

Lilly Ledbetter had worked at Goodyear for years before someone slipped her a note telling her that she was making a lot less money than other men at her seniority level. Others might learn it through gossip, or through a stray pay stub.

Working women all over the US have had their own equal pay awakenings, when they realized their salaries lagged those of others who had the same qualifications. The knowledge can be a shock.

One thing is clear, however: most American women are still not getting paid as much as their male colleagues.

“Women against feminism” – a viral social media campaign that sprang up this month – isn’t purely an American phenomenon. When Guardian US and ProPublica asked for your equal pay awakenings, one of our British readers, Juliette, 45, insisted that she too was “sick of being made out to be a victim simply because I am a woman. I chose to have children and be their primary carer. I am not underpaid or a victim.”

Yet her annual pay is £5,000, or \$8,473, less than that of the men in her office. Her explanation? It is not discrimination, just an effect of her having a child and needing flexible hours. “It is not a criticism of my abilities and I do not think all women are discriminated against,” she wrote.

The truth, unfortunately, is that women have been and still are paid less even if they do not take time off to have a child or need flexible hours. They earn, on average, about 77 cents for every dollar that a man earns. In span of a year, they make \$11,500 less than their male counterparts.

Being underpaid doesn’t automatically make you a victim. It’s an alert to stop being one. Most women who have discovered unequal pay have stood up for themselves, paving way for other women in their company. Some quit to prove that they deserve to be treated the same as their male co-workers. We all know the statistic that about 57% of men ask for their raises. For women, that number was 7%.

Yet women who do raise the subject of salary find that asking is not enough. Often times, they are told to take it or leave it. Frequently, even when given raises, their new pay still comes short of that of their male coworkers.

While that might be enough to discourage some from trying, women have to keep asking for raises and for higher pay. Why? Because men don’t hesitate to ask.

Here are the stories of women who had equal pay awakenings.

Margaret, 35, Los Angeles, California

Pay difference: \$5.50 versus \$7 an hour

I was a cashier at an Italian restaurant in high school in the early 90s. I worked with a boy, also in high school, and learned he made more than me when we compared pay checks one day. Neither of us had any idea that we were being paid differently for the exact same job.

I complained to the boss, one of the owners of the restaurant. At first, he tried to justify it by saying the boy was a grade older than me. Finally, he admitted that he just thought boys should be paid more. End of story. I was infuriated.

US Money pizza girl server Even teenagers in pizza parlours experience unequal pay.
Photograph: Ted Pink/Alamy
Jenny, 29, London

Pay difference: 15,000 pounds

I had always thought the job I did and the job my colleague did were equal. In fact I often covered work for him and very often helped him out, because it was important for the good of the team. He left unexpectedly and it was only when the job was advertised that I realised that his pay had been so much higher, all the time.

I talked to my manager who explained that my colleague was paid more because he had been at the organisation longer. I said I thought we should have a more similar wage at least (not a 15,000-pound difference) because if anything, I contributed more. In the end I did leave for a better (and better-paid) job.
Jane, 67, Lynnwood, Virginia

Pay difference: Health Insurance

[Forty-five years ago], when asking my boss for insurance for myself and my child, I was informed that males in the company were married, so they got family insurance, but I was female and not married so I got squat.

I repeated what my boss said back to him to see how it sounded to him. He shook his head and self-righteously said: 'yes, a man with kids gets insurance but not a woman with a child.' I was shocked and felt demeaned.

Cassandra, 52, San Francisco, California

Pay difference: \$3,000 a year

My husband and I graduated together and got the same job at two different companies. I was hired a few weeks before he was. In his final interview, he mentioned I was being paid \$33,000, so his company bumped my husband's pay up to \$36,000 so he would be earning more than I was.

I started at my company at the same time and for the same salary as a new male graduate – but the company advised him to start a day before me so he would always have seniority over me.

Erin, 26, UK

Pay difference: \$20,000

I knew for a while that others were paid at a higher rate compared to me. I just accepted that and I don't really know why. I guess I thought I just wasn't as good and others were slightly more experienced. I am an engineer and have a masters degree in my subject (and a lot of student debt to go with it), this is necessary for my job role, and this is my first company after graduating. I am the only female engineer.

