Pay Equity Within the Reform Movement

Introduction

Guest Editors: Marla J. Feldman and Mary L. Zamore

Why This Symposium on Pay Equity?
Throughout their careers, frequently without even knowing it, many women earn less than their male colleagues. In the United States alone, according to the U.S. Census Bureau data for 2016, women working full-time were typically paid 80 percent of what men were paid.1 It is important to note that women of color suffer a much larger wage gap, with Hispanic and Latina women, for example, being paid only 54 percent of what white male workers were paid in 2015.2 The American workplace is evolving and the wage gap is narrowing, but at the current rate of change, women will not reach full pay equity with men until 2119.3

Pay equity is not a women’s issue alone, although women suffer financially when they are paid less than they deserve and the long-term impact of a lifetime of depressed wages can be severe for women as they enter their retirement years. Based on today’s wage gap, the lifetime wage gap for women is over $400,000.4 Nor is pay equity a family issue alone, although families suffer when a wage earner is underpaid, especially since the percentage of women-headed households has increased from 1 in 10 in 1960 to 4 in 10 today.5 Less income coming into any household means less money for food, housing, health care, and education. Yet pay equity is not only an economic issue; it is also a moral issue. When

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workplaces throughout the world underpay women, it reflects an imbalance in the overall worth placed on women. Pay equity is ultimately an issue of justice.

Unfortunately, the Reform Movement’s consistent commitment to *tikkun olam* and economic justice does not make it immune to ethical challenges within its own congregations and institutions. The wage gap persists within the Reform Movement, as it does within the greater American Jewish community. It is even more troubling that gender pay equality eludes the women Jewish professionals of the Reform Movement since it is this branch of Judaism that touts gender equality and social justice as foundational values.

The Movement’s commitment to social justice can surely lead the way to more ethical employment practices. This injustice must be addressed firmly and consistently, taking it out of the shadows and discussing it openly. The Reform Jewish community must be willing to admit that a wage gap exists throughout the Reform Movement and that it is utterly unacceptable. Then, through widespread education of both employers and employees, the Movement can work to narrow the wage gap. The result of such targeted efforts should not only be the steady narrowing of the gap within the Reform Movement, but also the empowerment of Reform Jews to raise this issue within their workplaces and the greater American society.

With this mandate, our two organizations, the Women’s Rabbinic Network (WRN) and Women of Reform Judaism (WRJ), with financial support from the Jewish Women’s Foundation of New York, have joined to lead the Reform Pay Equity Initiative, bringing together every affiliate organization of the Reform Movement to work on this challenging issue. By sharing salary studies and surveys, teaching negotiation skills to the women Jewish professionals, and educating leaders of Reform congregations and institutions about ethical employment practices and the Jewish teachings that inspire *tikkun* (repair) of this troubling ethical shortfall, the Reform Movement can affect significant and meaningful change. And in the process of improving the Movement’s own employment practices, Reform Judaism can become a role model for other communities to close the gender wage gap for women. This *Reform Jewish Quarterly* symposium is a key component of this effort.
What You Will Find within This Symposium

Judaism envisions a society built on justice, and this is reflected in the expectation of fair compensation. The initial article in this symposium by Rabbi Mary L. Zamore and the responsum offered by Rabbi Jonathan Cohen on behalf of the CCAR Responsa Committee provide overviews of some of the traditional Jewish sources relevant to this social justice issue. A study guide will be made available by the CCAR for those who wish to study the responsum and use it as a foundation for their hiring activities.

Sadly, despite the long history of public policy statements and advocacy around pay equity, outlined in Rabbi Marla J. Feldman’s article, the reality within our Reform congregations and institutions has not lived up to our pronouncements. Cantor Barbara Ostfeld provides a personal vignette from her early days as the first female cantor, which sheds light on just one aspect of undervaluing women professionals.

Recent studies and surveys document that the gender wage gap remains a challenge within our institutions. Michael Gan and Natalie Moffett provide an overview of the most recent CCAR study of rabbinic salaries, noting that there has been little improvement over the prior study. Economist Elise Gould’s article offers a broader picture of Reform Movement professional salaries, utilizing survey data available from numerous Reform Movement affiliates in which the gender wage gap continues to be evident.

The ethics of ancient Judaism, coupled with Reform Jewish tenets, should inspire us to do better. Laura Bernstein’s article challenges us to look beyond salaries to a broader range of employment issues that should be considered in our hiring practices. Amy Asin and Rabbi Esther Lederman of the URJ Strengthening Congregations team provide a vision to which our congregations should aspire, with a practical blueprint to achieve that vision. Rabbi Paul Kipnes shares his congregation’s model, which effectively fulfills this vision, proving that it is, indeed, possible to address the gender wage gap if we commit to doing so.

Finally, connecting the gender wage gap with the general treatment of women in society, as raised by the #MeToo movement, Shifra Bronznick and Emma Goldberg provide a challenge to us to bring these values not only into our Reform congregations and institutions, but into society as well, sharing resources and models
that have proven effective. As Rabbi Rick Jacobs wrote in his afterword, “If we truly want our congregations to be sacred communities in which we experiment, model best principles, and engage every individual at the highest level of human dignity, now is the time. Let’s get this done.”

Acknowledgments

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We wish to thank especially Rabbi Paul Golomb, R/JQ Editor, and Rabbi Hara Person, CCAR Chief Strategy Officer, who helped bring this symposium into being. We are, of course, most grateful to the authors of these articles, who provided their time, energy, wisdom, and talent to shed light on this critical issue. They represent the diversity of our RPEI partnership, including rabbis, cantors, educators, administrators, and activists. Working together, and with your help, we believe we can translate their words into action and achieve pay equity for women in the Reform Movement and beyond.

Notes


2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

4. This statistic reflects an average for women over a forty-year career. For Black and Latina women, the lifetime impact of wage disparity is dramatically higher: $867,920 and $1,056,120, respectively. National Women’s Law Center, “Resource: The Lifetime Wage Gap, State by State” (April 2018), https://nwlc.org/resources/the-lifetime-wage-gap-state-by-state/.
