

THE OBAMA THEOREM

What's really behind the gender wage gap

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The Obamas are a well-matched first couple, to say the least. Both around 6 feet tall and Harvard educated, they were the only black lawyers in their Chicago firm when they met in the 1980s. With sterling educational and work backgrounds, they're both attractive high achievers, persuasive public speakers and evocative public figures.

At the Neighborhood Inaugural Ball, when they waltzed to Beyoncé's version of "At last ... my love has come along," many in the crowd were seen tearing up and clasping their hands to their cheeks. Why? The feelings of yearning and postponed fulfilment so key to romantic love were evoked by the song, but also by the romantic vision of this couple.



Let's face it: They're a perfect fit. A less talked about side of this story, though, is that when Michelle selected Barack as her partner, she ultimately opted to earn less. Beautiful, smart and independent, she could have chosen anyone. But like most women, she was attracted to a man at least as high achieving as she was (if not a man who could earn more). And though it probably didn't figure into their first conversations, these forces of romantic attraction gave her the flexibility and autonomy that many women crave.

This dynamic, as much as or perhaps more than discrimination, accounts for what experts describe as the gender gap in pay.

Michelle Obama is special but, in her choice of mate, she is much like women all over the world. From small American towns to sub-Saharan villages and bustling European and Asian cities, women see earning power, industriousness and ambition as highly attractive in men - and this is true no matter how educated, how high their salaries, or how politically engaged women are, according to studies by two American psychologists, Alice Eagly and David Buss. By advertising what good providers and parents they'll be, men flaunt their sex appeal.

This is more a matter of chemistry than accounting. While working at a Chicago hospital in 2006, Ms. Obama was pulling in a salary of \$274,000, and earning another \$50,000 sitting on corporate boards. Still, by choosing Barack, a high earner like herself (at the time, his book royalties alone added up to half a million a year), Michelle went from receiving more than \$300,000 in 2006 to working part time, earning 20 per cent of that sum the following year. By 2008, she had given up paid work entirely.

Like 75 per cent of women, she had adapted her career to her family and other interests - an option that most North American and European women say they would exercise in a flash if they could afford it, according to census and survey data. Sure, Ms. Obama was writing all her own speeches and attending 30 campaign events a week, but, by 2008, she wasn't earning a red cent. Was her precipitous drop in income due to gender discrimination? Was her husband, or anyone, forcing her hand?

More likely, Ms. Obama's decision to limit her paid work - well before she moved into the White House - is what happens when two like-minded people pool their resources and talents. This is not just common sense - it's also science. In electricity, opposites attract; but in couples, like attracts like. After all, humans don't pair off with just anyone. We're picky, and evidence shows we gravitate to partners who have many of our own traits.

Our intelligence and education, our appetites for risk, our height, weight, even clusters of our genes, are more similar to our spouses' than they are to our neighbours'. Taller-than-average men tend to go for taller-than-average women, and outgoing women usually choose extroverted men. High earners usually fall for other high earners, thus compounding any income gaps that already exist.

Looking at gender gaps often lead us to believe there's a single reason that explains them. But if this election has taught us anything, it's that exclusion no longer tells us the whole story. One of the most important chapters is really about love.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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