

MENDING THE WOUND OF INEQUALITY:

A SURGICAL APPROACH TO CLOSING THE GENDER PAY GAP IN THE UNITED STATES

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Executive Summary

This brief examines the reasons why the gender pay gap exists and persists in the United States. In so doing, it explains why closing the gap is an urgent matter that not only has far reaching implications for women and the economy, but for society as a whole. This brief also performs a policy analysis of four often cited ways of remedying the issue: raising the federal minimum wage, paid family and medical leave, affordable universal childcare, and banning pay secrecy in the workplace. Using data from an international and domestic perspective, this analysis reveals that raising the federal minimum wage, banning pay secrecy, and affordable universal childcare close the gap. Paid family and medical leave, on the other hand, does not close the gap by itself, but may do so when paired with other caregiving policies. Taking these results into account, this analysis utilizes a surgical approach, offering policy recommendations that target one aspect of the issue at a time. Measures proposed include setting a federal minimum wage floor that accounts for today's cost of living and inflation rate, providing incentives for fathers to take paid family and medical leave, providing on-site or near-site childcare options, and requiring workplaces to post salaries publicly.

Background

On average, women today earn about 83 cents for every dollar paid to men.ⁱ While 17 cents does not sound like a lot in the scheme of things, it amounts to women making over \$10,000 less per year in median earnings than men. This results in a long list of essential items that women cannot afford per year including 3 months' rent, 6 tanks of gas, 3 months of student loan payments, 3 months of child-care, and 3 months of health insurance premiums.ⁱⁱ

While women's earnings in 2020 were more comparable to men's earnings than they were in the past, progress to close the gap has been slow and inconsistent. That is, in 40 years, the gap has closed by 23 cents. Plus, the gap is even larger for women of color, with Black women today making 64 cents,

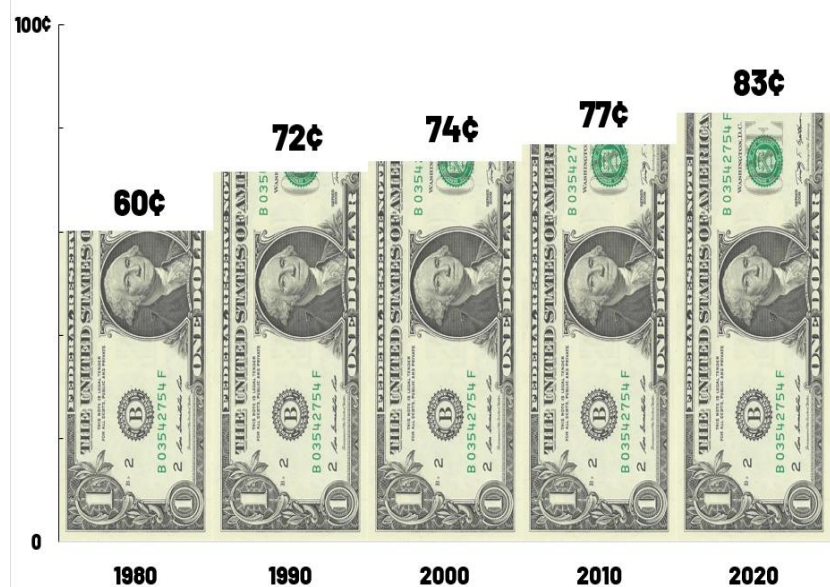
and Hispanic women making 57 cents, on average, for every dollar paid to men.ⁱⁱⁱ If the gender pay gap continues to close at this pace, equal pay will not be reached for all women until the year, 2111.^{iv}

This has serious implications, creating a domino effect that affects society overall. It results in less retirement benefits for women, leading to higher poverty rates in the United States.^v It makes it harder for women to balance their careers and family life, which affects the economic stability of the country. It affects employers and employees alike, impacting a workplace's culture and employee motivation. Moreover, it results in unequal treatment and opportunities, contributing to gender and racial discrimination that persists.

What Women Earn For Every Dollar Paid To Men

The progression by decade from 1980 to 2020 of what women, on average, earn for every dollar paid to men in the United States.

