

AAUW's blog illustrates the effect of the pay gap on specific women

Kerri, a design supervisor worked for five years at a company that designed, built, and installed laser welding assembly systems. When she was hired, Kerri said company officials told her they didn't negotiate pay. In 2003, the company was forced into bankruptcy and employees had to go through bankruptcy court for their final paychecks. When Kerri looked at the court's list of claims, she was heartbroken. People she had supervised had larger claims for two weeks of pay than she did.

When educator Maxine started her career as a teacher in the early 1970s, the school district refused to give her the head-of-household pay that men received — even though Maxine was the sole earner while her husband was in graduate school. Later, Maxine went into public school administration and found once again that her gender — and marital status — was a factor in her pay. While trying to negotiate her salary, one of the board members told her, “You don't need as much pay because your husband is a professor and you have enough money.”

Graduate student and former technician Anastasia accepted the salary offered to her in her first job out of college. She didn't know she could negotiate. She found when she arrived for work as a technician that a few men with less education and less relevant experience had negotiated for more pay. “I have a bachelor's degree in physics,” Anastasia said. “This guy who hadn't gone to college and couldn't do mental math was getting paid more.”

Lab technician Ellie and her female colleagues in a research lab at a teaching hospital fought pay discrimination in the late 1970s. The technicians in Ellie's lab were all women with college degrees. They learned that a male head technician without a degree — working in a much smaller lab with less responsibility — earned a salary 1.5 times larger than the female head technician in Ellie's lab. The women banded together and called in anonymous complaints to a U.S. Department of Justice pay discrimination hotline. To their surprise, an investigation — and pay raises — followed.

Math consultant Aileen works as a math consultant at a California county office that supports dozens of school districts. After three years on the job, she said she learned over lunch that a man just hired as a math consultant had started at a much higher salary. After trying unsuccessfully to work out the disparity with human resources, Aileen filed a lawsuit because of her two young daughters. “I don't want another girl to feel after she's worked so hard that she's not worth the same as the man sitting next to her,” Aileen said.

Lilly Ledbetter's fight for fair pay began with an anonymous note. After almost 20 years of working at Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co., she received a note revealing that she, the only female supervisor, was being paid 40 percent less than her male peers were. Ledbetter filed a gender discrimination lawsuit in 1998 that made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, only to have the court say in 2007 she had been paid unfairly long enough to make it legal. “The court said it was my fault that I hadn't figured out I was being paid less than a man,” Ledbetter said. “Yet I was told that if I discussed my pay, I wouldn't work there anymore.” The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, passed in 2009, helped regain ground lost as a result of the Supreme Court decision and reinstated employees' ability to have their day in court.