Others in the same role as me were less qualified, studying part time and having their fees paid for by the company, and also getting at least 1 day per week study leave. It was when I found out that their study day was not unpaid but paid at their normal day rate that I got angry and upset. I was fully qualified working 5 days a week. They were unqualified, earning 50% more than me and working only 4 days per week.

I asked for a raise to match the others' day rates. I stated my case and said it was not fair and that I would leave if it was not resolved. I was nearly fobbed off with a much smaller raise but I said again that I would not take anything less than being equal to the men. My supervisor agreed reluctantly.

Kathleen, 59, San Francisco, California

Pay difference: \$1 an hour (in 1975, that was a lot)

How did you find out you were being paid less? Compared rates with male employees.

We worked on the paint crew of our university's Physical Plant Department one summer. The other gal and I asked for an interview with the department manager. We laid out our case. The other gal was a lot feistier than I and angered the manager. He said if we want a raise we have to prove we deserve to be paid the same as the men. So we had to paint an entire house without the assistance of any males. We did it.

US Money painting wall Can a woman do the same job as a man? You bet. Photograph:
REX/Image Broker
Samantha, 25, New York, New York

Pay difference: \$7,000 a year

My supervisor was leaving for a new opportunity and we were out for drinks. After some shake-ups on our team, I had been given a lot of new responsibility and a fancy new title to go along with it. My supervisor encouraged me to ask for an equivalent of her

salary – \$55,000/year compared to my \$45,000. I was unsure of my value at the company when a colleague – recent college grad as of May 2013 and in the most entry-level position at our company – piped up to say that he couldn't believe I was only making \$45,000 being there nearly a year with two years of experience under my belt because his starting salary was \$52,000.

I approached my boss, the only woman in a leadership position at the company, and mentioned that with my supervisor leaving, my role changing and my responsibilities growing, I'd like to be financially compensated for that. She was caught off guard and said she'd bring it up to the CEO. Two weeks later she hugged me because she had gotten me a raise. The company thought I was worth 9% more than what I was making, putting my annual salary at \$48,000 – still \$4,000 less than the newest person in our company.

J, 42, New York, New York

Pay difference: \$15,000 a year

After 14 years at my workplace, I got a promotion. A male colleague who'd been at the company for four years had also just received the same promotion. I asked him how much he was earning and he graciously told me: it was \$15,000 more than they were offering me. Plus his annual bonus was higher: 15% of his salary versus 10% for me.

I was still in the process of negotiating my pay, so I asked for more. I was told no, take it or leave it. I took it, but I now feel much less loyal to this place.

US Money women men equal pay Even after a raise, some women still earn less than their male colleagues. Photograph: Alamy
Laura, 29, Durham, North Carolina

Pay difference: \$1 an hour

I was being paid \$15 an hour and had been there for a year, and realized that a new, entirely inexperienced male peer had been started at \$16 an hour. I talked to my boss. When I complained, she raised my pay to be equal to his, even though I had been there a year longer than him. I quit shortly after.

I have never asked for a raise. Once I quit the job, they offered me \$3 more an hour to stay, going from \$16 an hour to \$19 an hour. I was insulted that they hadn't given me a raise in two years when they were able to offer something like that on the fly. I still quit the job.

Robin, 49, Laurel, Maryland

A new grad male, doing the same job as myself and another woman both employed in the same position for about 10 years, was offered more money than either of us. I get

raises when asking, but the man didn't ask for or negotiate the higher salary. He didn't know he was making so much more.

We talked about filing a complaint but both of us ended up leaving the position (as did he).

US Money raise interview equal pay Asking for a raise can be nerve wracking.
Photograph: Joshua Hodge Photography/Getty Images

Pay discrimination can go both ways:
Dan, 30, Sydney, Australia

I found out I was being paid significantly less than my female colleagues when assisting in the recruitment of colleagues. I am the only man in a team of 11. My hiring managers were all women and were sexist.

[I] told my manager I identified it. Ask for an explanation of the disparity. When they claimed budget was making it hard to close [the] identified gap, I said that was understandable, noted that my grievance was raised under the formal grievance policy, and that they were obliged to formally respond – [I] mentioned discrimination. One month later I was moved to pay parity.

Women need to organise as a class to effect change. The problem clearly impacts men as well – on nowhere near the same scale though. Use us as allies.