Do women choose to earn less than men?

You've heard about the pay gap for ages, and statistics confirm that men make more than women. But some experts say it's our own fault. As told to Rebecca Webber

YES


When people hear that women earn just 81 cents to a man's dollar, they usually assume women are being paid less for the same work. Actually, the pay gap reflects the difference in the median weekly earnings of male and female full-time workers, who are, on the whole, doing very different jobs. Men typically choose higher-paying work. They are far more likely to be electrical engineers, pilots or sales managers. Women tend to opt for less technical jobs, often with better pay—namely in the arts or education—that typically pay less.

If women want big salaries, they can get them just as easily as men. Here's how: Choose a college major that leads to a lucrative field—such as engineering, not English. Then put in long hours on the job. People who work 40 hours a week make nearly twice as much as people who work 30 hours a week. Be willing to travel or relocate. And take a job that directly affects the company's bottom line—think sales, marketing or finance, not human resources. By making such choices, more women can become well-paid neurosurgeons, corporate lawyers or CEOs and shrink the pay gap fast. It's really up to them.

NO

Ann Crittenden, author of If You've Raised Kids, You Can Manage Anything and The Price of Motherhood

To call women's lower earnings a "choice" is a complete distortion of reality. Women often choose less lucrative fields because they're more flexible. In many industries the ideal worker continues to be someone who has no family (or is willing to act like it). So employees who need to devote time to other things start losing out on promotions and raises—and sometimes even the job itself. I recently met a young woman who had worked hard to become a pilot for a major airline—a high-paying position usually held by men. Then she had a baby. As she told me in tears, the airline insisted she keep her schedule, including nights away from home for layovers, instead of reducing her hours for less pay. Her only options were to work full time or to resign.

Caring for children or elderly parents isn't just a lifestyle decision; it's a societal necessity. Studies show countries with family-friendly policies, like paid leave and universal preschool, have less of a wage gap because women can combine work with family time. In this country, women may have to decline between her kids and her career. I don't call that a choice—I call that a social problem.