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*In what ways do social and economic factors contribute to the gender wage gap today? How can the government collaborate with workplaces to implement strategies like promoting pay transparency, investing in salary negotiation training programs, creating universal child care facilities, and increasing the minimum wage to close the wage gap?*

The gender wage gap is a critical problem impacting women across a variety of socio-economic strata, backgrounds, and ethnicities in the United States. Despite the significant gains women have made towards gender equality, the gender pay gap is unsettling and unfair. According to a study conducted by the Census Bureau in 2021, full-time, and year-round working women only earn 84 percent of what their male counterparts earned (Aragao). This gap has remained constant over the past 20 years nationally — in 2002, a woman earned 80 cents for each dollar that a man made, and in 2022, this number has sparsely increased to 82 cents (Aragao). It is also necessary to consider that this statistic is misleading as a median because it does not give us insight into the salary differences between women across various ethnicities and occupations. Women of color experience a significantly larger wage gap in the United States, with Hispanic women only earning 57 cents for each dollar a non-Hispanic, male earns (Bleiweis et al.). The disparities do not end at race: immigrant, transgender, and disabled women experience a wage gap too, and an increase in reliable data about their experiences will empower more minority groups and allow them to be a part of this conversation. It is also worth noting that a “82 cents on the dollar” may seem like a trifling difference, but this money compounds

over a woman's lifetime. On average, a full-time working woman earned \$10,194 less than her male counterpart in 2018. Over a 40-year career, the current wage gap would cause her to lose about \$407,760. If we consider these figures scaled nationally, 55 million women in 2019 cumulatively earned \$545.7 billion less than their male counterparts. Equal pay would mean that an additional \$545.7 billion, \$9613.13 individually, would be in the bank accounts of women across the country (Bleiweis).

In the United States, people have varying opinions about the causes of the gender wage gap. According to data published by the Pew Research Center, 61 percent of women assert that the gender wage gap is caused because employer's treat women differently, while only 37 percent of men agree with this. Similarly, 45 percent of women say that the gap is caused because of the decisions a woman has to make about balancing her career and family, while only about 40 percent of men believe this to be true. Political parties in the country also hold differing views about this issue: about 68 percent of Democrats and Democrat-leaning Independents correlate the gender wage gap to women being treated differently by employers in the workplace. On the other hand, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say that the gap is exacerbated by a woman's inclination towards a low-paying occupation and her choices about managing the household with a career (Aragao).

The gender wage gap is caused by a variety of reasons, but most of them are rooted in the motherhood penalty, which is a price a woman pays in terms of her career after deciding to start a family. According to a Census Bureau study, between the two years before the birth of a couple's first child and a year after, the gap between the earnings of an opposite-sex couples doubles. In fact, this gap continues to widen until the child turns 10 years old, and never fully closes ("The Motherhood Penalty – AAUW"). After a woman becomes a mother, she is not able

to devote the same amount of time at the workplace due to her caregiving obligations, which include preparing meals, managing household supplies, providing transportation to family members, housekeeping, and providing emotional support. Similarly, outdated stereotypes about the roles of men and women make it difficult for women to prioritize their careers. Many employers are wary of hiring a woman in her childbearing years because they believe that she will take time away for maternity. With 18 years of experience working in Human Resources, Vibha Shrivastava — employed at the corporation VML Y&R, discusses, “This cycle continues as fewer women are hired in leadership roles, because workplaces believe that they will not be able to meet the demands along with their caregiving responsibilities at home” (Shrivastava). At the same time, exorbitant childcare costs can force many working mothers to quit or start working part-time to ensure that their children receive the care they need. Without standardization policies about flexible working hours and maternity leaves in workplaces, it is challenging for women to overcome this inevitable motherhood penalty.

