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SOUTH BEND -- Melissa Martin stands in front of the Madeleva Hall auditorium at Saint Mary's College, staring at the delicious-looking scene before her.

Across the room, women have taken bites out of chocolate chip cookies and are now raising them in the air.

At first glance, the soft cookies may look tasty, but what they represent might be enough to make some women lose their appetite.

"That's the gap between what women earn and what men earn," said Martin, the chairwoman of the Indiana Commission for Women, as she stared at the partially bitten cookies across the room. "Would you want to give that to your neighbor? And would they accept it? I don't think so."

The cookies were Martin's example of the ongoing disparity between men's and women's pay -- an issue Martin wanted to drive home this week during Saint Mary's "Bridging the Gap: Reaching Pay Equity in Indiana."

"California has the sun," Martin said with a smile to women across the room. "Florida has the ocean. We may not be the best state, but let's make it a top state for women. ...æTo have a state where we all can say, 'This is where I want to be, this is where I choose to be because this is where I can thrive and opportunity abounds.'"

Wage gap

A wage gap is defined as the difference between median wages earned by men and median wages earned by women, Martin said.

And Hoosiers are no stranger to this wage gap reality.

"For every dollar that the average Hoosier man earns," Martin said, "the average Hoosier woman earns two quarters, two dimes and two pennies -- 72 cents."

The widest gaps in Indiana, Martin said, seem to be in the northern part of the state. Porter County had the largest wage gap, while Decatur had the smallest, she said.

Overall, more than half the jobs -- 55 percent -- that Indiana women have are low-paying jobs (less than \$30,000), Martin said. Women of color have a higher labor force participation, she said, and yet the gap is even wider -- by nearly 2 percent.

Martin said the wage gap can be caused by a variety of factors, particularly our culture's outdated societal beliefs and attitudes. Of course contributing to the issue, she said, is the reality of job clustering.

About 55 percent of working women in Indiana are in one out of several professions, Martin said. These range from serving as administrative assistants, to serving as registered nurses, retail salespeople, food counter workers and elementary school teachers.

Standing up, stepping forward and addressing the wage gap is a worthwhile goal, Martin said, for a number of reasons.

For one, workplace wage gap strategies can lower absenteeism rates and decrease workplace stress, Martin said. Plus, women who aren't employed to their full potential represent more than just a wage gap; they represent a productivity gap, she added.

Besides that, everybody bears the cost when women are undervalued, Martin added.

When kids fail in school because their parents can't afford the basic necessities at home, all of our futures are in doubt, Martin said. When people come to work sick because they can't afford to take a day off, our public health is in danger, she said.

On the other hand, when women can pay their bills, their lives get a little bit easier. When they can fulfill extra goals such as taking their kids to the doctor, life gets even better.

And when they can save money for their kids' college education, family disaster funds or even retirement, life gets better all the more.

"Most women, I know, would be absolutely giddy," Martin said. "That's the reality."

Gap solutions

Bridging the gap first means seeing an attitude shift in our culture, Martin said.

That means having a more positive outlook about the place and value of women in the economy. That also means seeing more women in a wider variety of occupations.

Naturally, it also means sharing family responsibilities among family members, workplaces and government, and promoting greater use of gender-sensitive pay practices.

Businesses in particular can follow several key practices to help women bridge the gap, such as reinvesting in women, said Virginia Calvin, chancellor of Ivy Tech.

For example, companies could ensure that professional development opportunities are provided with equal frequency to men and women. These include education, networking and mentoring, according to a panel on "Best Practices" at the "Bridging the Gap" conference.

Of course, it's just as vital for businesses to eliminate the 'good old boys' network and encourage women to stand up for themselves by going after educational benefits, increased pay and the like.

"Businesses have a need, and should have a requirement, to foster a culture that encourages women to ask for more money," said Michelle Merritt, national director of recruitment for AgentHR.

As businesses strive to create a diverse workforce, companies likewise should look for the distribution of men and women within levels of management and various areas of the companies. Often, women are found in supporting roles of the business and aren't as prevalent in the key areas of operation.

Companies, in addition, could provide work-family balance initiatives, said Ujvala Rajadhyaksha, associate professor in the Business Administration and Economics department at Saint Mary's College.

Research shows that work-life balance reduces hidden costs to companies such as poor productivity, high turnover, low morale and difficulty recruiting new talent. The John Hancock company found that the payback for every dollar invested in family-friendly policies was \$3.83, resulting in more than \$500,000 in savings in one year, according to the "Best Practices" panel.

As a result, programs such as flex-time, telecommuting and job sharing are recommended for companies, the panel said.

The panel further suggested that states consider implementing a state-sponsored, paid medical leave or provide incentives for businesses to provide such a paid medical leave to their employees.

The government also should implement policies that require or give large incentives for businesses to have external organizational reviews performed, the panel said. This will ensure pay equity and a positive business climate for all members of the workforce.

Credit: Tribune Staff Writer