

PAY GAP NARROWS IN FEDERAL SECTOR

Despite the fact that occupation has a major influence on the pay gap between male and female federal employees—with the gap narrowing as men and women take on similar jobs—a portion of the sex-based pay gap cannot be explained, according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO). The report accompanied GAO testimony before the congressional Joint Economic Committee, which held a hearing in light of “Equal Pay Day,” marking the additional four months women must work to equal the pay men receive in a calendar year.

“Ultimately, the gender pay gap for the entire federal workforce has declined primarily because the men and women in the federal workforce are more alike in characteristics related to pay than in past years. We cannot be sure why a persistent unexplained pay gap remains for both our analyses, but this may be due to the inability to account for certain factors that cannot effectively be measured or for which data are not available,” the GAO states. The GAO notes that a previous report found that in 2000 women in the federal government earned about 20 cents less than their male counterparts, with the difference more pronounced between white men and women than between African American men and women.

In the most recent report, the GAO says that between 1988 and 2007 the gender pay gap declined from 28 cents to 11 cents on the dollar, but for each year all but about seven cents could be explained by factors such as occupational choices and levels of federal work experience and education. It says that those seven cents might be explained by factors for which the GAO lacks data, such as sex discrimination and work experience outside the federal government. The GAO notes that federal employees increasingly are becoming more concentrated in professional and administrative jobs, with a corresponding decline in clerical and blue collar positions due to the phasing out of defense-related jobs following the end of the Cold War coupled with increased automation and contracting out.

In particular, the report notes that the large decline in the federal clerical workforce, which is primarily female and among the lowest-paid federal occupations, explains a large portion of the decline in the pay gap. Three characteristics—occupation, education, and federal experience—contribute the most to the pay gap, so that the increasing convergence of men and women in these characteristics explains also much of the pay gap’s decline. However, the GAO could not confirm or refute the presence of discrimination and its possible effect on that portion of the pay gap that cannot be explained by these factors.

The report indicates several limitations with the GAO study, including the inability to measure discrimination because it is not usually overt; the lack of data on other factors that may influence pay, such as experience outside the federal government and individual priorities; and the variables included in the study may have been measured or reported imprecisely. The GAO states that including factors regarded as proxies for personal obligations, such as marital status and number of children, had little effect on the pay gap, and the same was true when accounting for differences in enrollment in the Federal Employees Health Benefits Plan for a single employee versus a family. It adds that it lacked proxies for factors such as motivation and work performance, and some of the gap may be attributable to certain types of men and women being more or less likely to enter federal employment.

The report titled, *Women’s Pay: Gender Pay Gap in the Federal Workforce Narrows as Differences in Occupation, Education, and Experience Diminish* (GAO-09-279), is available at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d09279.pdf>.

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