The gender wage gap impacts women in a variety of occupations, including in academia. This is contrary to the popular belief that highly-qualified and educated women are able to earn the same amount of money as men, and the wage gap ceases to exist as qualifications increase. The reality is that female professors in academia also experience the effects of the unfair gender pay gap. Studies show that “women are less likely to perceive situations as negotiable, to set high personal salary expectations, and to call foul play, unlike their male counterparts who are more likely to themselves engage in lower-handed or aggressive negotiating tactics” (Kilmer, et al. 64). Likewise, it is challenging for women in academia to strike a balance between weak, non-assertive behavior while not compromising their likeability by being too assertive or headstrong. A study analyzing these factors was conducted by professors at the University of

Maryland, and their results showed that when women did negotiate their salaries, they did not do it at the right time. Men negotiate consistently throughout their career, and apply the most pressure for negotiations at the time of “tenure,” as compared to women. Similarly, many female professors’ stages of tenure clash with societal expectations about the right age to start a family. Negotiating your salary right before the stage of tenure, as proved by the study, has proven to be the most effective way to receive higher pay. Unlearning the cultural and social biases that are fed to women about being “likable” and “gentle” are detrimental to closing the gap, even between male and female professionals in academia that are equally qualified as each other.

The gender wage gap persists across the socio-economic spectrum, and Black women face both the racial pay gap, and the gender wage gap. In fact, women of color are disproportionately overrepresented in low-paying jobs (Aragao). In 2013, Black and Latinx women only made up about 13 percent of the U.S. workforce, but 27 percent of the low-wage workforce and over 40 percent of the low-wage female workforce (Bornstein 1425). Sociologist Lisa Catanzarite defines “brown-collar” jobs as low-level service, construction, agriculture, and manufacturing jobs where immigrant Latinos are overrepresented (Bornstein 1425). As a result, the gender wage gap that these women face has a much larger impact.

The gender wage gap causes women to accrue lower retirement savings, and lowers general economic security for women, especially in Black and Hispanic households, where women are usually the primary breadwinner (Estep and Khattar). Working women have cumulatively lost \$61 trillion in wages since 1967. To put these numbers in perspective, this loss is equivalent to 2.5 times the gross domestic product of the United States, and 2 times the current amount of United States government debt. This data demonstrates that the gender wage gap negatively impacts the economic output and productivity of the United States.

The gender wage gap impacts the quality of life and economic security of women across socio-economic strata, occupations, and races. As a result, policymakers and workplaces need to adapt current strategies and collaborate to close the wage gap through a variety of methods. Promoting pay transparency, providing universal child care facilities, supporting salary negotiation programs, and raising the minimum wage are solutions that can be implemented in tandem with each other to cater to women of varied backgrounds.

Increasing pay transparency in workplaces across the nation will allow women to get fair pay. In fact, the Wage Equity Act of 2023 proposes that it should become unlawful for employers to use an employee's previous wage history to determine their current salary and ban employees from talking about their salaries (United States, Congress). If this bill is enacted, it will allow women to break free from the vicious cycle of lower pay. With increased transparent conversations, women will actively be able to identify that they are being paid less than their counterparts, and take actions to change the situation. Overall, promoting pay transparency and protecting the rights of employees to be able to discuss salaries freely will make negotiation simpler, and will force workplaces to re-evaluate their compensation practices. Similarly, the bill also discusses that the government should provide grants to create and execute programs that teach wage-negotiation skills. The second part of this bill is connected to another strategy that can be used to close the gender wage gap, which is to promote women to join associations that provide training and support. Starting salary negotiation training can be effective in boosting a woman's confidence at the workplace (Dickler). The source, "Salary Negotiations and the Gender Pay Gap: Evidence from a University Setting," emphasized the power of assertive, and timely negotiation, that even professors about to receive tenure struggle with. As a result, it is easy for the average working woman to feel uncomfortable or lost when it comes to salary

negotiations. Hence, government-funded programs about salary negotiation techniques will generate awareness within the female demographic about the severity of this issue, and teach them ways to combat it. This solution will also allow women to associate with career-oriented, like-minded females and learn new skills, share knowledge, and empower each other.

Maintaining organizations that support the education and career development of women, such as AAUW, or American Association of University Women, can help raise awareness about combating gender discrimination at the workplace and allow women to utilize networking opportunities and career alliances through their shared databases. The first half of implementing this bill, requiring pay transparency in workplaces, is not economically challenging for the government unless lawmakers decide to incentivize the rule for companies that make a faster change. Similarly, it will not take a lot of time for this solution to be implemented, even for the negotiation training because the government can partner with existing career and educational development organizations for women. The number of people served by this solution is high, because all corporations will be required to use an employee's wage history and allow employees to talk about their salaries without restrictions. However, it may be difficult to manage the logistics of implementing this practice in large, global organizations. At the same time, pay transparency practices can raise concerns about privacy in the workplace and lead to conflicts between employees.

