than childless women because they are less productive. This may be true for some mothers who work at home and are subject to frequent interruptions, or for those who are exhausted from having to do most of the domestic chores, or distracted by creaky child-care arrangements. But the claim that mothers have lower productivity than other workers is controversial and unproven. It is easier to demonstrate that working mothers face the same old problem that has bedeviled women in the workplace for decades.

It’s Discrimination, Stupid

It is revealing that those occupations requiring nurturing skills, such as child care, social work, and nursing, are the most systematically underpaid, relative to their educational and skill demands. These are also, of course, the occupations with the highest percentage of females. But men who are primary caregivers also pay a heavy price: a “daddy tax,” if you will. This suggests that at least part of the huge tax on mothers’ earnings is due to work rules and practices and habits of mind that discriminate against anyone, of either sex,
who cannot perform like an “unencumbered” worker. In other words, discrimination against all good parents, male or female.

Surveys have found that wives may adore husbands who share the parenting experience, but employers distinctly do not. A majority of managers believe that part-time schedules and even brief parental leaves are inappropriate for men. When Houston Oiler David Williams missed one Sunday game to be with his wife after the birth of their first child, he was docked $111,111.

A survey of 348 male managers at twenty Fortune 500 companies found that fathers from dual-career families put in an average of two fewer hours per week—or about 4 percent less—than men whose wives were at home. That was the only difference between the two groups of men. But the fathers with working wives, who presumably had a few more domestic responsibilities, earned almost 20 percent less. There it is again: a 20 percent family wage gap.

“Face time still matters as much or more than productivity in many companies,” Charles Rodgers, a management consultant in Boston, said. Rodgers told me about a man in a high-tech company who regularly came to work two hours early so that he could occasionally leave early for Little League games with his son. He was given a poor performance rating.

Such discrimination is hard to quantify, but it is potentially a powerful political issue. When the Clinton administration announced that it was banning employment discrimination against parents working in the federal government, there were so many calls to a White House staffer assigned to the case that her machine stopped taking messages.

Only eight states currently have laws prohibiting discrimination against parents in the workplace. Examples include taking a primary parent off a career track out of an assumption that the individual couldn’t do the work; hiring someone without children over a more qualified person with children; forcing a primary parent to work overtime, or else; and refusing to hire a single parent, though the employer hires single, childless people. In the course of my reporting, I encountered numerous mothers who felt that their employer’s refusal to arrange a shorter workweek, particularly after the birth of a second baby, amounted to career-destroying discrimination.

NOTES


8. Jane Waldfogel, “Understanding the ‘Family Gap’ in Pay for Women with Children,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 12, no. 1 (winter 1998): 137–56. See also Waldfogel, “The Family Gap for Young Women in the United States and Britain,” *Journal of Labor Economics* 11 (1998): 305–19. Looking at two different cohorts of young women, one averaging age thirty in 1981 and the other about thirty in 1990, Waldfogel found that the nonmothers’ wages rose from 72 percent to 90 percent of men’s between 1981 and 1990. But the wages of mothers rose less, from 60 percent to only 70 percent of men the same age during the same period. The more children a woman had, the lower her earnings, even with all other factors being equal.

Waldfogel also uncovered a wage gap of 20 percentage points for young women in the United Kingdom. Nonmothers at age thirty-three earn 84 percent of men’s pay, while mothers earn only 64 percent. See Jane Waldfogel, “The Family Gap for Young Women in the US and UK: Can Maternity Leave Make a Difference?” Malcolm Wiener Center for Social Policy, Harvard University, October 1994, pp. 1, 20.


11. Christopher J. Ruhm, “The Economic Consequences of Parental Leave Mandates: Lessons from Europe,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* CXIII, no. 1 (1998): 285–317. Ruhm found that longer leaves (of nine months or more) were associated with a slight reduction in women’s relative wages, but Waldfogel discovered that mothers in Britain who exercised their right to a ten-month paid maternity leave and returned to their original employer had wages no different from those of childless women.


12. Heidi Hartmann, Institute for Women’s Policy Research, personal communication, January 8, 1995. Hartmann’s research has shown that fully 11 percent of women who have no paid leave have to go on public assistance during their time with a new baby.

14. This 1993 study was coauthored by Joy Schneer of Rider University’s College of Business Administration and Frieda Reitman, professor emeritus at Pace University’s Lubin School of Business.


16. For a good discussion of the obstacles to mothers’ employment in relatively well-paying blue-collar work, see Joan Williams, Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 76–81.

17. This survey of 1,000 workers was conducted by researchers at the University of Connecticut and Rutgers University, and was reported in the Wall Street Journal, May 18, 1999.

18. A survey of more than 2,000 people in four large corporations found that 75 percent of the professionals working part-time were women who were doing so because of child-care obligations. Only 11 percent of the male managers surveyed expected to work part-time at some point in their careers, compared with 36 percent of women managers. A New Approach to Flexibility: Managing the Work/Time Equation (New York: Catalyst, 1997), pp. 25–26.

19. There is other evidence that many so-called part-timers are increasingly working what used to be considered full-time—thirty-five to forty hours a week—for lower hourly pay than regular full-timers. See Reed Abelson, “Part-time Work for Some Adds Up to Full-Time Job,” New York Times, November 2, 1998.

20. In the five years from 1988 through 1992, the number of women-owned sole proprietorships, partnerships, and similar businesses soared 43 percent, compared with overall growth of 26 percent in such businesses. Wall Street Journal, January 29, 1996.


22. Information on women-owned businesses provided by the National Foundation for Women Business Owners in Washington, D.C., September 2000.


25. On corporate attitudes toward part-time work for men, see the study cited in note 17. Another study found that 63 percent of large employers thought it was inappropriate for a man to take any parental leave, and another 17 percent thought it unreasonable unless the leave was limited to two weeks or less. Martin H. Malin, “Fathers and Parental Leave,” Texas Law Review 72 (1994): 1047, 1089; cited in Williams, Unbending Gender, p. 100.