Sources: United States Census Bureau, American Association for University Women



The gender pay gap exists for several reasons including but not limited to occupational segregation, lack of adequate workplace policies that support mothers and families, women being disproportionately employed in low-wage jobs, the motherhood penalty, and women being perceived as less productive than men. It also exists because legislative efforts to date have fallen short. For instance, the Equal Pay Act (EPA) of 1963 made it illegal for men and women to be paid different wages for “substantially equal work.”^{vi} However, the act included many loopholes, such as employers justifying differences in pay on merit, seniority, productivity, and “any other factor other than sex.”^{vii}

There have also been obstacles for getting additional policies passed. For instance, the Paycheck Fairness Act of 2021, which addresses the EPA’s loopholes, has been filibustered numerous times. Likewise, the Build Back Better Act of 2021, which could have been a window of opportunity to chip away at the gender pay gap via its childcare and paid-family leave provisions, is no longer on the table.

This begs the question: Have these acts been expecting too much change at one time? Perhaps it would be advantageous to take a more surgical approach instead, focusing on legislation that addresses one aspect of the issue at a time.

Policy Analysis

This analysis takes a closer look at four policy options that have the potential to close the gender pay gap: raising the minimum wage, paid family and medical leave, affordable universal childcare, and banning pay secrecy in the workplace. These policy options have been selected because they directly address a handful of the reasons that the gap exists, including lack of adequate workplace policies that support mothers and families, pay equity laws in need of reform, and women being disproportionately employed in low-wage jobs. While each option is often cited as a step in the right direction, this analysis reveals that some options are better than others.

Using reports by various think-tanks, scholars, policy institutes, and news outlets from both an international and domestic perspective, this analysis examines how these policies could affect retirement benefits, the number of people in poverty, the number of women affected by the policy, labor force participation, and lifetime earnings, among other statistics. Further, it delves into whether these policies raise or lower the gap by a given percentage overall, or among specific demographic groups. It also considers the pros and cons in addition to the barriers to acquiring support in the United States.

Raising the Federal Minimum Wage

The federal minimum wage is currently set at \$7.25 per hour and the last time it was raised was in 2009. In that time, it has not kept up with the inflation rate or the rising cost of living. This is a trend that can be traced historically as well. After adjusting for inflation, minimum wage workers in 1968 earned 46 percent more than what today’s minimum wage workers earn.^{viii} To put this into perspective, a minimum wage worker today needs to work 87 hours to cover an average car payment, whereas in 1968, he needed to work 36 hours.^{ix}

Incrementally raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2025--the proposed target for several years by Democrats and labor activists via the Fight for \$15 movement and various iterations of the Raise the Wage Act--would help alleviate some of these issues:

- ✓ 21 percent of workers in the United States would receive a raise, amounting to an increase of about \$3,300 per year, on average, for full time workers.^x
- ✓ Because women make up nearly 2/3 of the minimum wage workforce, nearly 19 million women would receive a raise, with 25 percent being working mothers and 36 percent being working single mothers.^{xi}
- ✓ Women of color would be particularly affected, with over 30 percent of Black and Latina women receiving a raise.^{xii}
- ✓ Government expenditures on assistance programs such as EITC, CTC, and SNAP would decrease by an estimated \$13.4 billion to \$31 billion.^{xiii} Since incomes would increase, many families would no longer need or qualify for these programs.

That said, it has been argued that raising the federal minimum wage could have detrimental effects, including job losses. However, several studies have shown the opposite effect.^{xiv} As one example, Cengiz et al (2019) found that minimum wage increases, even amongst the highest increases at the state-level, did not decrease low-wage worker employment.^{xv}

Due to inaction at the federal level, thirty states have taken charge, adopting a minimum wage that is higher than the amount set at the federal level. In states where the minimum wage is \$10 or above, the gender pay gap is reduced by 17 percent as compared to states that have a \$7.25 minimum wage.^{xvi} Raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 per hour could have an even greater effect on reducing the gender pay gap.

