

THE PAYCHECK FAIRNESS ACT: HELPING TO CLOSE THE WAGE GAP FOR WOMEN

More than forty years ago, President Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act (EPA)¹ into law, making it illegal for employers to pay unequal wages to men and women who perform substantially equal work. At the time of the EPA's passage, women earned merely 58 cents to every dollar earned by men.² Although enforcement of the EPA as well as other civil rights laws has helped to narrow the wage gap, significant disparities remain and need to be addressed. The provisions of the Paycheck Fairness Act will strengthen current laws against wage discrimination, require the federal government to be more proactive in preventing and battling wage discrimination, and help realize the promise of equal pay for equal work.

The Gender Wage Gap Persists

- Today, women working full-time, year-round earn only about 76 cents for every dollar earned by men, a decline from 77 cents in 2002. In 2003, the median annual earnings of women 15 and older were \$30,724, compared to \$40,668 for their male counterparts.³
- Minority women fare significantly worse. In 2003, the median earnings of African American women working full-time, year-round were \$26,989⁴ compared to \$41,161⁵ for white men; the median for Hispanic women was only \$22,363.⁶ That means an African American woman earned just 66 cents for every dollar earned by a white man, while a Hispanic woman earned only 54 cents on the dollar.⁷ In both cases, this pay gap for women of color was larger than it was two years earlier, in 2001.⁸
- An earnings gap exists between women and men across a wide spectrum of occupations. In 2004, for example, the median weekly wages earned by women physicians were just 52% of the median weekly wages of male physicians.⁹ Women in sales and sales-related occupations earned only about 62% of the median weekly wages of men in equivalent positions.¹⁰ In some occupations, the gap is narrower, but still substantial. Women in the construction industry earned median weekly wages that were about 83% of what their male counterparts earned.¹¹ And women in computer and mathematical occupations had weekly earnings that were only 84% of what their male counterparts earned.¹²
- In some occupations, women have actually lost ground. For example, in a recent study of management positions in 10 industries that together employ over 70% of women in the workforce, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (then the General Accounting Office) found that women managers consistently made less than their male counterparts, and in seven of the 10 positions the pay gap had *increased* between 1995 and 2000.¹³
- The earnings gap between women and men also persists across all educational levels. While education lifts all boats, it lifts men's boats much higher than women's. For example, among workers 18 and older with some high school education, women's median annual earnings were \$11,650, compared to \$18,043 for men.¹⁴ Graduation from high school boosted women's median earnings to \$19,175, yet the same high school degree yielded \$28,827 for men.¹⁵ Even a two-year associate's degree gives men a much bigger bang for their buck (\$40,453 in median annual earnings) than it does for women (\$26,049).¹⁶ And earning a bachelor's degree yielded a median annual of income of

\$32,394 for women, but a whopping \$50,527 for men.¹⁷ In fact, the pay gap is widest among non-Hispanic white men and women: men with just a high school diploma make almost as much (\$31,051) as white women who have graduated from college (\$32,006).¹⁸

- There is not a single state in which women have gained economic equality with men.¹⁹ As of 2002, Washington, D.C. was the area with the smallest wage gap at 92%,²⁰ whereas Wyoming had the widest gap, with women making about 66% of what men earned.²¹
- As women get older, the wage gap for them widens. When women start their careers, the pay gap is relatively small: females aged 15 to 24 working full-time have median annual earnings that are 94% of what their male counterparts earn.²² However, by the time they reach the critical years leading up to retirement, that 6% pay gap has quintupled: women aged 45 to 64 who work full-time earn only about 68% of what men do.²³
- If women in the workforce earned the same as men (who work the same number of hours, have the same education, age, and union status and live in the same region of the country), their annual family income would rise by about \$4,000 and their poverty rates would be cut by half or more.²⁴
- Pay inequity also follows women into retirement. Unmarried women in the workforce today will receive, on average, about \$8,000/year less in retirement income than their male counterparts; even controlling for number of years worked and educational levels, the pay gap during prime working years plus spending a career in a female-dominated job accounts for two-thirds of that retirement income gap.²⁵ Women's loss of income in retirement due to pay inequity during their working years shows up primarily in their pensions and savings, not their Social Security. To the contrary, Social Security's progressive benefit formula and spousal benefits help women to counteract the effects of wage discrimination.²⁶

The Wage Gap Reflects Sex Discrimination

The wage gap cannot be dismissed as the result of "women's choices" in career and family matters. In fact, recent authoritative studies show that even when all relevant career and family attributes are taken into account, there is still a significant, unexplained gap in men's and women's earnings. Thus, even when women make the same career choices as men and work the same hours, they still earn less.

