

Season 2 Episode 1:

Connecting the Gender Pay Gap to Everyone's Health

[00:00:00.00] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:11.40] This is In Solidarity, a podcast where we draw connections between power, place, and health and discuss how our lives, our fates, are all interconnected. Here are your hosts, Ericka Burroughs-Girardi and Beth Silver.

[00:00:25.89] Hi there, and welcome to In Solidarity. I'm Ericka Burroughs-Girardi here with my co-host, Beth Silver. Hey, Beth. Great to be together again for another series of In Solidarity.

[00:00:37.83] And great to be with you, Ericka. Love when we're in the studio together this time from our offices on the campus of the University of Wisconsin. As a reminder, this is In Solidarity, a podcast from County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. It's a national program of the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

[00:01:00.75] Our first series on In Solidarity tackled the racial wealth gap. We had some fascinating conversations with scholars, authors, activists, and people making a change in their communities.

[00:01:13.11] And in this series of In Solidarity, we're tackling another gap. This time, we're investigating the gender pay gap.

[00:01:21.30] Did you know, Ericka, that women still earn on average \$0.80 for every dollar men earn in this country? Women of color earn even less. And add to that, women with advanced degrees earn less on average than men with college degrees.

[00:01:36.39] That's right, Beth. The gender pay gap has persisted in this country despite all of the educational gains women have made over the last 50 years. If we're going to move toward health equity in our society, making sure that women are paid fairly the same as men for the same work, we have to ensure women have equal opportunity in the workforce. In fact, that's why their gender pay gap was one of the things that we focused on during this year's rankings release. You can read more about it in our national findings report at countyhealthrankings.org.

[00:02:10.41] Absolutely, Ericka. Our national findings report focused on eliminating the gender pay gap along with ensuring a living wage, making child care accessible and affordable, and funding our schools to provide quality education for all children.

[00:02:26.58] We're going to bring on several guests who will help us unpack what we mean when we say the gender pay gap. We'll talk about how we got here, how it affects health, why some harmful myths persist about the gender pay gap, and what we can do to close the gap.

[00:02:41.32] So many interesting angles to the gender pay gap, Ericka. In just a few minutes, we're going to bring on Dr. Elise Gould from the Economic Policy Institute. But first, we're going to talk with one of our colleagues from County Health Rankings & Roadmaps who's going to explain the data we included in our national findings report.

[00:02:59.70] Dr. Elizabeth Blumberg is a scientist on our population health team. She has worked extensively on gender pay gap data. Hi, Elizabeth. Welcome to In Solidarity.

[00:03:09.77] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:03:16.16] Elizabeth, let's start with the basics. Are we making any progress closing the gender pay gap? And are all groups making gains? Or is the progress uneven?

[00:03:28.64] Sure. So it's been nearly 60 years since the Equal Pay Act was passed to ban wage discrimination based on gender. And yet, women still earn less than men do, a little more than \$0.80 for every dollar on average for the same roles in nearly every occupation. Gender employment discrimination remains a constant in the United States and influences all stages of employment from hiring, to performance reviews, to layoffs.

[00:03:55.25] And even though women's educational attainment has surpassed that of men for decades, they're often segregated into low-wage jobs and are still paid less than men for the same work. The gap also widens as women attain higher positions and progress through their careers. Other issues, such as redlining and discriminatory hiring practices, have made this even worse for women and communities of color, segregating them from economic opportunities. Rural areas of the country are also heavily impacted due to systematic disinvestment in their economies. At the end of the day, having enough assets and money to cover basic needs and save for future setbacks is fundamental for women and communities to achieve economic security and the good health necessary to thrive.

[00:04:41.77] Elizabeth, you did a lot of work on the gender pay gap for our national findings report and for our recent data spotlight. Can you tell us a little more about some of the key findings you highlighted in these reports?

[00:04:54.31] Yeah, absolutely. Gaps in pay based on gender impact the health of women in families and communities. Because of this, we examined the gender pay gap defined as the ratio of women's median earnings to men's median earnings for all full time year-round workers. And we examined this for all counties in the US with the most recent census data.

[00:05:15.37] What we found was that women earn less than men on average in almost every county with the size of the gap varying across the country, but concentrations of wide gaps in the South and the Western plains of the US. We also looked at median earnings and pay gaps across races and ethnicities and also across levels of urbanization. Hispanic, American, Indian, and Black women, along with women living in rural areas, earn the least across groups.

