Women, Wages and Work

A report prepared for the Women’s Summit by the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute
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Introduction

The Women’s Summit

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Women’s Summit is a center for women and public policy, leadership development and community engagement, housed at UNC Charlotte in the Department of Metropolitan Studies and Extended Academic Programs. The Women’s Summit is committed to ensuring women’s perspectives are represented in research, public policy, leadership development and education and aims to be a catalyst for increasing opportunities for community engagement.

Women, Wages and Work Campaign

The Women’s Summit is the first organization in North Carolina to undertake a rigorous study of the social, economic, political and physical wellbeing of women and girls at the local level, focusing initially on the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Region. The Women’s Summit has undertaken research to provide benchmarks for women’s earnings and benefits, women’s civic and political engagement and the rate of poverty and domestic violence of women in our community.

In 2008, the Women’s Summit presented “Women, Work and Wages in Mecklenburg County: An Economic Impact Assessment”¹ that highlighted the endemic wage disparity for women in the local workforce. The ensuing years have seen significant economic decline, and women have shouldered a disproportionate burden of the soft economy due to lower compensation and benefit packages. To explore the economic impact of women’s experience in the workplace, the Women’s Summit developed “Women, Wages and Work,” a year-long campaign dedicated to raising awareness of the challenges facing women as a result of pay inequity, and to understanding how the issues traditionally considered “women’s issues” are connected with women’s experiences in the workforce.

This campaign will:

- Assess the consequences of the wage gap and benefits inequity on our community;
- Educate on how to close the wage gap;
- Explore the role of businesses and non-profits in creating and supporting flexible working environments to accommodate the myriad challenges faced by the modern labor force;
- Investigate the economic merit of companies developing flexible working environments; and
- Explore the role of public policy in creating a truly just and equitable society.

As we come out of the “Great Recession” we have an unprecedented opportunity to create a more equitable workplace environment for every member of our community.

“Women, Wages and Work” launched on April 12, 2011, Equal Pay Day, and will culminate in the 2nd Biennial Charlotte-Mecklenburg Women’s Summit in the spring of 2012.

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Key Findings

The goal of this report is to begin to understand women’s earnings in Mecklenburg County. This report gives baseline information to help appropriately frame issues regarding “Women, Wages, and Work” in Mecklenburg County. It is hoped that this report will increase awareness and drive the research agenda on how disparities in wages affect women in Mecklenburg County. Another important goal of this report is to start to determine how women in Mecklenburg County fared during the “Great Recession.”

Strengths

- Overall, women in Mecklenburg County earn more than their counterparts at the state and national level.
- Overall, women in Mecklenburg County have achieved more education than their counterparts at the state and national level.
- In Mecklenburg County, women with at least some postsecondary education earn more than women with less education.
- Women working in traditionally male-dominated fields have earnings significantly higher than the median earnings for all women.

Challenges

- The wage gap between men and women persists in Mecklenburg County and is very close to the national average.
- Wages for women of color lag significantly behind wages for white women.
- When educational attainment is considered, the wage gap between men and women markedly increases.
- Wages for women in female-dominated occupations lag significantly behind wages for women in male-dominated occupations.
Gender and Wages

According to data from the US Census American Community Survey, median earnings for both men and women working full time in Mecklenburg County exceed North Carolina and national medians each year from 2005 to 2009 (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Median Earnings**

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
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<th>2008</th>
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<td><strong>United States</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>$41,565</td>
<td>$42,210</td>
<td>$44,255</td>
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<td>$45,485</td>
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<td>Women</td>
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<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>$37,441</td>
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<td>Women</td>
<td>$29,729</td>
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<td>$31,738</td>
<td>$32,937</td>
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<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>$45,048</td>
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<td>$47,426</td>
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<td>$48,063</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>$34,171</td>
<td>$35,858</td>
<td>$38,926</td>
<td>$38,564</td>
<td>$37,768</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: US Census American Community Survey

While both men and women in Mecklenburg County fared better than their counterparts at the national and state levels, disparities between men and women persist. Women’s wages were significantly lower than men’s wages each year from 2005 to 2009 (Figure 2). In 2009, women earned over $10,000 less than men, a slight improvement from 2005.

**Figure 2: Median Earnings in Mecklenburg County**

Women’s wages steadily increased from $34,171 in 2005 to $38,926 in 2007, an overall increase of 13.9 percent during that time, but decreased the following two years to $37,768 in 2009. Men’s wages followed the same general trend as women’s wages, but on average men were paid more, increasing 9.6 percent from $45,048 in 2005 to $49,351 in 2008 and then decreasing...
2.6 percent in 2009 to $48,063. On a positive note, wages for women increased at a greater rate than for men from 2005 to 2009, with a 10.5 percent overall increase for women compared to 6.7 percent for men.

