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NOW will highlight equal-pay issue at meeting in Indy this weekend

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The paychecks of working American women have long been smaller than those of men, and in the current recession, that has turned out to be a mixed blessing for families.

That's because women in lower-paying jobs have tended to avoid the ax when it comes to layoffs. Through April, nearly three-quarters of the jobs lost since the recession began in late 2007 had been held by men.

But as a consequence, families that formerly had two incomes now are struggling to stay afloat on the smaller paycheck.

Nationally, women earn about 78 cents for every \$1 a man takes home, and in Indiana, it's even less -- 72 cents, according to the most recent data. Minority women fare even worse in Indiana. Black women earn 65 percent of what white men make, while Hispanic women earn only 50 percent, according to federal labor statistics.

That disparity during what some economists are calling a "man-cession" is renewing calls for pay equality for women, and the topic will be a focus during this weekend's National Organization for Women conference in Indianapolis.

"In times of economic crisis, when the size of a woman's paycheck is highlighted, the focus on pay equity can become more striking," said Julianne Malveaux, president of Bennett College for Women in North Carolina.

"This is an opportunity for women's organizations, including NOW, to raise this issue," said Malveaux, a longtime activist on economic equity issues and a speaker at this weekend's conference.

NOW already has raised the issue, encouraging its members to contact their U.S. senators and urge them to vote for the Paycheck Fairness Act, which would close some loopholes in the Equal Pay Act of 1963.

Some hope the measure and others like it have a better chance under President Barack Obama's administration. Among them is Lettie Oliver, a NOW member and associate director of Council 62 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union in Indianapolis.

Oliver noted that Obama practically kicked off his presidency by signing the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act in January, affirming that discrimination continues with each unfair paycheck and thereby extending the time that legal recourse can be taken. Obama also supports passage of the Paycheck Fairness Act.

The economic downturn reinforces the need for fairness in pay, Oliver said.

"It just shows we have to stay true to our traditions: There should be no discrimination, no difference," she said. "Equal pay for equal work."

Times changing

Billie Dragoo, founder and chief executive officer of RetuCare, an Indianapolis medical staffing company, said she thinks the tide is turning because employers increasingly realize the value of a fairly compensated work force and, in particular, that it pays to pay women well.

Women make 80 percent of the buying decisions, and if businesses want those women to be customers, they are going to have to earn enough to afford to buy products and services, she said.

Still, Dragoo, who this month began a two-year term on the 12-member board of the National Association of Women Business Owners -- the first Hoosier named to the national board -- is outraged by the slow increase in women's wages.

In 1963, when the Equal Pay Act was passed, women earned 59 cents to every dollar a man earned. In 2007, the national average had increased to 78 cents.

"So, 44 years is what it took us to get a 19-cent increase?" Dragoo said. "I mean, it's ridiculous. It's obvious that something needs to be done."

That difference, however, might be one reason more men have lost their jobs than women.

The industries feeling the brunt of the recession -- manufacturing, construction and related industries -- tend to be male-dominated. Women historically have worked in areas such as health care and education, sectors less vulnerable to economic cycles and that often allow employees more flexibility to tend to family needs.

But as more men lose their jobs, women are gaining in another statistical column: the percentage of the total work force.

In May 1949, women made up 29.2 percent of the labor force, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This May, 60 years later, that number had grown to 47.3 percent.

Although the rate of women entering the work force slowed in the 1990s, some observers suggest that by the time this recession ends, the departure of men from the labor force could put women close to the 50 percent mark.

Factoring in agricultural employment, BLS figures show women accounted for 49.1 percent of the labor force at the end of 2008.

Sharper focus

Even before families began to rely on the incomes of two parents, pay equity for women was a key issue for organizations such as NOW, and the trends of the recession have sharpened the focus.

Among those fighting for equity is Sue Errington, who was president of Indiana NOW in 1977, when Indiana became the last state to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment.

But Errington, now a Democratic state senator from Muncie, said that doesn't mean the issue has died.

In the spring, Errington and co-sponsors won passage of a measure in the General Assembly to establish a commission to study possible disparities between male and female workers in state government.

In past years, she said, attempts at a broader study of pay in the public and private sectors failed, so the scaled-back survey is at least a start.

In the Hayes household on Indianapolis' Southside, the pay disparity between Steve and Debra was largely related to their decision that Debra would work part time to give her more time for child care and other responsibilities at home.

But their lifestyle has been built around Steve working full time, and when he lost his job of 12 years in December, it threw the family's finances in turmoil.

Steve, 46, had been a systems engineer for the Plainfield operations of OHL, a Tennessee company that distributes goods manufactured by other companies.

Debra is an accountant for a health-care management company, working about 30 hours a week. She'd like to increase her hours, but her company also is tightening up.

To help make ends meet, the couple refinanced their mortgage, canceled their summer camping trip and shifted their health insurance to Debra's job. Even the dog was switched to generic food.

But Debra's smaller paycheck won't cover the life they had built and, she acknowledges, had taken for granted.

"The best benefit is that we just recognize how well we were doing before and how we were blowing it," she said. "I'll *never* go back to that again."

Additional Facts

ABOUT THE MEETING

On-site registration will be open today for the annual convention of the National Organization for Women, which runs through Sunday at the Sheraton Indianapolis City Centre Hotel.

For conference information, go to www.now.org/organization/conference/2009/faq.html .

For descriptions of the workshops, go to www.now.org/organization/conference/2009/workshops.html .
