

Opinion: Darcy Juday: Equal pay for lion hunters

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March 28 was Women's Equal Pay Day. What does that have to do with lion hunting?

In 1978, I was a new geologist at a small oil exploration company. Mike, my male mentor, delighted in showing me Ann Landers' advice column for the day, from a geologist's wife in fear for her marriage. "Young women geologists", she declared, "are just on the prowl to seduce their mentors." But she consoled herself, "I shouldn't worry, because all 'lady geologists' are probably ugly enough to hunt lions with a switch!"

Times have changed for the better — that probably wouldn't see print today, and my cohort is no longer "lady" geologist, engineer, or doctor. But not all attitudes have improved, and that's why we recognize Equal Pay Day — the date this year that women must work to earn what men earned by Dec. 31, 2024. That showcases the pay gap, the earnings ratio of all women's median pay to non-Hispanic white men's median pay.

Back in 1978, the pay gap ratio was 60%. In 2025, nearly 50 years later, that ratio has "improved" — to 83%. If my naive 27-year old self had known that after 50 years the gap would still be so large, she might not have been so optimistic. At this current rate of progress, we won't have equal pay for all women until 2088. For Latinas, this year's gap is 58%. Latina Equal Pay Day is Oct. 8, 2025, and truly equal pay for Latinas won't come until 2125! We can't wait that long.

In 1978, my then-husband was at another firm — same job, same schooling, same experience — and my salary was appreciably less than his. Over a 40-year career, that inequity magnifies to a tremendous deficit of income, and worse, in retirement benefits.

But wait, you say, women choose to work fewer hours, to work lower paying careers, to stay home with their children. To that I say: Society's attitudes haven't changed that much. Household and childcare responsibilities still fall disproportionately on women, causing them to cut back hours; women (like me) are steered by high school and college counselors toward lower-paying jobs; gender and racial bias still exist. So we still suffer the gap.

Another cause of inequity is using prior salary history, which may have been tainted by bias to set current pay. That just allows discriminatory pay to follow workers regardless of their capabilities. Forbidding workers to discuss their wages and lack of salary transparency makes pay gaps hard to fight. I was lucky: In 1990, the boss' secretary pulled me aside, whispering "Your salary is so low vs. the guys in your group. Do something about it!" That was windfall advice most women don't get.

Proudly, in 2021 Colorado enacted the Equal Pay for Equal Work Act to address pay history use and require transparency. And yet, I found that a neighbor who is early in her career is uncomfortable, even fearful, to talk to coworkers about salaries. And she was unaware that the Colorado Equal Pay Act allows her to.

Another young woman friend has the same concerns about her salary and whether she'll be able to buy a house or retire. Her state doesn't protect salary conversations or have pay transparency. Nationwide, Congress is no help — it has failed to pass the Paycheck Fairness Act for decades. The last national equal pay legislation was in 1963. How can this be right?

I'm a member of the Longmont branch of AAUW, the American Association of University Women, which works toward equity for women and girls. According to their studies, "underpaying and undervaluing women's work not only financially hurts women and families — it weakens the entire U.S. economy. From 1967 to 2021, the pay gap has cumulatively cost women \$61 trillion in lost wages. Closing the gender pay gap could add billions of dollars to the U.S. economy annually."

What can you do? Support the Paycheck Fairness Act, if it comes back. Talk to your daughters about Colorado's Pay Transparency Act. Try out AAUW's Start Smart program for negotiation skills. Cut yourself a lion-hunting switch, and stand up for pay equity.

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