



## Equal Pay for Women: We Can't Wait Another 50 Years

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*This is a guest post from Darlene Friedman, Senior Director of Membership Marketing for Soroptimist, a global organization working to empower women socially and economically, and LiveYourDream.org, its online community offering hands-on volunteer opportunities.*

On April 9, 1963, President John F. Kennedy signed the [Equal Pay Act](#) into law to prohibit discrimination on account of [sex](#) in the payment of wages by employers. The law would end, he said, the "unconscionable practice of paying [female employees less wages](#) than male employees for the same job."

Flash forward 50 years, and... well... not so much.

Today, U.S. women are paid just 77 cents for every dollar paid to men. And, no surprise, the gap is even worse for minority women. A new National Partnership for Women and Families study affirms the gap exists [in every U.S. state](#) and in the country's 50 largest metropolitan areas.

Back in 1963, conventional wisdom held that men needed higher pay because they had families to support. Now, according to a just-released Pew study, women make up 40 percent of the leading or only breadwinners in U.S. families. A reflection of our poor economy and the rising number of single mom-headed households, the fact is 31 percent of families where the mom is the primary (or only) wage earner live below the poverty line.

Wage inequality is a complex issue with myriad social and economic layers. It is true women often gravitate toward lower-paying jobs. They take breaks to have and stay home with their kids. They return to the workforce part-time in order to preserve balance in their lives. However, according to a 2007 National Women's Law Center report, none of these variables tells the whole story. All things being equal (no pun intended), women continue to earn less than their male counterparts both in cases where the work is equal and when it's comparable.

Unequal pay for women means higher poverty levels, a lack of access to food, shelter and other necessities, and limited future opportunity for their families. In fact, according to the NOW Foundation, U.S. [working families lose \\$200 billion](#) of income annually to the wage gap. And if it were eliminated, poverty would be cut in half.

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The National Partnership for Women and Families found that median yearly pay for women employed full time is more than \$11,000 less than men's. It results in lost income amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars during the course of a woman's working life. According to The Wage Project, and as reported in the Soroptimist White Paper, [The Gender Wage Gap](#), that amount for women with a college degree can reach a staggering \$1.2 million. Wage inequality also means women enter into retirement with far fewer financial resources than men.

Let's take a real-life example. [Gladyn Minzey, of Clarksville, Tennessee](#), overcame tremendous hardships to get her life back after it became derailed due to sexual abuse that occurred when she was a child. After relationships with violent men and self-medicating with drugs and alcohol (often the case with people who were sexually abused as children), Gladyn took control. She summoned the strength buried deep within and decided to change the trajectory of her life and the lives of her two daughters.

Working part time serving pizza during the day and attending community college at night, Gladyn struggled to pay for books, tuition and childcare. Then she got some help in the form a cash grant from the Soroptimist [Women's Opportunity Awards](#) program. Today she is working toward a master's degree in social work. She believes her life's purpose is to give back and help others who have experienced trauma.

Gladyn is an inspiration to all who know her. She deserves every good thing that comes her way.

Now, let's imagine that after completing her degree, Gladyn is hired as a social worker at a salary of \$40,000 per year. It is true that Gladyn is going into a predominately "female" profession. (Why the helping professions are so underpaid is another conversation altogether.) But for now, let's say her male counterpart, same degree, same experience, is hired at \$48,000 a year. Since Gladyn is a single mother, she must provide for her family on that one salary, while her co-worker has a working spouse. He is promoted several times, not necessarily because he is doing a better job than Gladyn. He eventually becomes a manager and earns \$20,000 more per year. Every year he gets raises based on that higher salary, while Gladyn lags behind. You don't have to be a mathematician to see the effects of this inequality. Despite doing everything right to turn her life around, under this scenario Gladyn and her daughters would suffer the ill effects of low income and limited opportunity.

This part of Gladyn's story may be hypothetical, but it's based on real-life incidents. Women like Gladyn are doing everything humanly possible to make something of their lives but they are short-changed and sabotaged at every turn. It flies in the face of the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" value that Americans supposedly hold dear.

So, what can we do?

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We all, as individuals and as part of the greater collective, can help women get their fair share by:

- Supporting them in their efforts to crash through the glass ceiling.
- Helping them achieve a work-life balance.
- Encouraging sound education choices, including making girls aware of careers in higher-paid, traditionally male fields such as engineering.
- Recognizing and valuing the importance of helping professions such as nursing, teaching and social work.
- Teaching women to ask for better pay and better jobs.
- Working to break down systemic discrimination by pressuring businesses to uphold the [Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act](#) and the [Equal Pay Act](#) and advocating for passage of the [Paycheck Fairness Act](#), which strengthens federal enforcements, provides employer incentives to uphold the law and empowers women to better negotiate the pay they deserve.

This is not just a women's issue. It's a men's issue. It's a family issue. It's a matter that speaks to the long-term health of our entire country.