America’s Women and the Wage Gap

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Nationally, the median annual pay for a woman who holds a full-time, year-round job is $41,977 while the median annual pay for a man who holds a full-time, year-round job is $52,146. This means that, overall, women in the United States are paid 80 cents for every dollar paid to men, amounting to an annual gender wage gap of $10,169.1 This persistent, pervasive wage gap is driven in part by gender and racial discrimination, workplace harassment, job segregation and a lack of workplace policies that support family caregiving, which is still most often performed by women.2

The gender wage gap is a measure of just how far our nation still has to go to ensure that women can participate fully and equally in our economy – and it is widest for many women of color. Among women who hold full-time, year-round jobs in the United States, Black women are typically paid 61 cents, Native American women 58 cents and Latinas just 53 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men.3 White, non-Hispanic women are paid 77 cents and Asian women 85 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men, although some ethnic subgroups of Asian women fare much worse.4

The wage gap also varies by state and congressional district but spans nearly all corners of the country. In Louisiana for example, women are paid 69 cents for every dollar paid to men (a gap of 31 cents for every dollar), while in California, women are paid 89 cents for every dollar paid to men (a gap of 11 cents) (see chart).5

In 421 of the country’s 435 congressional districts (97 percent), the median yearly pay for women who work full time, year-round is less than the median yearly pay for men.6
What Does the Wage Gap Mean for America’s Women?

On average, women employed full time in the United States lose a combined total of more than $900 billion every year due to the wage gap. These lost wages mean women and their families have less money to support themselves, save and invest for the future, and spend on goods and services. Women, their families, businesses and the economy suffer as a result.

If the annual gender wage gap were eliminated, on average, a working woman in the United States would have enough money for approximately:

- Fourteen more months of child care;
- More than two-thirds of an additional year of tuition and fees for a four-year public university, or the full cost of tuition and fees for a two-year community college;
- Nearly eight additional months of premiums for employer-based health insurance;
- Nearly seven more months of mortgage payments;
- More than 10 additional months of rent;
- Up to 8.4 additional years of birth control;
- Or enough money to pay off student loan debt in just under three years.

Women, Families and the Country Cannot Afford Discrimination and Lower Wages

- In the United States, mothers are breadwinners in half of families with children under 18. This includes half of white mothers, 53 percent of Latina mothers, 81 percent of Black mothers and 44 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander mothers. Yet the wage gap for mothers is larger than for women overall. Mothers with full-time, year-round jobs are paid 71 cents for every dollar paid to fathers.
- Nearly 15 million family households in the United States are headed by women. About 26 percent of those families, or 3.9 million family households, have incomes that fall below the poverty level. Eliminating the wage gap would provide much-needed income to women whose wages sustain their households.

The Wage Gap Cannot Be Explained by Choices

- The wage gap persists regardless of industry. In the civilian industries that employ the most full-time employees – health care and social assistance, manufacturing, retail trade and educational services – women are paid less than men. In the health care and social assistance industry, women are paid just 73 cents for every dollar paid to men. In manufacturing, just 78 cents. In retail trade, 79 cents. And in educational services, 87 cents. Across all industries, women are paid lower salaries than men.
- The wage gap is present within occupations. Among the occupations with the most people working full time, year-round – sales, production, management, service, and office
and administrative support – women are paid less than men. In sales, women are paid just 70 cents for every dollar paid to men. In production, just 72 cents. In management, 76 cents. In service occupations, just 75 cents. And in office and administrative support occupations, 91 cents.20

The wage gap exists regardless of education level. Women with master’s degrees working full time, year-round are paid just 75 cents for every dollar paid to men with master’s degrees who work full time, year-round. Further, among full-time, year-round workers, women with associate’s degrees are paid less than men with just a high school diploma, and women with master’s degrees are paid less than men with bachelor’s degrees.21

Numerous causes contribute to the wage gap, including discrimination and bias. Compared to men, women tend to hold lower-paying jobs, work in lower-paying industries, and spend less time in the formal workforce. These trends result from factors ranging from pervasive stereotypes and social norms about gender and work, to a lack of workplace support for family caregiving, to gender and racial discrimination, to the devaluation of work when it is primarily done by women – and the effects are both starker and qualitatively different for women of color.22 Statistical analysis shows that even after controlling for factors like occupational and industry differences, differences in experience and education, and region and unionization – which themselves are not solely the result of women’s choices – 38 percent of the gap is unaccounted for, leading researchers to conclude that factors such as discrimination and unconscious bias continue to affect women’s wages.23

America’s Women Are Concerned About Unfair Pay

Women consider equal pay a top workplace issue. Nearly six in 10 women (58 percent) in the United States identify equal pay as one of the most important issues facing women in the workplace. When compared to women in most other high-wealth countries, a substantially higher share of U.S. women list equal pay as one of the most important issues women face at work.24

Less than one-third of women believe they are paid fairly. Just 28 percent of U.S. working women say they are confident they are paid the same salaries as their male counterparts. Forty-three percent say they do not believe they are paid the same – a substantially higher share than in most other high-wealth countries.25