[00:05:41.38] But we found the largest pay gaps exists between men and women living in rural or suburban areas. And finally, when comparing it to the average annual salary of a white man,

we found that women of all races and ethnicities must work much longer to earn the same amount. In fact, Hispanic women would have to work on average an additional 299 days or nearly 10 months longer than white men just to earn the same annual salary.

[00:06:08.72] Elizabeth, how did the pandemic affect the gender pay gap?

[00:06:13.35] So we still have yet to see the extent of the wide ranging and long lasting impact the pandemic will have on our society, our health, and issues like the gender pay gap. However, we do know that women's participation in the labor force dropped to a 30-year low during the pandemic. And this was a result of layoffs and added caregiver and educating responsibilities.

[00:06:33.41] Throughout the pandemic, lower paid women and women of color have unequally faced things like unemployment, steeper pay cuts, and lower pay offers when they returned to the workforce. Adding to all of this, one out of every three women has a job defined as essential. And women of color are more likely to have an essential job than any other group, yet they still make much less than their male equals for the same work.

[00:06:57.86] These underpaid and undervalued roles also are less likely to include employer provided benefits and safe workplace practices. In fact, women of color comprise the majority of health care workers who have died throughout this crisis. So because of these issues, pay gaps among women of color have widened over the course of the pandemic. COVID-19 could have wide reaching impacts on the gender and racial pay gap for years to come, compounding existing inequities in economic opportunity.

[00:07:26.70] In addition to what you said about how the pandemic affected it, where are we headed with the gender pay gap? When will we see this eliminated? And again, how does that differ for women of color and by region?

[00:07:39.29] Yeah. So since we're seeing stagnation and even worsening of trends of pay gaps recently, it doesn't appear these gaps will be eliminated any time soon. And since the gaps are so much wider for women of color, especially Hispanic women and also women living in rural areas, we have that much more work to do to ensure all women and their families have the opportunity for financial stability and economic security. The pay gap really sheds light on the systemic undervaluing of women's contributions to the workforce and the economy. But equal pay can be part of a recovery that begins to reverse these trends we're seeing in pay gaps and center for fairness and opportunity for all.

[00:08:17.75] Elizabeth, you had mentioned that redlining was a source or a reason why we see a gender pay gap. Can you make that connection for us?

[00:08:29.01] Sure. So historically, redlining has segregated people from economic opportunities in different places. And this has impacted both communities of color and women. And so when women have been historically segregated from the same economic opportunities as other people who might live not very far away from them, this means that they don't achieve the same level of opportunity or economic security in the long term. And this gets compounded over generations.

[00:09:04.34] Wow.

[00:09:05.36] You also said, Elizabeth, that it differs by region, that it's especially pronounced in the South and the Western plains. Why is that?

[00:09:13.04] That's a good question. I think there's still a lot we can research and look into as to why it would differ by certain regions. But I think it comes down to economic opportunity and even just a culture of women having equal access to things like education and jobs to reach their full potential.

[00:09:34.79] And Elizabeth, you also said that it differs by type of region, so much more pronounced in rural areas and also in suburban areas over urban areas. Why is that?

[00:09:46.67] Yeah. So I think it really comes down to economic opportunity, and diversity, and availability of jobs. We know that in rural areas, there's been systematic disinvestment in their economies and different opportunities for female or male dominated sectors. However, we do still see, even in female dominated sectors, that men earn more than women even for the same occupations.

[00:10:14.12] Elizabeth, this has been so informative. And I think you really helped set the stage for this series. So thank you so much for spending some time with us today.

[00:10:24.54] Yeah. Thanks for having me on.

[00:10:26.00] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:10:30.01] Our other guest today is Dr. Elise Gould with the Economic Policy Institute. Dr. Gould is a senior economist who researches wages, poverty, inequality, economic mobility, and health care. She has written extensively about the equal pay day and the gender pay gap. Please help me welcome Dr. Elise Gould. Hi, Dr. Gould, and thank you for joining us today.

[00:10:57.27] Thank you so much for inviting me.

[00:11:00.35] The theme that runs through our shows is the idea of social solidarity. We want to start by asking, what does social solidarity mean to you, and how does it influence the work you do?

[00:11:13.97] I love this question. When I think about it, I think a bit about my religion. And my religion recognizes the unique worth and dignity of all people regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, or any other identity or category. People are social beings, and our lives are interrelated and interdependent. Our humanity, I think, asks us to cultivate relationships, which elicit the best and reduce suffering and respecting that interdependent web of human existence.

