

A Brief History of the Equal Pay for Working Women in the United States

Compiled by LEIGH ELMORE, Editor for *Women in Business Magazine*®

The concept of equality among the sexes is as old as humanity itself.

In America certainly Abigail Adams had it in mind when she implored her husband, John Adams, “to remember ladies,” when helping to frame the Declaration of Independence in 1776. While her prescient remarks were not heeded, her ambitions did not fade, and the effort to ensure equal rights and equal pay for women in America are still burning to this day.

Based on national pay disparity numbers, a hypothetical woman would have to work until April 12, 2016 in order to make the same amount of money that a man made in 2015. In other words women earn 79 cents for every dollar earned by a man. As we anticipate Equal Pay Day on April 12, it’s important to recognize that the struggle for equal pay has been ongoing for more than a century.

Here is a brief timeline of that effort:

- In **1869** it was noted that women working in the U.S. Treasury Dept. were earning about half (\$900) as men doing the same jobs (\$1,800). That year a resolution to ensure equal pay for government workers passed the House of Representatives by nearly 100 votes. However, the legislation was watered down by the time it passed the Senate in **1870**.
- One of the earliest public demands for equal pay for women came in **1873** when the female employees of the Western Union Telegraph Co., went on strike, partly to ensure equal pay for all employees. The strike ultimately failed, but it raised the banner.

- In **1911** significant progress came when New York teachers were granted equal pay to that of their male counterparts.
- The World Wars of the 20th century helped to advance the cause of women in the workplace. Thousands of women took jobs to support the war efforts. The National War Labor Board ruled in **1918** that women doing war related



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work should be paid equally with men. The same held true in World War II in the 1940s.

- After WWII the effort flagged as men returned from the military and took their old jobs back. An attempt in **1947** by the U.S. Labor Department to pass an equal pay amendment in Congress was ultimately unsuccessful.

- Finally, in **1963**, Congress passed the Equal Pay Law, which was signed by President John F. Kennedy, who called the law, “a significant step forward.” The Civil Rights Act followed in **1964**.
- Legal wins for women continued in **1978** with the Pregnancy Discrimination Act and in **1991** with the Family and Medical Leave Act, which allowed parents regardless of gender to take time off.
- In **2009**, President Obama chose the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act as his first piece of legislation, which restores some protections against discrimination that had been stripped in a **2007** Supreme Court case, and incentivizes employers to make their payrolls more fair.

Keeping up the Pressure for Equal Pay

There are a number of agencies that track women’s progress in the workplace. These include the U.S. Department of Labor, the National Women’s Law Center and the Economic Policy Institute.

The [U.S. Department of Labor](#) maintains a website devoted to tracking issues on the equal pay front. Look for a special ABWA website in the near future that will link to many of the Labor Department’s information.

“Federal Law has banned pay discrimination since 1963,” states [Labor Secretary Tom Perez](#) on his blog. “But more than 50 years later, many in the American workplace—because of their sex, race or ethnicity—don’t get equal pay for equal work. Unlawful pay

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discrimination shortchanges workers by thousands of dollars a year, affecting people's ability to support their families today and accumulate retirement savings and Social Security benefits for tomorrow."

The [National Women's Law Center](#) is a non-profit organization that has been working since 1972 to advance and protect women's legal rights. It reports, "We can shrink the wage gap by strengthening equal pay laws, making it easier for women to enter high-paying careers, and lifting up the salaries of women in low-wage jobs."

The [Economic Policy Institute](#) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank created in 1986 to include the needs of low- and middle-income workers in economic policy discussions. The institute's mission is to inform and empower individuals to seek solutions that ensure broadly shared prosperity and opportunity. It has developed a [12-point strategy for closing the pay gap](#).

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