Another way to express the difference in wages between men and women is the wage gap, which is the ratio of women’s earnings to men’s earnings. For example, a wage gap of 0.75 indicates that women earn 75 cents to every dollar men earn. Women’s wages are closer to those for men as the ratio increases. From 2005 to 2009, Mecklenburg County’s wage gap was similar to the national wage gap, with the exception of 2007, when the gap closed to 0.82. (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Wage Gap

![Wage Gap Chart]

Source: US Census American Community Survey

Little progress has been made in the United States in closing the wage gap. North Carolina’s wage gap was closer to pay equity from 2005 to 2009 compared to Mecklenburg County with the exception of 2007, when the wage gap in Mecklenburg County was slightly better. From 2006 to 2007 when the wage gap was better is due in part to the increase in the median earnings for women in Mecklenburg County which rose 8.6 percent ($3,068) compared to men’s median earnings which rose 2.4 percent ($1,123) from 2006. Mecklenburg County’s wage gap improved from 0.76 in 2005 to 0.82 in 2007 but returned to a more consistent upward trend in 2008 (0.78) and 2009 (0.79).
Race, Ethnicity and Wages

In addition to gender wage differences, variations exist among women of different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Figure 4). Some variations between different races and ethnicities are more pronounced than others.

**Figure 4: Women’s Median Earnings by Race and Ethnicity, Mecklenburg County**

[Graph showing median earnings for different races over years 2005 to 2009]

Source: US Census American Community Survey

White women in Mecklenburg County had the highest earnings of any race, with median earnings ranging from $40,073 in 2005 to $45,703 in 2007. African American women in Mecklenburg County had the second highest earnings among racial groups, experiencing a slight but consistent earnings increase from $29,212 in 2005 to $32,939 in 2009. Asian women earned slightly less than African American women from 2005 to 2009, while earnings for Hispanic and Other Races in Mecklenburg County experienced significant variability. Both Hispanic women and women of Other Races earned the least among all racial and ethnic groups during the past five years. Earnings for Hispanic women ranged from $18,939 in 2009 to $25,877 in 2007, while earnings for women of Other Races ranged from $17,794 in 2006 to $23,341 in 2009. White women and Hispanic women both saw decreases in earnings in 2009 from the previous year, while other racial and ethnic groups of women saw increases. African American women were the only racial or ethnic group to see annual increases consistently from 2005 through 2009.
Occupation and Wages

Men in Mecklenburg County earned more than women in many occupations, as evidenced by earning differences in the occupations selected for this report (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Median Earnings by Occupation by Gender, Mecklenburg County, 2009**

Of these occupations, women in computer and mathematical occupations had the highest median earnings in Mecklenburg County at $58,527 in 2009, although men’s earnings for that field were higher at $66,894. Women in life, physical and social science occupations had the second highest median earnings at $55,429, while men with the same occupations earned $58,750. Women in sales and office occupations had the lowest median earnings at $27,730 in 2009, compared to men at $36,325. Education, training and library occupations had the second lowest median earnings, but represent the smallest earnings differential (2009 wage gap of 0.99) between men ($32,333) and women ($32,078) within the selected occupations. The largest earnings differential in Mecklenburg County was in health practitioner and technical occupations where women earned $44,472 compared to their male counterparts who earned $68,356 in 2009, resulting in a wage gap of 0.65.
Educational Attainment and Wages

Educational attainment for both men and women with a Bachelor’s degree or higher in Mecklenburg County exceeded North Carolina and national averages each year from 2005 to 2009 (Figure 6).

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<th></th>
<th>2005</th>
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<td><strong>United States</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>28.2%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>26.0%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>North Carolina</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mecklenburg County</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
<td>43.4%</td>
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<td>39.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
<td>39.9%</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: US Census American Community Survey

While both men and women in Mecklenburg County fared better than their counterparts at the national and state levels, differences in educational attainment between men and women were evident. Between 2005 and 2007, men consistently had higher educational attainment than women. The educational attainment gap between men and women narrowed in 2008, and in 2009 the percent of women with a Bachelor’s degree or higher exceeded that of men in North Carolina and Mecklenburg County.

Educational attainment is important to the discussion on women, work and wages because educational attainment can be closely tied to earnings potential. Women’s earnings increased with greater educational attainment, but not as substantially as men’s earnings (Figure 7).
Men earned more than women regardless of education level, but the disparity increased as the level of education increased in Mecklenburg County in 2009 (Figure 8). Women with less than a high school diploma earned $14,989, while men who lacked a high school diploma earned $18,325, and women with a graduate or professional degree earned $49,741, while their male counterparts earned $79,831 in 2009. The wage gap was closest to equity with less than a high school degree and increased as men and women attained higher levels of education. Women with graduate and professional degrees made just 62 cents for every dollar men with those degrees earned in 2009 in Mecklenburg County.
Conclusions

Women in Mecklenburg County have made significant gains in the past five years surrounding earnings and the wage gap. Compared to women at the state and national levels, women in Mecklenburg County were ahead in educational attainment and median earnings in 2009. There are still disparities among gender, race and ethnicity related to earnings, as women on average were paid less than their male counterparts and paid less compared to one another depending on race or ethnicity. In 2009, white women in Mecklenburg County were paid over $24,000 more than Hispanic women, a significant disparity that still persists. With changes in the demographic makeup in Mecklenburg County apparent over the past decade, one must ponder how women, especially those who are a minority, will fare in the coming years.
Endnotes

Citations


Photographs

Cover page: C. Apaliski; Page 6: Goodwill Industries of Southern Piedmont; Page 8: N. Pierce; Page 9: N. Pierce; Page 10: Goodwill Industries of Southern Piedmont; Page 12: C. Apaliski