Another method to combat the gender pay gap is to establish universal child care programs — this would alleviate the numerous caretaking responsibilities that fall on a woman and give mothers the opportunity to prioritize their careers without compromising their family. A research study conducted by Columbia University and the National Women's Law Center reports that a woman with two children would make \$97,000 more throughout her life, if universal child

care was implemented. Similarly, the U.S. would witness a \$130 billion boost in the income of 1.3 million women across their life (Leonhardt). The creation of a universal child care program would allow mothers to work more hours and reduce their caregiving obligations. Overall, they would also have to spend less out-of-pocket on expensive childcare programs, which puts money back into their pocket. Similarly, the creation of this program would lead to more jobs for women, who would contribute to social security. Putting in more work hours will lead to higher retirement benefits, which would increase their economic security. (Hartley et al.). However, a universal child care program is difficult to establish because it must be created to be equitable to diverse families by affirming cultural needs, disabilities, dual-language learners, and children with families who work non-traditional hours. It is also important to give more attention to underrepresented, financially disadvantaged areas of the country. (Hartley et al.) Balancing affordability with the quality of care is challenging to balance, and it is imperative to develop a skilled workforce of educators and caregivers that can be retained through benefits that extend beyond a salary. Maintaining standards like this are expensive, and establishing governmental frameworks and systems on the lines of this plan would take time. As a result, implementing this solution in the short-term is not ideal. However, starting the process for the establishment of universal child-care would be highly beneficial to reduce the effects of the wage gap in the future. It is also worth considering that some families may resist handing their children to such programs. Research demonstrates that children exhibit higher levels of stress hormones, in child-care environments than they do at home. This could create a lasting physical impact on their brain architecture, and lead to negative developmental effects and social-emotional outputs (Eden). But, if the United States is able to create an equitable, and quality universal child care

system, the effects of arguably one of the biggest causes of the gender wage gap — the motherhood penalty — can be reduced definitively.

The gender wage gap can also be narrowed if the government raises the federal minimum wage. In fact, The Raise the Wage Act of 2021 would lift the federal minimum wage to 15 dollars an hour, and eradicate the idea of a sub-minimum wage for people who work for tips. (Boesch, et al.). According to data from the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) and the National Employment Law Project (NELP), this act would benefit 32 million workers, 59% of which are women. Overall, 1 in 4 women would receive increased wages (Boesch, et al.). Women of color are disproportionately represented in low-paying, minimum wage jobs — and raising the minimum wage would be an effective solution to close the wider pay gap that Black and Latina women experience. 23 percent of all workers receiving a raise would include about 3.4 million Black women and 4 million Latinas, according to data from 2020. More data from the EPI and NELP highlights that women would see an average increase of about \$3,500 in wages annually, while the annual wages of Black and Latina women would increase by \$3,700. Across the country, a majority of minimum-wage earning mothers are the primary breadwinners of their family, and they are mostly women of color (Boesch, et al.). Data from the Original Center of American Progress indicates that primary breadwinner women make up around 65 percent of all the workers who would receive a wage increase. Implementing this solution would raise the wages of 8 million mothers — increasing their economic security for retirement, and allowing them to have a better quality of life (Boesch, et al.). Implementing the Raise The Wage Act would incrementally raise \$2.13 tipped wage to \$15, which would also benefit the over-represented amount of women in this industry. Data from the National Women’s Law Center demonstrates that the gender wage gap is one-third smaller in states requiring employers



to pay tipped workers at least the minimum wage (Boesch, et al.). Overall, this solution would also raise millions of non-female workers out of poverty — making it an effective way to solve multiple problems at the same time and be cost-effective for the government. Although raising the minimum wage at a federal level will be expensive, the time it takes to see results with this solution is minimal and it serves an expansive amount of people.

