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AT LUNCH WITH WARREN FARRELL

Are Women Responsible for Their Own Low Pay?

By CLAUDIA H. DEUTSCH

DO you think that Lawrence H. Summers, Harvard's president, stirred up a hornets' nest by suggesting that women's brains are not genetically wired for math or science? Wait until you hear Warren Farrell on the subject of women's pay.

Sure, Dr. Farrell accepts that women, as a group, are paid less than men. But the way he sees it, using pay statistics to prove sex discrimination is akin to using the horizon to prove that the world is flat.

Women, he believes, methodically engineer their own paltry pay. They choose psychically fulfilling jobs, like librarian or art historian, that attract enough applicants for the law of supply and demand to kick in and depress pay. They avoid well-paid but presumably risky work - hence, the paucity of women flying planes. And they tend to put in fewer hours than men - no small point, he says, because people who work 44 hours a week make almost twice as much as those who work 34 and are more likely to be promoted.

In fact, Dr. Farrell points to subgroups - male and female college professors who have never married, or men and women in part-time jobs - in which women average higher pay than their male counterparts. "Control for all these things, and the women make as much, or more," said Dr. Farrell, 61, whose new book on the shaky myths of pay disparity, "Why Men Earn More: The Startling Truth Behind the Pay Gap - and What Women Can Do About It" (Amacom), arrived in bookstores in January. "Let's face it: men do a lot of things in the workplace that women just don't do."

Ready to brand him a sexist? Wait, there's more. Dr. Farrell says he thinks that the whole debate over gender-linked skills is superfluous. "Men may well be hard-wired to be better at math, and women to excel at verbal skills, but so what?" he asked. He said the human ability to adapt to circumstances and limitations was equally hard-wired, and that fascination with a field could easily trump innate abilities.

It's pretty subversive stuff. But then, Dr. Farrell - the doctorate is in political science, "but I walk and talk like a psychologist," he said - is accustomed to flouting convention. In the early 1970's, when the idea of equality for women still had novelty status, he served on the board of the New York chapter of the National Organization for Women. In 2003, by then living in San Diego, he unsuccessfully sought the Democratic nomination for governor of California on a platform promoting legislation to force courts to grant divorced fathers equal time with their children. He has a lucrative business as an expert witness in custody cases, and in speaking and consulting on fatherhood issues. (He has no children, but he has served as a stepdad to several.)



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times
Warren Farrell, the author of "Why Men Earn More," says, "Men have not stacked the decks against women."

When a book tour took him to Manhattan recently, he had lunch with a reporter at Eleven Madison Park, on Madison Avenue at East 24th Street, to elaborate on why, as he phrases it, women should stop trying to play off "victim power" and start wielding their true earning power.

"Companies like I.B.M. have offered women scholarships to study engineering for years, and women engineers routinely get higher starting salaries than men," he said.

Noting that his current and former wives, businesswomen both, make more than he does, he added: "Men have not stacked the decks against women."

Even as a child, Warren Farrell had little patience for the gender roles mandated by society. His family was conventional enough: a New Jersey suburban home, three children (he was the oldest), an accountant father who was definitely the primary earner.

But the young Warren refused to be pigeonholed by anyone's view of proper behavior for a boy. In seventh grade, he entered - and won - a beauty contest for boys. "I was elected class prince," he recalled with a still-proud laugh. In eighth grade, he was tagged as a math whiz, but he found math too boring to pursue. Although he was tall and athletic, he hated fighting, so, of course, he attracted the taunting of the local bullies in high school. He finally fought one. He won, and the bully clique respected him after that.

"It made me sad - winning a wrestling match is such a stupid reason to respect someone," he said.

Dr. Farrell always suspected that women tended to undermine themselves. One day, while he was teaching urban politics at Rutgers, he attended a convention at which one attendee, an attractive young woman, wanted to make a point but was beset with stage fright. "I encouraged her to speak up, and when she did, she blew everyone away," he said. She and Dr. Farrell soon married and, after she became a well-known corporate executive, she offered to be primary breadwinner while he pursued a doctorate in political science from New York University. (He asked that her name be withheld to protect her privacy.) He did his dissertation on the women's movement.

"My wife's income allowed me to do what I really loved," he said. "I realized that women's liberation is men's liberation, too."

After they divorced - they remain friends, he said - Dr. Farrell moved to San Diego, where he still lives. Ten years ago he met, and eventually married, Liz Dowling, a California entrepreneur with two daughters - Alex, now 17, and Erin, 18. Although he has written extensively about issues like sexual harassment and fatherhood, he says he is not spurred on by personal experiences. "I've always been motivated to stop people from doing dysfunctional things," he said.

Which, of course, provided a nice segue into his thoughts on how women can stop the self-sabotage that so often leads to low pay. Refreshingly, he steered clear of advice about body language, attitudes, dress and communication skills; women are already better at all of those than men, he said. But he did offer other observations:

There can be good jobs in fields you think you hate. So what if you are all thumbs. "A woman with organizing skills can run a construction company without ever picking up a hammer and nail," Dr. Farrell said. Do you like medicine, but can't stand blood? "Pharmacists can make as much as doctors," he said, and can have more control over their lives.

Jobs that are hazardous for men can be pretty safe for women. Women in the military are rarely sent to the front lines, Dr. Farrell said. Studies have shown that women who are cabdrivers usually pull daytime hours, female postal workers get safer routes, and male coal miners try to keep their few female colleagues out of danger. "When women need protection, men will compete to give it," he said.

Many jobs pay women more than men. Some of them - say, advertising executive, speech pathologist or statistician - are in fields that have long welcomed women. But many are jobs that many women erroneously believe are closed to them, like tool-and-die makers, funeral service workers, automotive mechanics, radiation therapists and sales engineers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics provides pay comparisons for many jobs.

A little extra training can yield a lot more money. Are you good with numbers? "Financial analysts make a lot more than accountants," Dr. Farrell said. Similarly, he notes, a nurse anesthetist makes twice as much as a regular nurse.

The "line versus staff" rule applies to women, too. Men have long realized that jobs in manufacturing and sales - line jobs in business parlance - are better for their careers than staff support jobs in human resources and public relations. "C.E.O.'s are selected from among those assuming bottom-line responsibilities for a company," he said, "so these fields pave the way for women who want to break alleged glass ceilings."

It is O.K. to trade a fatter paycheck for more time with children and hobbies. Just recognize that society did not force the choice on you. "Feel powerful and happy that you have control over your own life," Dr. Farrell said. "It's better than feeling like an angry victim of discrimination."

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