

Column: The Paycheck Fairness Act must be passed

By Dr. Katherine Buckovetz • Today • *Updated 1:29 a.m.*

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Throughout the nation, including Hawaii, March 24 marks Equal Pay Day. It's not a day that has a fixed date, or an observance that many know about. But for those who are intimately involved with the fight to close the gender pay gap, this is anything but a holiday.

Equal Pay Day is a reminder of the gender pay gap: Each year, Equal Pay Day lands on the date a woman must work in order to earn what a man earns in the previous year.

The current gender pay gap, according to AAUW's current research, is 82%. This means that for every dollar an average man makes, a woman with the same background and education who is working the same job makes 82 cents. When the numbers are analyzed further, nearly all women of color come out worse than the average. If the shoe were on the other foot, it's highly unlikely that any man, of any color, would say that was fair.

The current gender pay gap is the result of decades of federal legislation to close it. These include the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Title VII Act of 1964 were the initial steps toward mandating equal pay for equal work regardless of gender. The Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, passed many years later, gave individuals the right to go to court to fight for their rights under the federal anti-discrimination laws.

In Hawaii, the gender pay gap is better than the national average. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, it's currently about 85%, behind states such as Vermont and Maryland. However, given the high cost of living, any inequality in pay is devastating in Hawaii.

In the 2018 legislative session, Gov. David Ige signed Senate Bill 2351 into law. It mandated that employers may not request job applicants to provide previous salary information. In 2021, equal pay parity based on gender is rare. Women in Hawaii still earn 89 cents for every dollar a man earns doing the same job, per the 2019 U.S. Census Statistics, with women of color earning even less.

At the current rate of progress, the gender pay gap won't be closed in our lifetime. Or our daughters'. Or, probably, our granddaughters'. In 2016, AAUW released research that the gender pay gap will not be closed for another 136 years.

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The time to act on finally closing the gender pay gap is overdue and it has far-reaching implications for nation's economy. Any delay condemns not just women into poverty, but whole families into destitution because women are often the sole income earners. The gender pay gap makes it harder for women to retire, makes it necessary for them to take out student loans — and in many cases, carry more debt than men — and puts them in a difficult position to open their own businesses.

Congress is considering the Paycheck Fairness Act to update the Equal Pay Act's loopholes creating gender employment discrimination felt today. The best way to observe Equal Pay Day is to end it: Voice your support for the Paycheck Fairness Act by contacting our congressional legislators and demanding they support the Act: U.S. Sens. Brian Schatz (202) 224-3934 and Mazie Hirono (202) 224-6361; and Reps. Ed Case (202) 225-2726 and Kaiali'i Kahele (202) 224-3121.

Immediate and decisive action must be taken now. We look forward to Equal Pay Day being an anecdote in future history books because the gender pay gap has, finally, been closed.

Dr. Katherine Buckovetz, of Kailua-Kona, is a psychologist with decades of experience administering U.S. Department of Labor and Human Services programs; she is a member of AARP Hawaii and AAUW Hawaii.



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