The gender wage gap is a pertinent issue that significantly reduces the quality of life of women across the country, and it is important for policymakers to implement all of these solutions to some extent, in order to alleviate the effects of the wage gap for women in diverse socio-economic strata. Raising the federal minimum wage mainly will assist women of color in low-paying jobs, while the creation of pay transparency practices along with negotiation training will assist women working in corporate jobs. Establishing universal childcare will help women universally, as the motherhood penalty is one of the biggest causes of the gender wage gap. But, policymakers should prioritize solidifying pay transparency practices and creating career training services as laid out in The Wage Equity Act of 2023, along with raising the federal minimum wage first. While universal child care programs significantly reduce the amount of familial responsibilities on a woman, the government needs to lay out detailed frameworks for this solution to ensure the well-being of the young children under the system. Once these solutions have been implemented, the government will be better equipped to focus its time and energy on planning and forming a dependable universal childcare system. Raising the federal minimum wage immediately will quickly provide much-needed relief to thousands of low-income households, and starting the establishment of career-training programs and corporate pay transparency practices early will create the greatest positive impact on women. Amending The Wage Equity Act with a stipulation about raising the minimum federal wage will allow both of

these solutions to be implemented in tandem with each other. This is the best solution because it allows the government to alleviate the effects of the wage gap for women in diverse situations, while minimizing execution costs since both the solutions are included in one bill.

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I. Findings

- A. “In 2021, full-time, year-round working women earned 84% of what their male counterparts earned, on average, according to the Census Bureau’s most recent analysis” (Aragão).
  - B. Scope & Severity
    - 1. The wage gap is more significant for women of color (Aragao).
    - 2. Impacts of the wage gap compound over a woman's lifetime → “A woman working full time, year round earned \$10,194 less than her male counterpart, on average, in 2018” (Bleiweis).
    - 3. Wage gap is persistent across education levels (Kilmer et al. 62).
  - C. Causes
    - 1. Motherhood Penalty → Lower working hours and interrupted careers (Bleiweis).
    - 2. Race → People of Black and Latinx ethnicities have relatively lower educational and career opportunities (Bornstein).
    - 3. Women of color are over-represented in low-paying jobs → Occupational Segregation (Aragão).
  - D. Consequences
    - 1. Threatens economic security in Black and Hispanic households → women are usually the sole breadwinners (Khattar and Estep).
    - 2. Lowered retirement security in old age regardless of socioeconomic status
- II. Transition
- A. The gender wage gap impacts the quality of life and economic security of women of all races.
  - B. Policymakers and workplaces need to work together to close the wage gap through a variety of methods.
  - C. Promoting pay transparency, providing universal child care facilities, supporting salary negotiation programs
  - D. Supporting women at the workplace by providing universal childcare, promoting pay transparency, and creating programs to educate women about salary negotiation is an effective approach to closing the gender wage gap.
- III. Increase Pay Transparency
- A. Prohibiting employers to use an employee's wage history to determine their current salary (United States, Congress).
    - 1. Breaks low-pay cycle
  - B. Creating programs for women in college, technical education, and careers that teach wage-negotiation skills (United States, Congress).
  - C. Protecting the rights of employees to discuss their salaries openly
- IV. Promoting women to join associations that provide training and support (Civic Action)
- A. Starting salary negotiation training can be effective in boosting a woman’s confidence at the workplace (Dickler).
    - 1. Overlaps with the Wage Equity Act
  - B. Being in an association that uplifts women is beneficial in many ways
    - 1. Learn new skills, share knowledge, empower each other (“Work Smart Trainings – AAUW: Empowering Women Since 1881”)

## V. Universal Child Care Programs

- A. Creation of low-cost, accessible, and quality child care programs across the country (Leonhardt).
  - 1. Women won't be required to quit their jobs/work less to take care of family
- B. Quality control is important, yet difficult: more framework needed
- C. High government budget - reallocation of funds (Leonhardt).
- D. Families may resist handing their children to such programs
  - 1. May have negative developmental effects and social-emotional outputs (Eden).

## VI. Recommendation

- A. Making pay practices more transparent for employees is an effective way to end the cycle of low pay for women, but it may be complex to implement in large, global organizations. Universal child care programs significantly reduce familial responsibilities on women, allowing them to prioritize their career, but may raise concerns about the quality of this care impacting the development of children. Investing in salary negotiations education for women empowers and helps them develop long-lasting career skills.
- B. Providing strong support to women at workplaces through pay transparency, salary negotiation education, and universal childcare will close the gender pay gap.