[00:11:45.03] I bring this world view into the work I do, the relationships I form with my colleagues, and the economic questions I ask of the data. I believe it's important to center the

lives most vulnerable, in my case, those historically at the margins of the labor market, including, but not limited to women, men of color, those with lower levels of education or less opportunity, less bargaining power in the workplace, lower wages. Also, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the role of unions in increasing social and economic solidarity, including mine. I'm a proud member of IFPTE Local 70, the nonprofit employees union since 2003. I think of social solidarity in a way as considering the world where we doesn't require them.

[00:12:28.61] Dr. Gould, can you tell us a little more about the gender pay gap, how we got here, how it's changed over time, and where you see it going?

[00:12:38.41] So the gender pay gap is a huge concept. There are many different ways to measure the gender pay gap. You can look at wages on an hourly basis.

[00:12:49.21] You can look at wages, annual earnings, on an annual basis. You could look at full-time workers. You can look at workers with the same amount of education in the same profession at the same job at the same workplace.

[00:13:02.29] You could look at different parts of the wage distribution. And when you do that, you can see that there's a larger gender pay gap at the top end for higher wage workers than there is at the bottom end or even at the middle. At the lower end, there is a much smaller gender pay gap in part because of policies like the minimum wage that keeps wages from falling below a certain level. And so you see men and women at the lower end of the wage distribution have closer wages than those at the higher end.

[00:13:32.38] I think that over time, what we see in the data is that there has been some closing of that gender pay gap. But that's stagnated very much in the last decade or so. And we haven't seen that much improvement. But when I think going forward, I still remain pretty optimistic that we can look at the data and we can use evidence-based policymaking to try to make improvements and to improve the status of women across the country.

[00:13:58.06] Yeah. I want to talk about that a little bit more because some people argue that the gap exists because of things like women self-selecting into lower paid jobs. Now, you wrote a report called Women's Work and the Gender Pay Gap. In it, you argue that even these decisions around career choices are shaped by discrimination, societal norms, and other forces beyond women's control. What did you mean by that, and are you saying that society values women less and compensates their work less?

[00:14:33.65] That's a great question. There is this idea that women are choosing lower paid occupations, but in lower paid jobs. But the fact is that, as you said, there are lots of societal norms and expectations that lead to that.

[00:14:48.96] So by the time a woman earns her first dollar, her occupational choice is the culmination of years of education, differential guidance by mentors, expectations set by those who raised her, her family, her teachers, hiring practices affirms, and widespread norms and expectations about work-family balance, other responsibilities, those kinds of different societal expectations that are set by employers, coworkers, and society at large. And so it's not some sort

of vacuum. You don't walk into your job and leave behind all of those other expectations and all of that experience. That leads you to where you are, and that explains some of the differences, that kinds of occupational segregation is a huge factor.

[00:15:32.49] So even though there have been some improvements over the decades, much of those have been due to certain occupations opening up, also, investments made by women in terms of increasing their educational attainment, there still remains a certain amount of stuckness to women in terms of the opportunities that they have to get into certain jobs to be promoted into other jobs. So not only are women more likely to be in low-wage jobs. Men are more likely to be in high-paid jobs.

[00:16:00.80] As a society, we undervalue women's work. Those who work with children, those are work with the elderly, those are work with the sick, it's an important and valuable work that nearly everyone needs at some point in their lives, they will benefit from. But it's grossly undervalued in part because of who is doing that work. And not just women, but Black and Brown women, immigrant women, all of those factors play a role.

[00:16:26.48] Yeah. Thank you for starting that because it kind of leads into my next question because what we see historically is that when men have entered female-dominated professions, prestige and pay have gone up for those positions. So it's like that the work is being done, but the people doing it have greater societal value. Can you unpack that?

[00:16:48.44] Yeah, it happens in both directions. Absolutely. When we think about the kinds of jobs that women do now, there are professions that used to be male-dominated that are now female-dominated. And you don't see the kind of wage growth that you might have seen in another universe where men continue to dominate. And the same thing happens in the other direction. As fields become more filled with men, you actually do see differential wage growth.

[00:17:12.48] There's really a great body of literature that looks at that in different professions across the country. So I think that who is doing the work and not just the work that's being done is certainly playing a role. And it's not just women. It's looking at race. It's looking at age. It's looking at immigration status. Many of those play a role as well.

[00:17:32.82] Dr. Gould, another fascinating aspect of the gender pay gap is that according to your research, it narrowed from the '70s to the '90s, but since then, as you just alluded to, has stayed about the same despite the fact that women make up the majority of the college educated population. Why is that?