**CLOSES
GENDER PAY
GAP**

Yet, it should be noted that a worker making a \$15 minimum wage today needs to work 42 hours to cover an average car payment, which is more hours than he needed to work in 1968. As such, \$15 is still not high enough to account for today's cost of living and inflation rate.^{xvii}

Paid Family and Medical Leave

Paid family and medical leave is a gender-neutral policy that would provide up to 12 weeks of paid-time off for the birth or adoption of a child, an employee's own critical health condition, and caregiving for a family member. It would apply to full-time and part-time workers who are self-employed, privately employed, and employed by federal, state, and local government.^{xviii} Pay per week would be based on a percentage of one's earnings per week. Funding would come from the federal government via tax revenue.^{xix}

The United States is the only industrialized country without paid family and medical leave. One could argue this is reason enough to get this type of policy passed. The policy also has the potential to provide many benefits, especially for society and working women:

- ✓ Women are between 20 and 50 percent less likely to leave their jobs after having a child in states where paid family and medical leave policies have been enacted, subsequently impacting women's ability to advance their career and acquire retirement savings.^{xx}
- ✓ It would encourage two parent child rearing. When fathers take advantage of paid family and medical leave opportunities, and caregiving responsibilities are shared, this can make it easier for women to not only rejoin the workforce, but also balance their work and family life.^{xxi}

However, it is unclear whether implementing such a policy would close the gap. Studies abroad show that women still take advantage of paid time off more than men, even though it is open to both genders.^{xxii} This suggests that incentivizing fathers to take paid leave may be another way of approaching the policy.

**MIXED
RESULTS**

Other studies show that states with "higher care economy" scores, such as California, Oregon, Connecticut, New York, and Massachusetts, have higher labor force participation for women (around 76 percent on average) and lower gender pay gaps (with women making 84 cents on average for every dollar paid to men).^{xxiii} This suggests that paid family and medical leave might close the gap when paired with other caregiving policies.

Affordable Universal Childcare

On average, working families in the United States spend \$13,000 per year on childcare.^{xxiv} Many Americans, especially low and middle-income women, are forced to make tough choices between spending the bulk of their paycheck on childcare or working fewer hours or quitting their jobs to perform childcare duties themselves.

To alleviate these issues, one option is to offer high quality, affordable universal childcare that is subsidized by the government. As has been previously proposed by Senator Warren and President Biden, for families whose income falls below 200 percent of the federal poverty line, childcare would be free.^{xxv} For families who have a higher income,

childcare costs would be capped at 7 percent of household income.^{xxvi} Funding would come from tax revenues, specifically those levied on the wealthy.^{xxvii}

Such a policy would also place an emphasis on constructing and renovating childcare facilities so that families have greater access to high-quality childcare. Additional emphasis would be placed on providing training and professional development opportunities for childcare workers as well as increasing their pay and benefits.^{xxviii}

Affordable universal childcare could have a plethora of positive effects on women's economic stability:

- ✓ Women's lifetime earnings are estimated to increase by \$97,000 and retirement benefits by about \$20,000.^{xxix}
- ✓ Women's labor force participation is estimated to increase by 17 percent.^{xxx} Sweden, Norway, and Canada have seen a similar rise in women's labor force participation due to their universal childcare policies.^{xxxi}
- ✓ Childcare workers, whom are among some of the most underpaid workers in the country, would be lifted out of poverty.^{xxxii}
- ✓ Additional societal benefits range from better childcare quality to improved health and educational outcomes for children as they become adults.^{xxxiii}

CLOSES GENDER PAY GAP

Research shows that affordable universal childcare would close the gender pay gap between about 3 to 25 percent, depending on one's education level.^{xxxiv}

However, conventional gender roles that subscribe to mothers as primary caregivers tend to stand between the United States and universal childcare.^{xxxv} This can be seen in the way that family household duties are divvied up^{xxxvi} in addition to an interest in preserving the "sanctity of motherhood."^{xxxvii}

That said, universal childcare is not unheard of in a United States context. When many women took over their husband's jobs during WWII, the Lanham Act provided high quality, government funded universal child-care for all families through the establishment of day care centers.^{xxxviii} Resultantly, women's employment and annual earnings increased, plus studies have shown that this also improved children's high school graduation rates in the long run.^{xxxix}

Although universal childcare during this time was seen as a form of wartime emergency and did not last beyond the war effort, this historical example shows that the federal government has been ready and willing to implement universal childcare in times of need. Maybe COVID-19 will be the catalyst for establishing universal childcare in the 21st century.

