



A Wage Justice Agenda for Moms and Caregivers

2026 Moms' Equal Pay Day

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Motherhood should not come with a lifetime of disproportionate costs and pay penalties. Today, in the United States, women are denied reproductive choice, disproportionately tasked with unpaid caregiving, denied vital supports during pregnancy and after childbirth, and financially penalized upon returning to the workforce. Mothers are, in short, carrying out essential work without pay and taking on substantial costs to raise children. As a result, mothers face reduced earnings and income that impacts retirement savings, wealth, and economic stability for their entire families. Meanwhile, our economy thrives on care work that continues to be grossly devalued. Women perform approximately \$683 billion worth of unpaid care work annually.¹ Care workers remain underpaid, carrying out vital work on wages that are not enough to cover basic needs for their own families. Equal Pay Today's Policy Agenda provides a roadmap to address these inequities head-on.

CLOSER LOOK

Equal Pay Today's Platform for Change

Equal Pay Today, a project of Equal Rights Advocates, is a wage justice initiative uniting over 50 national, regional, state, and tribal organizations to eradicate pay disparities harming mothers and other workers based on characteristics including gender, race, LGBTQ status, and disability. With a focus on low-paid workers and communities of color, Equal Pay Today is building a wage justice movement through policy advocacy, movement building, research, and strategic legal enforcement. Equal Pay Today's comprehensive Policy Agenda addresses various contributors to the gap, including unequal pay for equal work, pay secrecy, lack of paid leave and caregiver bias, occupational segregation, and poverty wages. Since its founding, Equal Pay Today has supported successful pay equity legislation in 44 states, helped lead advocacy in support of successful federal actions, and built upon these wins during the most recent legislative sessions across the country.

CLOSER LOOK

The Federal Administration's Attacks Are Exacerbating Wage Injustice for Moms

The Trump administration is forcing and encouraging women to have more babies, all while dismantling baseline supports necessary for families to have the means to raise children. These rollbacks are driving women to leave their jobs to care for children, directly inhibiting their labor market participation. The administration's attacks include:

- a broad assault on reproductive rights;
- rollbacks in funding for childcare and early education programs like Head Start;
- cuts to core benefits for women and children like SNAP and WIC;
- significant reductions to Medicaid funding that covers vital maternal care services; and
- rollbacks to anti-discrimination and workplace protections, including proposed rollbacks to minimum wage and overtime protections for home care workers and guidance on workplace protections for pregnant workers.

- A working mother working full-time typically loses approximately \$1,583 each month or \$19,000 for every year of work, impacting their ability to make ends meet or save money over time.⁸ These losses increase to \$35,000 for Black mothers, \$38,900 for Latina mothers, and \$40,000 for Indigenous American mothers.⁹
- It is estimated that pregnant individuals enrolled in employer health plans incur \$20,000 more in health care costs compared to those who do not give birth added to an 18-year cost of over \$300,000 to raise a single child.¹⁰
- More than 60 percent of mothers with children under 18 are concerned that their income will not cover family expenses.¹¹
- With over 35 million households headed by women, including a large number with children and a considerable number living in poverty, the wage gap for moms means that more women, children, and families live in poverty.¹²

The State of Wage Justice for Moms

Mothers sustain our economy and drive growth through their consumer spending, labor force participation, and unpaid care work.² Yet, having children is costly and imposes a double penalty on working moms, who incur more costs yet earn less. This penalty results in discriminatory stereotypes and substantial economic strain. Gender- and race-based disparities do not yield only inequity; they impact mothers' ability to cover basic necessities. These penalties hurt moms and our economy.

- Working moms, including part-time and part-year workers, make only 64 cents for every dollar earned by fathers.³ This loss in wages is enough to cover over six months of a family's groceries, six months of childcare, and five months of rent.⁴
- The wage gap only worsens for mothers of color and single moms. Single working mothers are one of the most economically insecure demographics in the United States.⁵ Latina mothers and Indigenous American mothers working full time, year-round were paid just 51 cents and 50 cents respectively for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic fathers.⁶ Black mothers working full time, year-round were paid only 56 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic fathers.⁷

CLOSER LOOK

Caregiver Discrimination

Caregiver bias stems from assumptions about how caregivers will or should act. Most commonly, employers assume caregivers, typically women, will not be as competent or committed to their jobs and therefore are not as valuable.¹³ These assumptions lead employers to discriminate against caregivers in all aspects of work, including hiring, pay, promotion, and termination.

Family caregiver discrimination affects employees of every income level, race, gender, and industry, however, working mothers and pregnant people, are most likely to experience this type of discrimination, with low-wage earners and people of color disproportionately impacted.¹⁴ One study found mothers were 79% less likely to be recommended for hire, half as likely to be promoted, and offered an average of \$11,000 less in salary for the same position as similarly qualified non-mothers.¹⁵ Research also shows that many employers are biased against job applicants who have temporarily stayed at home with their children, and that this adverse treatment continues through employment.¹⁶ Mothers of young children often report that they are chosen first for layoff over less senior workers,¹⁷ and passed over for promotion.¹⁸ Employees who have eldercare responsibilities face the same scrutiny. Fathers who take paternity leave are often criticized or stigmatized for taking time off work.¹⁹ This type of adverse treatment based on a person's caregiver status, necessitates anti-discrimination protections that specifically cover caregivers or are based on one's familial status.

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During most of my pregnancies, I was working full-time and didn't have access to paid family leave. This meant a lot of anxiety around figuring out how I was going to cover it. In most cases, I used up all of my sick and vacation time, which meant going back to work and not having days off for when, inevitably, my kids got sick. It also meant, in most cases, that I took unpaid time off and had to figure out how I was going to cover that cost, especially the cost of my health insurance when I was taking maternity leave.