[00:17:53.21] It's kind of a million dollar question. Why have we not moved forward in society? Why have we not seen those kinds of improvements?

[00:18:01.73] I think there's many factors I mentioned already. Occupational segregation that has continued. When we think about the kind of rising inequality, economic inequality on all levels, wages, incomes, wealth, that kind of economic inequality where gains to a growing economy are disproportionately going to very few, those very few, again, are in male-dominated professions. We've allowed labor standards to erode, such as the minimum wage. And I mentioned that

women face a smaller penalty at the lower end of the wage distribution because of the minimum wage, so raising it will disproportionately advantaged women.

[00:18:37.50] And there's persistent discrimination. Reductions in unionization is certainly also a factor. When you look in the public sector or you look at unionized firms, there is a smaller gender pay gap because of the transparency of wages in terms of what people are getting paid is based much more directly on their own experience and education. And there's less room for the kind of discrimination that you see in workplaces that don't have those.

[00:19:03.78] I want to circle back to what you were talking about earlier about the racial and ethnic differences we see. How does the gender pay gap break down along racial and ethnic lines? Why, for example, do Hispanic women in this country have to work longer to make the same wage as the average white male?

[00:19:23.88] Yeah. Why, indeed? It seems like something that we should be able to get over. I think occupational segregation clearly plays a role here. It's not just a gendered phenomenon, but also a race and ethnic phenomenon in terms of who gets stuck into certain jobs and who doesn't, who has those opportunities. So obviously, discrimination plays a role.

[00:19:44.11] But even in the same jobs with the same amount of experience, Black and Hispanic women specifically are paid less on average than their white non-Hispanic male counterparts. This persists in both female and male-dominated professions. So it's a problem that's widespread. And absolutely, you cannot ignore the racial and ethnic components of that kind of discrimination and pay inequities.

[00:20:08.94] Given your years of research on the subject, is there anything about the gender pay gap that still surprises you?

[00:20:17.35] I think just the simple fact that people deny it exists. Every time I put out a paper, there's always comments on social media or from reporters about women choosing lower paid professions. People think that everyone gets paid what they deserve. People think that if you like your job or if you have a calling to do that work, then you can be paid less for it.

[00:20:41.35] But the evidence is so clear in the data that women are being paid less for the same jobs. So it's not just about occupational segregation and being in different jobs. Even in the same jobs, women are not getting the same due there.

[00:20:56.32] In addition to that, is it the compounding inequities over time that make the gender pay gap even more severe for older women? That is, the missed opportunities that you've referenced, the missed raises, years of lower pay. And how does that impact women's ability to build wealth?

[00:21:13.83] It's enormous. The motherhood penalty exacerbates the gender pay gap, not just the motherhood penalty, so the hit you get for maybe reducing your work hours or leaving the labor force for a little while, the opportunities for advancement are hindered. But also, you have other caregiving responsibilities.

[00:21:31.77] On average, women are more likely to take care of other family members, even if they're not taking care of their own children. And that gender pay gap on an hourly basis, every hour, every day, every week, every year compounds. And obviously, intergenerational mobility or lack thereof plays a role.

[00:21:49.45] So the opportunities for your children are limited if you don't have as much. And the ability to build that wealth and those opportunities for advancement are simply not there to the same extent they are for men. Again, on average, some women have more opportunities than some men do. But on average, we're talking about a pretty big gap that builds up over time.

[00:22:09.75] What does your research say about the connection between health and the gender pay gap?

[00:22:14.82] Well, we know that health is lessened with more economic deprivation. If you have less money, on average, your health status is going to be lower. You're going to face more health conditions. Hardship and stress matter for physical and mental health. If you have a lifetime of lower earnings and more stress, that will come at a cost to your health and your children's health.

[00:22:37.44] And Dr. Gould, I'm also curious about how the gender pay gap differ by place. I've read that it may take decades longer to close the gap in rural areas, for example.

[00:22:48.94] When I think about closing the gap, I think it's important to remember that much of the closing of the gender wage gap is not because of tremendous wage growth for women, but because of stagnant wages for men. Again, that's because of growing economic inequality. And yes, when you think about differences across the country, there are cultural differences in different areas maybe in rural areas versus cities or in the South versus the North. Opportunities to enter male-dominated or higher paid professions may be more limited in some places versus others. And the limitations placed on girls from a young age, those expectations and norms we already talked about, they have real implications for your career, for your prospects, for opportunities that you have in terms of having better earnings throughout your lifetime.