- A 2003 study by U.S. Government Accountability Office (then the General Accounting Office) found that, even when all the key factors that influence earnings are controlled for – demographic factors such as marital status, race, number and age of children, and income, as well as work patterns such as years of work, hours worked, and job tenure – women still earned, on average, only 80% of what men earned in 2000.²⁷ That is, 20% of the pay gap between women and men could not be explained or justified.
- A 1999 study covering all industries and occupations across all regions of the United States found that between one quarter and one-half of the wage gap is due solely to differences in pay between men and women working in the same establishments and in similar jobs.²⁸

Studies like these are borne out by case after case, in the courts and in the news, of suits brought by women charging their employers with wage discrimination. The evidence shows that sex discrimination in the workplace is still all too prevalent. Recent examples of pay discrimination cases include:

- In the largest employment discrimination suit ever filed, female employees have sued Wal-Mart for paying women less than men for similar work and using an old boys' network for promotions that prevented women's career advancement. One woman alleged that when she complained of the pay

disparity, her manager said that women would never make as much as men because “God made Adam first.” Another woman alleged that when she applied for a raise, her manager said, “Men are here to make a career, and women aren’t. Retail is for housewives who just need to earn extra money.”²⁹ The case is proceeding as a class action by more than 1.5 million women who are current and former employees of Wal-Mart.

- In 2001, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission found that Los Angeles County had created a two-tiered pay system: one for men and another for women. The county had started a nonprofit organization to ease the caseload of attorneys in the county counsel’s office. The auxiliary lawyers, who were mostly women, were paid 20% less than the county counsel lawyers, who were mostly men.³⁰
- In 2004, Wachovia agreed to pay \$5.5 million to settle allegations by the U.S. Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs that it engaged in compensation discrimination against more than 2,000 current and former women employees over six years.³¹

Clearly, sex discrimination plays a major role in producing and sustaining the wage gap for women. It is thus hardly surprising that public opinion surveys consistently show that ensuring equal pay is among women’s top work-related priorities. For instance, nine in 10 women responding to the “Ask a Working Women Survey” conducted by the AFL-CIO rated “stronger equal pay laws” as a “very important” or “somewhat important” legislative priority for them.³²

The Provisions of the Paycheck Fairness Act Are Designed to Close Loopholes in the Law and Block Rollbacks in Federal Enforcement that Have Hindered Efforts to Secure Equal Pay for Equal Work

The persistence of wage disparities as well as the experiences of litigants under the Equal Pay Act demonstrate the need for stronger laws to ensure that women are paid equal wages for equal work. Enactment of the Paycheck Fairness Act,³³ introduced in the Senate by Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and in the House of Representatives by Rep. Rosa DeLauro, would update and strengthen the EPA in important ways, including:

- **Improving Equal Pay Act Remedies**
The Act toughens the remedy provisions of the EPA by allowing prevailing plaintiffs to recover compensatory and punitive damages. The EPA currently provides only for liquidated (fixed and limited) damages and back pay awards, which tend to be insubstantial. The change will put gender-based wage discrimination on an equal footing with wage discrimination based on race or ethnicity, for which full compensatory and punitive damages are already available.
- **Making it Easier to Bring Class Action Equal Pay Act Claims**
The Act allows an EPA lawsuit to proceed as a class action in conformity with the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure (FRCP). Class actions are important because they ensure that relief will be provided to all those who are injured by the unlawful practice. Currently, it is very difficult to bring EPA suits as class actions because the EPA, adopted prior to the current federal class action rule (FRCP Rule 23), requires plaintiffs to opt *in* to a suit. Under the federal rule, class members are automatically considered part of the class until they choose to opt *out* of the class.
- **Improving Collection of Pay Information by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)**
The Act requires the EEOC to survey the pay data already available and issue regulations within 18 months requiring employers to submit any needed pay data identified by the race, sex, and national

origin of employees. These data will enhance the EEOC's ability to detect violations of law and improve its enforcement of the laws against pay discrimination.

- **Prohibiting Employer Retaliation**

Many employers place a “gag rule” on discussions of salaries among employees. The Act prohibits employers from punishing employees for sharing salary information with their co-workers. Without the ability to learn about wage disparities, it is difficult for employees to evaluate whether they are experiencing wage discrimination and to take action to assert their rights under the law.