COLLEEN, MOM OF 4 FROM LANCASTER, PA

A Comprehensive Wage Justice Agenda for Caregivers

Caregiver discrimination, pay inequity, and a lack of public investment in a care economy have only been exacerbated by federal attacks on existing protections. These systems hurt working moms and increase the risk of poverty for children and families. But these gross injustices are solvable.

Over the past decade, Equal Pay Today has built community power behind policy reforms that address the key contributors to the pay gap harming caregivers. Equal Pay Today has advanced policy solutions that are making a difference for caregivers in many states, that serve as a playbook for replication nationwide. These solutions, set forth in our Policy Agenda, not only defend against a hostile federal administration; they are paving a new vision for valuing the labor of mothers and caregivers and building long-term consensus around vital federal legislation.

Supporting moms means leading a cultural shift towards valuing care work and ensuring that parents, including men, are collectively shouldering the economic costs of raising children and caring for family members. It also means investing in care and strengthening workplace protections to eliminate the motherhood penalty. This requires a comprehensive wage justice agenda for moms that includes the following:

Establishing necessary caregiver protections to address the cost of having children.

Today, families must regularly choose between spending most of their income on childcare or leaving the workforce to take on childcare themselves. Equal Pay Today advocates for federal and state laws to establish access to affordable childcare, paid family leave, paid time off, and fair pay for care workers. Since California enacted the country's first paid family leave in 2002, at least 14 states and D.C. have followed suit with similar protections. Equal Pay today supported efforts to expand California's paid family leave law to include chosen families and supported efforts to enact paid leave in Virginia in April 2026 (the first paid leave program of its kind in a Southern state). These wins are building momentum to secure federal paid leave protections under the FAMILY Act.

Equal Pay Today also supports increased investment, rather than rollbacks, in public benefits including TANF, SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, Head Start, and childcare funding, which play a critical role in safeguarding maternal health and providing necessary economic support for women and their families.

Eliminating caregiver penalties by establishing and enforcing anti-discrimination protections for caregivers.

Protections based on gender are not enough. Equal Pay Today supports state and federal efforts to enact and enforce express anti-discrimination protections for caregivers. In 2023, Equal Pay Today successfully supported efforts to enact legislation in California, which prohibits discrimination against employees based on their family caregiver status. These types of protections also exist in states like Alaska, Connecticut, Maine, Minnesota, New York, and Delaware.²⁰

Promoting equal pay by strengthening pay equity laws, including salary history bans.

During the hiring process, working mothers are frequently asked not only about their family status, but also about their previous salary.²¹ Equal Pay Today supports the federal Paycheck Fairness Act and has supported dozens of state wins, including recent wins in Virginia, which enacted a 2026 law prohibiting the use of prior salary in salary-setting decisions and requiring salary ranges in job postings.

Challenging the devaluation of “women’s work” and the segregation of women, particularly women of color, into lower-paid industries.

Systemic gender and racial discrimination grossly devalue care work, which is essential to our economy and overwhelmingly carried out by women, typically women of color and immigrant women. The average hourly wage for childcare workers in 2025 was \$16.84 per hour (annual \$35,030), half the average hourly wage of \$33.54 (annual \$69,770) for the private sector workforce as a whole.²²

Equal Pay Today works to raise wages in underpaid and undervalued industries where women and workers of color are disproportionately represented, starting by increasing the minimum wage. Equal Pay Today supports the federal Raise the Wage Act to increase the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 per hour to \$17.00 per hour. Equal Pay Today also supported state legislation to increase wages in Illinois and Maryland.

Equal Pay Today, in collaboration with partners, is also taking on the weaponization of federal agencies critical to wage justice, like the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. This includes a robust campaign opposing the EEOC's attempt to eliminate the longstanding EEO-1 data collection. For 60 years, the agency's collection of workplace demographic data broken down by gender, race, and ethnicity, has been vital in identifying discriminatory trends in hiring, salary-setting, and job segregation.

Equally important is the creation of pathways for women into male-dominated higher paying industries with union protections. Giving women equal opportunities to these jobs helps families escape poverty and achieve economic security. Equal Pay Today supports projects led by Equal Rights Advocates to create these pathways.

Strengthening enforcement of existing protections for pregnant workers and caregivers and challenging attacks on enforcement infrastructure.

Equal Pay Today supports robust enforcement of the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act, including collaborative work to prevent the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission from rolling back regulations to advance this enforcement. Equal Pay Today also supports defensive effort to challenge rollbacks in minimum wage and overtime protections for home care workers as well as broader rollbacks of essential public benefits.

STATE PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

Moms Rising Leads Passage of Bill Expanding Paid Leave Protections in North Carolina

Moms Rising, an EPT member and leading partner, mobilizes grassroots action and amplifies the voices and real-world experiences of women, to take on the most critical issues facing women, mothers, and families.

In July 2026, Moms Rising achieved a significant victory, helping to enact the Public Workforce Modernization Act, which expands paid parental leave protections to cover state, public school, and community college employees in North Carolina. The law provides 12 weeks of paid leave for full-time state employees and prorated leave for part-time state employees. It covers leave for a newborn biological child; a newly placed adopted, foster, or otherwise legally placed child under age 18 whose parent is a leave-eligible state employee, and leave for a miscarriage or death of a child during birth.

Moms Rising's advocacy on this bill marks an important win towards addressing the affordability crisis in North Carolina, providing essential supports to government workers, allowing more moms and caregivers to stay in workforce, and boosting the economic security of working families.

Endnotes

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