



On ‘Equal Pay Day,’ fight over gender wage gap rages on

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April 3, 2017

Another session of Congress, another attempt from Democratic lawmakers to enshrine the Paycheck Fairness Act into law. But with tight Republican control over the federal government, the bill seems likely to meet its usual fate: defeat.

U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., and U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., are expected to reintroduce the bill – submitted to every session of Congress since 1997 with the aim of reducing the gender wage gap – into Congress on Tuesday.

The bill would, among other things, prohibit screening job applicants based on their salary histories and require employers to demonstrate that any pay disparities between men and women exist for job-related reasons. The bill’s expected reintroduction coincides with Equal Pay Day, which activists say marks how long women have to work on average to catch up with their male colleagues’ earnings the year prior.

Nationally, the average woman employed in a full-time, year-round job makes 80 cents to every dollar earned by a man, according to a National Partnership for Women & Families analysis of U.S. census data. The gap is even more pronounced for black and Latina women, who make 63 and 54 cents, respectively, for every dollar earned by a white, non-Hispanic man.

For Vicki Shabo, vice president of the National Partnership for Women & Families, the issue of equal pay affects nearly every aspect of women’s lives.

The gender wage gap “makes it hard to pay mortgage and rent, and has real practical implications for women’s ability to take care of themselves and their families,” Shabo said.

The National Partnership for Women & Families’ analysis determined that eliminating the gender wage gap would provide women who have full-time, year-round jobs with enough money for 1.5 more years of food or 15 months of child care.

Providing financial security for women is a major reason that DeLauro sponsored the Paycheck Fairness Act.

“This wage gap is unacceptable and it is time to enact the Paycheck Fairness Act and end the wage gap once and for all,” she said in a statement.

Kay Morrison worked as a journeyman welder at Kaiser Shipyard 2, on the assembly-line graveyard shift - and she made the same as the man working alongside her. Today, on average, full-time working women still earn 77 cents for every dollar earned by men.

Credit: The White House

Not everyone views the pay gap as an issue of overt sexism, but rather a naturally occurring phenomenon because of women's unique career choices.

"I'm a working mother myself, so for me, the only way I can be in the workforce is to have a flexible work schedule and different accommodations than men want or need," said Rachel Greszler, a senior fellow at The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank. "In turn for that, I'm willing to have a lower salary, but without that, I can't be in the work force."

Roger Pilon, vice president for legal affairs for the libertarian Cato Institute, said the bill was partisan rather than practical. "This is a patently political bill designed to pander to one element in the Democrats' base, namely women," he said.

With Republicans in control of both chambers of Congress and the White House, there is little chance that the Paycheck Fairness Act will become law.

In April 2014, when Democrats still held the Senate, the bill failed to receive a single Senate Republican vote. It had 52 sponsors in the Senate but couldn't amass the 60 votes needed to receive an open debate on the floor; the bill did not reach the House of Representatives floor for a vote that session. But DeLauro is still hoping to pull some Republican House colleagues into supporting the bill.

"If Republicans are serious about addressing the issues working women and families face," DeLauro said, "they should sign on to the Paycheck Fairness Act and address equal pay in a comprehensive and serious manner."

If the bill fails to progress through legislative channels, Shabo said, companies themselves should step up. Over 100 companies signed onto the Equal Pay Pledge pushed forward by the Obama White House last December.

"At a time when politics may be less functional than maybe we would like," Shabo said, "we would like to see more companies step up as well and voluntarily audit their pay practices."