- **Closing a Loophole in an Employer Defense**

Under the EPA, when an employer is found to be paying female employees less than male employees for equal work, the employer may assert an “affirmative defense”³⁴ that the pay differential is based on a “factor other than sex.”³⁵ Some employers have argued for interpretations of this affirmative defense that are so broad (e.g., to include factors such as a male worker's stronger salary negotiation skills or higher previous salaries) that they may themselves be “based on sex” and would seriously undermine the EPA.³⁶ The Act tightens this affirmative defense so that it can excuse a pay differential for men and women only where the employer can show that the differential is truly caused by something other than sex and is related to job performance – such as differences in education, training, or experience.

- **Eliminating the “Establishment” Requirement**

Under the EPA, in order to determine that there is wage discrimination, the wage comparison must be made between employees working at the same “establishment.”³⁷ Some courts have interpreted this to mean that wages paid in different facilities or offices of the same employer cannot be compared even if the employer is paying workers different salaries for the same work.³⁸ The Act clarifies that a comparison need not be between employees in the same physical place of business.

- **Developing Voluntary Guidelines for and Recognizing Model Employers**

The Act directs the Labor Department to develop guidelines to enable employers voluntarily to compare wages paid for different jobs to determine whether their pay scales accurately reflect the requirements of the jobs. This will help employers to eliminate unfair disparities between occupations traditionally dominated by men and by women. The Act also establishes an award, to be administered by the Labor Department, to recognize and promote the achievements of employers who have made strides to eliminate pay disparities.

- **Increasing Training, Research, and Education**

The Act provides for increased training for EEOC employees to identify and respond to wage discrimination claims. It also calls for enhancing various research and education programs at the Labor Department, including conducting research on ways to eliminate gender-based pay disparities and providing information to employers to assist them in eradicating such disparities.

- **Halting Rollbacks and Retreats by the Department of Labor**

The Department of Labor is charged with ensuring that employers that do business with the federal government do not discriminate and take affirmative action to ensure equal opportunity. Under the Bush Administration, however, the Labor Department has refused to use the tools at its disposal to detect and take enforcement action against wage discrimination by federal contractors. To the contrary, it has proposed guidelines and regulations that would tie its hands. Moreover, the Department has removed information about women's rights to equal pay from its website and has discontinued proactive activities to educate the public and enforce the law. The Act requires the Labor Department to reinstate many of these activities and to utilize all investigatory and enforcement tools at its disposal.

■ **Sparking the Development of Salary Negotiation Skills Training**

The Act establishes a competitive grant program to develop training programs for women and girls on how to negotiate better compensation packages, and directs the Secretaries of Labor and Education to integrate the programs developed into education and job training programs under their respective jurisdictions.

Conclusion

Equal pay for equal work is at the foundation of equality in the workplace. Wage discrimination affects family economic security today and retirement income tomorrow. American women and their families cannot afford paychecks that are shortchanged just because the workers who earned them are women. The provisions of the Paycheck Fairness Act propose concrete steps to respond to the ongoing injustice of wage discrimination.

NOTES

¹ 29 U.S.C. § 206(d).

² Council of Economic Advisers, *Explaining Trends in the Gender Wage Gap* 1 (1998).

³ U.S. Census Bureau, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance in the United States: 2003*, Current Population Reports, Consumer Income, P60-226, Table 1: Money Income and Earnings Summary Measures by Selected Characteristics: 2002 and 2003, at 5 (Aug. 2004), available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p60-226.pdf> (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2004 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, Table PINC-05. Work Experience in 2003—People 15 Years Old and Over by Total Money Earnings in 2003, Age, Race, Hispanic Origin, and Sex, available at http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032004/perinc/new05_113.htm (last visited Apr. 18, 2005). (Individual tables available at http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032004/perinc/new05_000.htm.)

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2004 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, Table PINC-05. Work Experience in 2003—People 15 Years Old and Over by Total Money Earnings in 2003, Age, Race, Hispanic Origin, and Sex, available at http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032004/perinc/new05_056.htm (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2004 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, Table PINC-05. Work Experience in 2003—People 15 Years Old and Over by Total Money Earnings in 2003, Age, Race, Hispanic Origin, and Sex, available at http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032004/perinc/new05_117.htm (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).

⁷ National Women's Law Center calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2004 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, selected tables, available at http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032004/perinc/new05_000.htm (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).

⁸ In 2001, the pay gap between white men and women of color was 69% for African American women and 56% for Hispanic women. National Women's Law Center calculation based on U.S. Census Bureau, Detailed Income Tabulations from the Current Population Survey, March 2001, Table PINC-05: Work Experience in 2001—People 15 Years Old and Over by Total Money Earnings in 2001, Age, Race, Hispanic Origin and Sex, available at http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032002/perinc/new05_063.htm and http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032002/perinc/new05_064.htm (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).