Banning Pay Secrecy in the Workplace

A 2017-2018 survey found that 48 percent of workers were banned or dissuaded from discussing their wages, impacting their ability to make pay negotiations, know where they stand as compared to other associates, and prove that wage discrimination is happening in the workplace.^{xl}

To mitigate these issues, over a dozen states and the District of Columbia have implemented laws that ban pay secrecy in the workplace,^{xli} producing some positive results:

- ✓ Women's earnings are 3 percent higher in states that banned pay secrecy versus those that did not.^{xlii} In those states, the gender pay gap has also been reduced by 12 to 15 percent for workers with a college degree and 6 to 8 percent for workers without a college degree.^{xliii}

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While these findings are encouraging, other studies reveal puzzling results. That is, while fewer workers report that their employers prohibit them from discussing their wages, there has not been a subsequent increase in workers' feelings toward discussing their pay openly.^{xliv}

Due to this discrepancy, it may be advantageous to consider the role that workplace culture plays in this regard or whether posting salaries publicly could circumvent the issue. In terms of the latter, this has had positive effects on closing the gender pay gap. For instance, Obloj and Zenger (2022) found through an examination of 100,000 salaries at

academic institutions across eight states that the gender pay gap decreased by 2 to 6 percentage points after salaries were posted publicly between 2008 and 2013.^{xlvi}

Policy Recommendations

Across the board, these policy options have several positive effects on women and society. However, they do not all close the gender pay gap. Based on these results, I propose the following policy recommendations, in order of implementation:

1 Raising the Federal Minimum Wage

- Although \$15 is more of a realistic and politically feasible target, it would be useful to aim for a federal floor that accounts for today's cost of living and inflation rate, similar to what was previously done between 1938 and 1968.^{xlvi} Estimates show that the rate would need to be between \$22 and \$26 to account for this today.^{xlvi} Setting the rate at \$20.50, the average between \$15 and \$26, could be a way to meet in the middle and help workers afford healthcare, food, rent, and other essentials.
- This could be phased in incrementally by 2027, with an increase of about \$2.60 per year if 2022 is the start year. Once \$20.50 is reached, the minimum wage could be indexed, so it can keep up with inflation.

2 Affordable Universal Childcare + Paid Family and Medical Leave

- For future legislation, it would be beneficial to consider pairing affordable universal childcare and paid family and medical leave together as a policy bundle to maximize the effectiveness of both policies in closing the gender pay gap.
- In terms of affordable universal childcare, one additional approach is to provide federally subsidized on-site or near-site childcare options. This can give workers peace of mind knowing that their children are being looked after nearby as well as provide greater flexibility for daycare hours.^{xlvi}
- Because raising the federal minimum wage would decrease government expenditures on assistance programs, these funds could be reappropriated to pay for or subsidize on-site or near-site childcare facilities.
- To increase more uptake by men for paid family and medical leave, one approach is to provide bonuses of a specified amount for men who utilize the policy.^{xlvi} Another approach is to reserve a portion of the paid-time off period just for fathers.^l For instance, in Quebec and Sweden, they use a "daddy quota," where leave is provided to fathers for a specified number of weeks. If fathers don't take the time off, they lose the benefits.^{li}

3 Banning Pay Secrecy + Promoting Pay Transparency

- Since banning pay secrecy and publishing salaries publicly close the gender pay gap, it would be useful to pair both policies together to provide additional safeguards against unequal pay in the workplace. The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) could also be amended to include a requirement that employers publish their wages publicly as well as implement workplace policies that promote an open discussion of wages.

Imagine if over half the country, or about 166 million women, received a 17 percent raise, on average, and what impact this could have. If the gender pay gap is reduced, not only would more money be brought into the economy, but it would contribute to the betterment of society overall. If we take a more surgical approach to closing the gender pay gap, equal pay can hopefully be achieved in our lifetimes, and bring us closer to achieving the democratic ideals that this country was founded on, fairness and equality.

End Notes

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