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Narrowing of the Gender Pay Gap Stalls

Data from the Department of Labor (DOL) reveals that in recent years women have not gained as much ground in achieving equal pay with men as they did in the 1980s and early 1990s. This is especially true for well-educated women. David Leonhardt, "Gender Pay Gap. Once Narrowing, Is Stuck in Place," *The New York Times* (Dec. 24, 2006).

There has been traditionally a significant gap between the wages of men and women in the workforce. By the mid-90s, however, women were earning more than 75 cents for every dollar in hourly wages that men earned. That figure was up from 65 cents fifteen years earlier.

In the past ten years, there has been little movement in comparative wages, and well-educated women have actually lost a little ground. Last year, college-educated women ages 36 to 45 earned 74.7 cents for every dollar earned by men in the same demographic, a drop of 1 cent in a decade, according to analysis of the DOL data by the Economic Policy Institute.

The wage gap exists between the genders even when employees do similar work and have similar qualifications. This gap closed from 82 cents per dollar to 91 cents from the late 70s to the late 80s. But by the late 90s, the wage for women remained at 91 percent of that for men with the same work profile.

Commentary

The gap between men and women's pay scales does not necessarily mean an immediate increase in litigation. It may mean an increase in legislation, however.

Discrimination is one reason cited for the pay gap. Other reasons do exist, however, including that women are the traditional caretakers of children and often choose to stay at home for extended periods during their work careers. This time away from work extends the gap.

Whatever the reason, employers should carefully review how women in similar positions and duties are paid in comparison with their male counterparts and alleviate any differences.

One sign that courts are turning their head toward pay scale issues is the recent appellate court ruling affirming the certification of a huge discrimination class action of Wal-Mart female employees. The centerpiece of the case is unequal pay for women doing similar jobs as men.