

ViewPoint: For women in poverty, wage gap is even wider

By Elizabeth Zarrella Maglio
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Years ago I was sitting at my sister's kitchen table listening to ideas for naming the family's newly adopted female pup. I challenged my young nieces to think about names of inspirational women they had studied in school; Anne Frank and Rosa Parks took the top two. The conversation continued on to women leaders, the working world and career choices. When I mentioned that women get paid less than men even though they may have the same career, my young nieces laughed at such a ludicrous notion.

Fast forward 20 years, and income inequality is a popular buzzword. Some use it to refer to the widening gap between the upper class and the working, low-income class. Income inequality also refers to the wage gap between ethnic and racial groups, as well as between men and women. There's hard data to back up claims showing the gap still exists; in some cases, it's wider than ever. This year it will take women 15.5 months to earn what a man earns in 12 months. The three and a half months is the gap in income, which the U.S. Dept. of Labor estimates as 78 percent nationwide. In Massachusetts, we're at 82 percent overall, despite the signing of the Equal Pay Act in 1963. That means that a woman earns about \$49,000 while a male earns about \$60,000.

How does this happen? According to American Association of University Women's publication *The Simple Truth*, it starts right after college. Similarly educated and experienced men and women start out after college with an 18 percent gap in earnings, with women earning 82 percent of what their male counterpart earns. If academic achievement doesn't protect against wage disparity, what happens at the lower end of the income scale? In food services, and also in administrative office support positions, women earn 90% of what men earn.

What, then, is a female head of household to do? At Project Hope, a multiservice agency serving families from the Dorchester and Roxbury communities of Boston, the overwhelming majority of households rely on a female as the primary financial provider – generally a woman of color. At least half struggle to survive on earned incomes under \$15,000 per year. Anti-poverty programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program do provide some relief.

A proactive approach by the Baker Administration would be to call for transparency at the state level. Job postings should publicize salary ranges for every position. Gov. Baker could encourage the corporate community to adopt this same practice, and to conduct salary audits. The issue of wage gaps can be used to influence policy. The Mass. Pay Gap Bill prohibits potential employers from seeking salary histories and requires them to disclose a position's minimum salary.

As for my nieces, they named their dog Rosa. They are now educated and pursuing careers, and know firsthand what they are up against.