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It's 2014. Why is the wage gap still an issue?

By Ann Powers

At the beginning of my final semester in college in 1988, I stood in line to pay my tuition just like 45,000 other students at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

I handed the guy behind the payment counter a check for \$608.09. He had no neck and was wearing one of those “wife beater” muscle shirts.

“Hey you, what da hell is this?” Mr. No-Neck snapped at me. “You’re in-state, so your tuition is \$868.70.”

“I’m also a woman,” I said. “And by the latest and most generous figures, I’m only going to make about 70 cents to your white, male-chauvinist dollar. So, this check is for exactly 70 percent of in-state tuition.”

“Huh?” he eloquently replied.

I explained to this lunk that if I were going to make about one-third less than he, I was declaring a one-third discount for myself and the entire female population — on everything.

From that point on, I was only going to pay 70 percent of my lunch bill and leave 70 percent of a 15 percent tip. Instead of drinking 60-cent tappers at the student union, I could throw them back for 42 cents. I would pay 70 percent of my taxes and give the landlord 70 percent of the rent.

Moreover, I would only pay 70 percent of the going rate on tampons. No, on second thought, I wouldn’t pay anything. After all, if men menstruated, tampons would be federally funded.

My confused new friend began to sweat and beckoned to some managerial, bureaucratic types for help. I was ushered out of line.

But, I didn’t stop there. I continued to inform my unwelcomed escorts that right there in that great public liberal university, male professors were earning about \$4,500 more than female professors.

The posse began to hurry me down the line. As they tugged at my shirtsleeve, I noticed some women waiting for ID pictures wearing chemistry department T-shirts.

“Don’t be fooled!” I shouted back at them. “National statistics show that even with your master’s or Ph.D., a male chemist will surpass your income by at least \$7,000 a year.”

I was pushed closer to the door. I saw a couple of women from the journalism school.

“Forget it,” I warned. “As a media department head, your male counterpart will bank \$20,000 more annually.”

My irritated escorts gave me a final push, and those heavy administration doors slammed shut behind me — an ominous sign that if I ever wanted to register as a student again, I was to return quietly with a check for the full amount of tuition.

Bewildered, I sat on a nearby curb and thought about it. Knowledge is power, and I needed their diploma documenting that I had that knowledge. I also couldn't afford the school's late fees.

I paid in full, and five months later I graduated.

That was then, and this is now. Unfortunately, not much has changed for the sisterhood since that spring semester in Madison 26 years ago. It seems the war on women is alive and well.

Consider the non-progress of the equal pay for equal work debate.

When President John F. Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act in 1963, women earned 59 cents to a man's dollar. Today, 51 years later, women earn about 77 cents in that same category, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

And while this reflects an increase of 18 cents, or 1 cent every three years, that's still approximately \$11,000 in lost income every year for the average woman. Spread that across a 45-year career, and women earn half a million dollars less than male colleagues doing the same job, with the same education, and the same seniority. The only variable is gender.

Moreover, census reports show that women compose nearly 50 percent of America's total labor force, and are more likely than men to hold two jobs outside the home. Of single mothers, about 75 percent work and 30 percent earn such low wages that they live in poverty.

However, in families headed by single men, only 13 percent live in poverty.

And minority women fare even worse. Compared to white men, African-American women make 70 cents on the dollar, and Latina women earn about 60 cents, according to labor statistics.

The Paycheck Fairness Act was introduced in 2009 to strengthen the Equal Pay Act.

The legislation would close loopholes in the Equal Pay Act, protect female employees and encourage employers who lessen gender discrimination. It's been consistently stalled by Republican members of Congress, most recently by a Republican filibuster in the U.S. Senate.

President Obama addressed the roadblock earlier this year.

"Today, the average full-time working woman earns just 77 cents for every dollar a man earns ... in 2014, that's an embarrassment," he said. "It is wrong."

Yes it is. And what's equally embarrassing and wrong is the Census Bureau reports that the wage gap isn't going to bridge itself anytime soon. Studies estimate it will take more than 40 years, until 2058, before that happens, if that happens.

Why? It's 2014, people. Why is this *still* an issue, and looking like it will be for decades to come?

Maybe I need to reinstate my 30 percent discount.