⁹ National Women's Law Center calculations based on Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Household Data Annual Averages*, Table 39: Median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers by detailed occupation and sex, 250 (2004 Income) available at <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat39.pdf> (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 252.

¹¹ *Id.* at 253.

¹² *Id.* at 250.

¹³ See U.S. General Accounting Office, *Women in Management: Analysis of Selected Data from the Current Population Survey 18-19*, GAO-02-156 (Oct. 2001), available at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d02156.pdf> (last visited Apr. 18, 2005); see also, Staffs of Reps. John Dingell and Carolyn Maloney, *A New Look Through the Glass Ceiling: Where Are the Women?, The Status of Women in Management in Ten Selected Industries* (Jan. 2002), available at <http://www.house.gov/maloney/issues/womenscaucus/glassceiling.pdf> (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).

¹⁴ National Women's Law Center calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2004*, Detailed Tables, Table 9 (2005), at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2004.html> (last visited April 18, 2005).

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Misha Werschkul & Erica Williams, Institute for Women's Policy Research, *The Status of Women in the States: 2004*, at 26 (Amy B. Caiazza and April Shaw, eds., 2004).

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² National Women's Law Center calculations based on selected tables, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2004 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, Table PINC-05. Work Experience in 2003—People 15 Years Old and Over by Total Money Earnings in 2003, Age, Race, Hispanic Origin, and Sex, available at http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032004/perinc/new05_073.htm and http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032004/perinc/new05_127.htm (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).

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- ²³ National Women's Law Center calculations based on selected tables, *id.* available at http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032004/perinc/new05_091.htm and http://ferret.bls.census.gov/macro/032004/perinc/new05_145.htm (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).
- ²⁴ AFL-CIO & the Institute for Women's Policy Research, Equal Pay for Working Families: National and State Data on Pay Gap and Its Costs 1 (1999), available at <http://www.aflcio.org/issuespolitics/women/equalpay/EqualPayForWorkingFamilies.cfm> (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).
- ²⁵ Olivia S. Mitchell, Phillip B. Levine, & John W. Phillips, The Impact of Pay Inequality, Occupational Segregation, and Lifetime Work Experience on the Retirement Income of Women and Minorities ix (AARP, Sept. 1999), available at http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/econ/9910_women.pdf (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).
- ²⁶ *Id.*
- ²⁷ U.S. General Accounting Office, Women's Earnings: Work Patterns Partially Explain Difference between Men's and Women's Earnings 2, GAO-04-35 (Oct. 2003), available at <http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-35> (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).
- ²⁸ Kimberly Bayard et al., New Evidence on Sex Segregation and Sex Differences in Wages from Matched Employee-Employer Data 30 (Nat'l Bureau of Econ. Research, Working Paper No. 7003, 1999).
- ²⁹ Bob Egelko, *Sex Discrimination Cited at Wal-Mart: Women Accuse Wal-Mart, Lawyers Seek OK for Class-Action Suit*, The San Francisco Chron., Apr. 29, 2003, at B1, available at sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2003/04/29/BU303648.DTL (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).
- ³⁰ Evelyn Larrubia, *U.S. Calls Lawyer Pay Plan Biased Equity*, Los Angeles Times, Aug. 30, 2001, at B3.
- ³¹ *Wachovia to Pay \$5.5M in Discrimination Case*, Tampa Bay Business Journal, Sept. 24, 2004, available at <http://tampabay.bizjournals.com/tampabay/stories/2004/09/20/daily37.html> (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).
- ³² AFL-CIO, 2004 Ask a Working Woman Survey Report, at 9 (2004) available at <http://www.aflcio.org/issuespolitics/women/report/upload/aawwreport.pdf> (last visited Apr. 18, 2005).
- ³³ Another important legislative proposal, the Fair Pay Act, introduced in the Senate by Sen. Tom Harkin and in the House of Representatives by Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton, would extend the reach of the equal pay laws to cover wage discrimination that results from occupational segregation on the basis of sex, race, and ethnicity.
- ³⁴ In wage discrimination cases, an affirmative defense is one that admits the existence of a wage disparity but asserts a legally permissible reason for the disparity.
- ³⁵ 29 U.S.C. § 206(d)(1).
- ³⁶ *See, e.g., Kouba v. Allstate Ins. Co.*, 691 F.2d 873 (9th Cir. 1982) (employer computed minimum salaries for new sales agents based on their prior salaries).
- ³⁷ 29 U.S.C. § 206(d)(1).
- ³⁸ *See, e.g., Wetzell v. Liberty Mut. Ins. Co.*, 449 F. Supp. 397, 407 (W.D. Pa. 1978).