[00:23:34.10] We'll be getting into solutions in the next episode. But I want to know, what are some things you think would help close the gender wage gap?

[00:23:44.22] Right. That's what we want to know is how to fix this problem. I mean, I think that we have the data that shows that there is a problem, and we need to have the will to do something about it. There's no silver bullet to solving pay equity, but I think there's kind of a menu of policy options that can close not only the gender pay gap, but also gaps by race and ethnicity.

[00:24:02.43] This includes requiring federal reporting of pay by gender, race, and ethnicity, prohibiting employers from asking about pay history because that perpetuates the kind of pay discrimination that women have already faced. You could require employers to post pay bans when hiring, so that you have the information to know what kind of pay you can expect and make sure that there aren't gaps by gender or race. You could adequately staff and fund the Equal

Employment and Opportunity Commission and other agencies charged with enforcement of nondiscrimination laws.

[00:24:33.21] I also think about policies that reduce the demanding hours in certain high paid professions, jobs that require lots of availability on nights and weekends, jobs that are harder to balance with family responsibility. I'm not sure who thinks they're getting a productive hour in your 80th hour of work, but it would be game changing to get a handle on those excessive work hours and reduce it, make it better for people in those jobs and open up those opportunities to people who don't have them. We also need policies that lift wages for most workers while also reducing gender, and racial, and ethnic pay gaps, such as running the economy at full employment, raising the federal minimum wage, and protecting and strengthening workers' rights to bargain collectively for higher wages and benefits. That's a starting place.

[00:25:15.28] Yeah, such good stuff. Thank you so much, Dr. Gould. We appreciate you being here today.

[00:25:21.77] Yeah, we certainly do. Thank you so much, Dr. Gould.

[00:25:25.60] Thank you for inviting me. I think this is such an important and valuable conversation I look forward to the future episodes.

[00:25:31.71] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:25:37.50] What an interesting conversation with Dr. Gould. I appreciated how she spoke about the gains we've made, but that we've still got a long way to go for, quote, "women's work," as she calls it, to be valued as highly as men's work.

[00:25:51.30] Absolutely. We can celebrate our victories while also acknowledging that there's still lots of work to do. The pandemic certainly highlighted that.

[00:26:00.27] So true, Ericka. I think the part of the conversation that's going to stick with me is when Dr. Gould said that the thing that still surprises her about this topic that she's researched for so long is that people don't believe it, that there is a sense in the public that the gender pay gap doesn't exist. We're going to devote an entire episode to that later in this series, so happy to hear that she's thinking about it as well.

[00:26:24.66] That was an excellent way to start off this series, and there's more to come. Speaking of which, Beth, do you want to tell the audience who we have next?

[00:26:32.25] You got it. Next up on In Solidarity, we'll talk with Dr. Jessica Milli economist and founder of Research to Impact. It's a consulting practice that helps leverage data and stories to drive social impact. We'll be talking with her about how the gender pay gap affects women of color. And we'll talk about what it means for health, the toll it takes on women to be underpaid and undervalued. We'll also get into some of the solutions to the gender pay gap with Kirsten Frobom from our evidence and policy analysis team at County Health Rankings & Roadmaps.

[00:27:05.94] I can't wait, Beth. Dr. Milli has done some excellent research on the gender pay gap. Just this year, she co-authored two fascinating pieces. One looked at the causes behind wage and equality between women of color and white men.

[00:27:21.15] The other report is called The Economic, Educational, and Health Related Costs of being a woman. It was written for the Center for American Progress. And it concludes that closing the gender pay gap would not only, quote, "eliminate the disproportionate costs incurred by women, but also advance a more equitable economy for all."

[00:27:41.70] I'm really looking forward to talking with Dr. Milli and with Kirsten to explore the ways we could close the gender pay gap. Until then, I'm Beth.

[00:27:50.10] And I'm Ericka.

[00:27:51.39] And we're In Solidarity, connecting power, place, and health.

[00:27:59.86] In Solidarity is a production of County Health Rankings & Roadmaps from the University of Wisconsin with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Views expressed by guests of In Solidarity are their own. Their appearance on In Solidarity does not imply County Health Rankings & Roadmaps endorsement.

[00:28:18.07] To learn more about our guests' work, to discover additional resources on the topics we've discussed, or to find out how healthy your community is, visit us at countyhealthrankings.org.