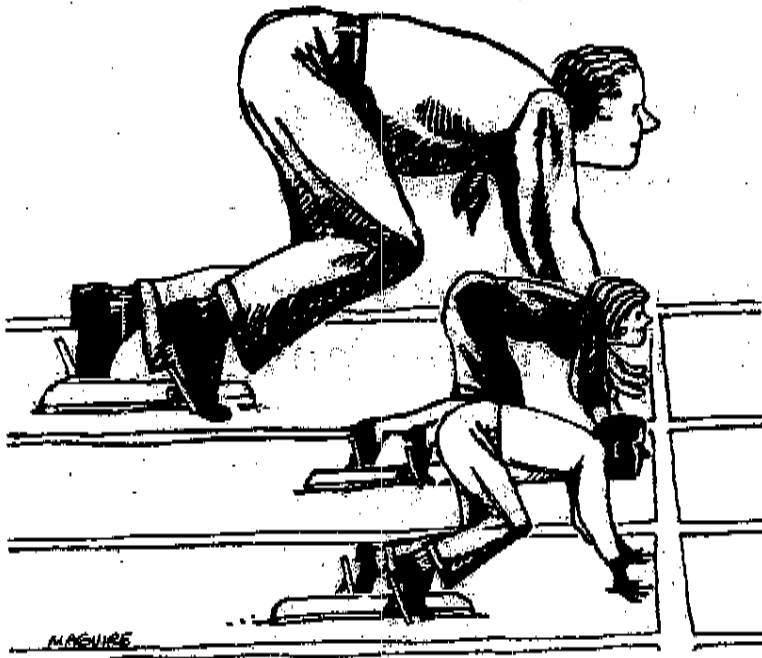


# OPINION

OPEN FORUM *By Ann M. O'Leary*



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## Why the Fair Pay Act isn't enough

The first bill President Obama signed was the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which provides women and minorities with critical tools to challenge discriminatory pay practices. In overturning a misguided Supreme Court opinion limiting pay equity suits, the act marks an important step forward but, by itself, it is unlikely to close the wage gap between men and women: Why? Because pay discrimination is only a part of the problem.

It's a familiar fact that women working full time earn 78 cents for every \$1 earned by men. But this wage differential looks very different for women with and without children. Single women with no children working full time make 96 cents for every dollar earned by a similarly situated man. A married woman with children working full time earns only 69 cents for every dollar earned by her male counterpart. And a single mother working full time earns 58 cents on every dollar earned by a married man with children. In addition to discrimination, one of the chief factors causing the wage gap is that women are more likely to have major interruptions in their work history due to family obligations. While some women choose to leave the workforce when a child comes along or a parent is ill, too many are forced to leave be-

cause they do not have the right to take time off from work for family responsibilities without the threat of losing a job or losing necessary salary to keep the family afloat.

To close this gap, President Obama should focus his efforts on the unfinished work of the last Democratic president. The first bill that President Bill Clinton signed was also a piece of workplace equity legislation, the Family and Medical Leave Act. That law ensures that workers no longer have to fear losing their job if they become sick or pregnant, or if they take leave to care for a new baby or a seriously ill family member. For workers who have access to this leave, it allows them to continue to hold a job during times of family responsibilities, build up their salary histories, and save for retirement — creating critical economic security for their families. But after Clinton signed that legislation, family leave fell off the list of legislative priorities. The act left out more than 40 percent of the workforce, and disproportionately left out low-wage workers. And the leave guaranteed by the FMLA is unpaid, so it is inaccessible to many workers covered by the law. Like Clinton's first bill, Obama's first bill signals the administration's commitment to workplace equity. But in order to make serious progress on women's equity and close the

wage gap, Obama should urge Congress to act swiftly to expand job-protected family leave, ensure that workers have access to paid sick days, and provide financial incentives to states to follow California's lead and adopt paid family leave (but make it even better than California's law by ensuring that worker's jobs are protected if they take the leave). Obama should also use his executive power to make the federal government a model family-friendly employer, and go a step further by requiring that federal contractors and grantees also provide family-friendly workplace policies.

Obama must make family leave a top presidential priority. Vice President Joe Biden's Task Force on Working Families and the first lady's statement at the Lilly Ledbetter signing ceremony noting that the bill is just "one cornerstone of a broader commitment to address the needs of working women" is a very promising beginning. An average woman loses \$434,000 over a 40-year career due to the wage gap. Correcting this problem is critical to both economic and family security.

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