

Remarks on the 50th Anniversary of the Equal Pay Act

June 10, 2013

The President. Thanks so much, everybody. Everybody have a seat. Well, welcome to the White House. It is wonderful to see all of you. Thank you, Joe, for that kind introduction. Thank you, Valerie, for the great leadership you've shown on this. And to all of you—business leaders and advocates, Members of Congress who are here, members of my administration—I am so glad that all of you could be here to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Equal Pay Act.

Now, when you think about it, we're not just celebrating a law, we're honoring the heroes who made that law possible, the fierce determination of Americans who saw a wrong and worked to right it. There were women who were sick and tired of being sick and tired—*[laughter]*—of seeing the same jobs advertised with different pay scales; women who were tired of being treated like second-class workers; women like Dorothy Height and Congresswoman Edna Kelly and Esther Peterson, all who pushed to make the Equal Pay Act a reality. And today we recognize the work of those brave women. But until equal pay truly is a reality, we're also here to recommit ourselves to the work that remains to be done.

Fifty years ago today, President Kennedy signed the Equal Pay Act into law, right here in the White House. He said it was basic to our democracy. It's the idea that all of us are created equal. And as I said in my Inaugural Address this year, our journey to equality is not complete until our wives, our mothers, our daughters can earn a living equal to their efforts.

The day that the bill was signed into law, women earned 30—59 cents for every dollar a man earned, on average. Today, it's about 77 cents. So it was 59, and now it's 77 cents. It's even less, by the way, if you're an African American or a Latina. So I guess that's progress, but does anybody here think that's good enough?

Audience members. No!

The President. I assume everybody thinks we can do better.

Audience members. Yes!

Audience member. We can.

The President. Yes, we can. *[Laughter]*—so—*[applause]*. That's right.

Over the course of her career, a working woman with a college degree will earn, on average, hundreds of thousands of dollars less than a man who does the same work. Now, that's wrong. I don't want that for Malia and Sasha. I don't want that for your daughters. I don't want that to be an example that any child growing up ends up accepting as somehow the norm. I want every child to grow up knowing that a woman's hard work is valued and rewarded just as much as any man's.

Now, what's important to realize also, though, is this is not just an issue of fairness. This is a family issue. This is a middle class issue. This is an economic issue. Just last week, a report confirmed what we already know: that women are increasingly the breadwinners for American families. Women are now the primary source of income for nearly 40 percent of American families. Forty percent, almost half.

That's not something to panic about or to be afraid about, that's a sign of the progress and the strides that we've made. But what it does mean is that when more women are bringing home the bacon, they shouldn't just be getting a little bit of bacon. [Laughter] If they're bringing home more of the income and that income is less than a fair share, that means that families have less to get by on for childcare or health care or gas or groceries. It makes it harder for middle class families to save and retire. It leaves small businesses with customers who have less money in their pockets, which is not good for the economy. That's not a good example to set for our sons and daughters, but it's also not a good recipe for long-term, stable economic growth.

So to anyone who says 77 cents on the dollar sounds pretty close to equal, I say, you're math is bad. [Laughter] You wouldn't like it if your vote only counted in three out of four elections. [Laughter] You wouldn't like it if your daughters or sons went to school, but they only got taught 3 out of 4 days a week or 4 out of 5 days a week. You wouldn't like it if you were forced to work every fourth day without pay. Men would be complaining about that. [Laughter] They wouldn't think that was equal or fair.

So this is the 21st century. It's time to close that gap. That's why the first bill I signed into law was the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act.

That's why, as Valerie mentioned, I created the first-ever White House Council on Women and Girls, which is working to close that gap. And Valerie's Council—this Council is doing a great job in bringing the experiences of women into our Federal policies as well.

It's why I established a National Equal Pay Task Force to help crack down on violations of equal pay laws, which, by the way, they're doing at a record rate. And through education and outreach, they're also helping employers develop tools to comply with the Nation's equal pay laws on their own. And that's why, earlier this year, I signed a Presidential memorandum directing the Federal Government to close that gap for good for its employees. Right? We have to set an example.

It's also why we're using the latest technology to help workers get the information they need to figure out if they're underpaid. And thanks to innovators like Rachel and Laquitta, who are up here, we can now say, "There's an app for that." [Laughter] But as long as this gap persists, we're going to have more work to do. And now is the time to keep up the work that all those trailblazers started 50 years ago.

Now is the time for Congress to step up and pass the Paycheck Fairness Act so women have better tools to fight for equal pay for equal work. Now is the time for us to encourage more young women to pursue math and science education. Now is the time for us to hire more STEM teachers so all our children are prepared for the high-tech, high-wage jobs of tomorrow.

Now is the time to make sure businesses offer men and women the flexibility to be good employees and good parents. And I really want to commend Deloitte and SumAll and the CEOs who are with us here today. They are creating exactly the kind of—kinds of innovative workplaces that help hard-working Americans thrive, and they're committed to pay equity. And so when you have a chance to talk to Joe, say thank you. And CEOs who are out there, if you want a first-class company that is tapping into the talents and resources of all your employees, make sure that you're putting in place systems so that they all feel like they're being treated fairly and equally. It's a simple principle, and it's a powerful one.

And now is the time to make sure that we are putting in place a minimum wage that you can live on, because 60 percent of those making the minimum wage are women.

We do all this, and this will be part of our broader agenda to create good jobs and to strengthen middle class security, to keep rebuilding an economy that works for everybody, that gives every American the chance to get ahead, no matter who you are or what you look like, what your last name is, who you love.

That's what I'm going to keep on fighting for. That's what you're going to keep on fighting for. And we have all of you and your predecessors to thank for the incredible progress this country has made in eliminating the barriers and injustices that might keep our daughters from enjoying the same rights, same chances, and same freedoms as our sons. I'm proud of you.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:53 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Joe Echevarria, chief executive officer, Deloitte LLP; White House Senior Adviser Valerie B. Jarrett, in her capacity as Chair of the White House Council on Women and Girls; and Rachel Koch of Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz College and Laquitta Martell-DeMerchant of Fuzion Apps, Inc., winners of the Department of Labor's Equal Pay App Challenge.

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