Earnings for women still fall short of equality

by Michael Kinsman

Imagine the public outcry if a company violated a federal law for 44 years.

Now, listen to the noise level of the complaints about equal pay for women.

You don't hear very much, do you?

Every year around this time, we hear some grumbling about women not earning as much as men and then a few days later the discussion ends, only to be rekindled a year later.

This year is a clone of past years. A new study by the American Association of University Women reports that in 1994, women who earned college degrees were making only 80 percent of men just one year out of college.

Ten years after graduation, these same women were earning only 69 percent of men's incomes.

This is very significant because one of the arguments used to defend gender pay differences has been a lack of education for women. But with more women earning college degrees today than men, that argument falls flat.

Another recent study - this one by the California Budget Project - reports that female college graduates earned about 25 percent less than male graduates in 2006.

The federal government's own analysis shows that women in 2005 earned just 81 percent of what men did, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

These reports confirm that women are still discriminated against in the workplace when it comes to pay.

This discrimination was supposed to have been put to rest 44 years ago. President John F. Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act on June 10, 1963.

The law said employers must pay equal wages to men and women who perform jobs that require substantially equal skill, effort and responsibility, and that are performed under similar working conditions.

There is no ambiguity there. The law is straightforward.

So why does gender-pay discrimination still exist?

The answer is simple: People find some way to rationalize lower wages for women, often using flawed but remarkably durable arguments.

One argument is that women often go into lower-earning professions like nursing and teaching. There may be some truth to that, but an American Association of University Women report found that women engineers - predominantly a male profession - earn just 95 percent of what male engineers do after one year.

Another argument is that women's careers suffer because they go in and out of the work force for child-raising activities. There is some truth to that, but doesn't that mean we should make it easier for women to do this without penalizing their earning power?

A third argument reasons that women aren't as good as negotiating for salary increases as men. Any male who had negotiated anything with a woman knows that is flawed thinking.

The arguments beg for us to move ahead of this issue and start treating women more equitably in our workplaces.

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