Women are more likely to support a candidate for office who supports pay equity. Seventy percent of Republican women, 83 percent of independent women and 88 percent of Democratic women say they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who supports equal pay for women.26
A Path Toward Closing the Wage Gap

Despite the federal Equal Pay Act of 1963 and other protections for women, experts warn that women and men will not reach pay parity until 2059 unless something changes. Right now, the lack of supportive policies and bias combine to make fair pay elusive. But there are federal policy solutions that would help:

- **Fair pay protections and practices.** The Paycheck Fairness Act, now before Congress, would prohibit employers from retaliating against employees who discuss their wages and make it easier to demonstrate that discrimination has occurred. It would also prohibit screening of job applicants based on their salary histories. The Fair Pay Act would diminish wage disparities that result from gender-based occupational segregation.

- **A higher minimum wage and elimination of the tipped minimum wage.** The Raise the Wage Act would increase the federal minimum wage to $15 an hour over a seven-year period and gradually eliminate the subminimum wage for tipped workers. Greater access to overtime pay through updated U.S. Department of Labor regulations would also help make wages more fair for millions of working people.

- **Stronger protections against and remedies for workplace harassment.** The Ending the Monopoly of Power Over Workplace Harassment through Education and Reporting (EMPOWER) Act would increase transparency by prohibiting nondisclosure and nondisparagement clauses as a condition of employment and requiring companies to disclose settlements in connection with workplace harassment. It would also establish a confidential tip line with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, require workplace training and public education, and update the tax code so that survivors aren’t penalized and companies cannot deduct the costs of litigation or settlements.

- **Family friendly workplace standards.** The Healthy Families Act would guarantee paid sick days, and the Family And Medical Insurance Leave (FAMILY) Act would establish a national paid family and medical leave standard for women and men. Both proposals would help keep women attached to the workforce, resulting in higher wages over time. Pregnancy discrimination protections, access to quality, affordable child care and predictable schedules are also essential for retention and advancement of women in the workforce.

- **Full funding for federal agencies that investigate and enforce fair pay.** The Equal Pay Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, as well as executive branch initiatives to collect pay information and promote fair pay, are critically important to uncovering and eliminating discriminatory workplace practices that harm women.

- **Comprehensive reproductive health care.** Access to comprehensive reproductive health care enables women to pursue education and career opportunities and can increase workforce attachment and wages over time. Defending policies like the Affordable Care Act’s guarantee of copay-free coverage for the full range of FDA-approved contraceptives and more adequately funding our nation’s Title X family planning program are critical to ensuring women get the contraceptive care they need.
Passage of the Equal Access to Abortion Coverage in Health Insurance (EACH Woman) Act would help reduce barriers to abortion care.

Together, these policies will help close the gap between the wages paid to women and men by improving women’s access to good and decent-paying jobs, providing the support women need to stay and advance in their careers, and helping ensure fair and nondiscriminatory treatment wherever women work and in whatever jobs they hold.

Learn more about fair pay at NationalPartnership.org/Gap.


4 Child Care Aware of America. (2017). Parents and the High Cost of Child Care. Retrieved 13 September 2018, from https://usa.childcareaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017_CCA_High_Cost_Report_FINAL.pdf; Unpublished calculation of $8,670 based on the average cost of center-based child care for a four-year-old. This average is not representative of the mean and is an approximation calculated by weighting state child care cost averages by the number of programs by type reported by each state. It is not to be considered a “national average.”


6 Child Care Aware of America. (2017). Parents and the High Cost of Child Care. Retrieved 13 September 2018, from https://usa.childcareaware.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/2017_CCA_High_Cost_Report_FINAL.pdf; Unpublished calculation of $8,670 based on the average cost of center-based child care for a four-year-old. This average is not representative of the mean and is an approximation calculated by weighting state child care cost averages by the number of programs by type reported by each state. It is not to be considered a “national average.”


10 Kaiser Family Foundation. (n.d.) Average Annual Single Premium per Enrolled Employee For Employer-Based Health Insurance, 2016. Retrieved 13 September 2018, from https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/single-coverage/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22sortColumn%22:%22Employee%20Contribution%22,%22sortOrder%22:%22desc%22%7D


13 Center for American Progress. (2012, February 15). The High Costs of Birth Control: It’s Not As Affordable As You Think. Retrieved 13 September 2018, from https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/pdf/8C_costs.pdf; (Calculated from a survey of retail costs of oral contraceptives for the uninsured and average copays, combined with the average cost of doctor visits to obtain the prescription. While the Affordable Care Act greatly advanced access to birth control by requiring coverage of contraceptives without cost sharing, many women still must pay out of pocket because they lack insurance, because their plan is grandfathered and does not cover contraceptives without a copay, or because their plan only covers generics.)

The National Partnership for Women & Families is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, access to quality health care and policies that help women and men meet the dual demands of work and family. More information is available at NationalPartnership.org.

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