Rewriting the Rules and Breaking the Wage Gap Silence

Shifra Bronznick and Emma Bronznick Goldberg

This Reform Movement symposium on the wage gap comes at a moment when people at all levels of our communities are motivated to make change in our structures and cultures. Moved by the courageous women in every industry who are stepping forward with stories of sexual harassment, our institutional leadership understands this moment as a wake-up call about pervasive inequities and inappropriate employment practices in the Jewish community.

The #MeToo movement is not about tales of misdeeds uncovered and subsequently resolved. These are the stories of long-held toxic norms. The structural issues at stake go beyond the individuals who have been harassed and those who are now accused. What the #MeToo movement makes clear is the deep and pernicious devaluation of women, hidden in plain sight, from fraternity houses and auto factory assembly lines to Hollywood, Congress, and C-suites across the country.

This is an opportunity not just to listen and react, but also to effect institutional and policy changes that tackle inequity in all its forms. As women’s workplace stories have demonstrated, our professional systems cultivate complicity among board members, senior executives, human resources directors, lawyers, and colleagues at all levels. Our workplaces are structured to enable those in power to act without retribution.

What we must acknowledge is that we are all part of these networks of complicity. The same forces that perpetuate sexual

SHIFRA BRONZNICK is a strategist for social change and was the founder and president of Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community.

EMMA BRONZNICK GOLDBERG is the chief of staff at the startup initiative Longpath Labs upon completing the Fox Fellowship in Gender Studies at the University of Cambridge.
harassment play out through many other dynamics that diminish and devalue women—in particular, the wage gap.

The wage gap offers a particularly compelling opportunity for communities and institutions to implement strategies with proven impact in addressing inequality and ending the silence around the disempowerment of women in the workplace. Like sexual harassment in the workplace, the wage gap has been an open secret. We acknowledge it, we make pronouncements about it, we track it, we even have an annual Equal Pay Day to mark our unequal pay. Yet institutional leaders have not been held accountable for their failure to close the gap.

Indeed, the wage gap has been justified and even defended in coded language. In 2014, at a conference on women and technology, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella elicited outrage when he advised women not to ask for raises: “It’s not really about asking for a raise. But knowing and having faith that the system will give you the right raise.” Nadella told the audience, essentially, that good things come for women who wait. “That might be one of the initial ‘superpowers’ that, quite frankly, women [who] don’t ask for a raise have. It’s good karma. It will come back.”

That someone of Nadella’s stature and authority could make a public statement of that nature is to be expected given the systems we’ve created—systems that demand and reward female silence. Yet who wrote these rules in the first place? We must make clear that women should and must ask for fair pay. We must dismantle the system and debunk the myth.

The “Lean In” brand of feminism is a skewed manifestation of this myth. As of 2018, more than 4.2 million copies of Sheryl Sandberg’s Lean In book have been sold. Women around the world, who propelled this book to bestseller lists and Sandberg to TIME and Fortune fame, have been told that if they want equal pay and a place at the decision-making table, they need only step up and make their voices heard. In turn, their male colleagues will award them the compensation, authority, safety, and respect they deserve. Yet for all these books sold and “Lean In” circles formed, what results have been achieved? Structurally very little has changed. The wage gap has hardly budged. The leadership gap remains firmly entrenched. The number of Fortune 500 companies headed by women has increased from slightly less than 5 percent to just over 5 percent in 2017.
Yesterday’s rules have told women that if they continue to ask, eventually things will come out even. We now know this isn’t true. As of 2017, in comparison to white men for full-time jobs, white women earn 81.9 cents on every dollar, black women earn 67.7 cents on every dollar, and Hispanic women make 62.2 cents on the dollar.6 It has been estimated that, over the course of a lifetime, the wage gap causes a midlevel woman professional to lose at least $500,000.7 The need for women to advocate for themselves cannot be understated but closing the wage gap will take far more than louder asks. Women cannot play by the rules. We must rewrite the rules.

Fortunately, the Jewish community can learn from other communities and institutions that are rewriting the rules and accelerating the pace of change. In Iceland, the government has passed a law demanding employers to demonstrate that they pay women and men equally; if they fail to do so, they must explain why.8 As of January 2018, California law prohibited employers from relying on prior salary history for setting compensation, a long-held practice which had created an artificially low ceiling for women.9 Subsequently, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled, “Pay differences based on prior salaries are inherently discriminatory under the Federal Equal Pay Act because the previous salaries resulted from gender bias.”10 These kinds of laws need to be adapted to our Jewish institutions, especially our religious organizations; they function as mechanisms to end the silence around the wage gap and compel employers to compensate women fairly.

The City of Boston provides a powerful example of a large-scale commitment to close the wage gap. Starting in 2013, the two-pronged strategy includes the Wage Smart training program to equip women with salary negotiation skills and the 100% Talent initiative, a compact among 179 companies to collect and aggregate their data anonymously, to detect patterns and dismantle policies that perpetuate the wage gap.11

Salesforce, under CEO Marc Benioff, offers a strong corporate model. In 2015, Salesforce reviewed compensation of its global workforce by job function, level, and location. To resolve salary inequities by gender and race, the company made salary adjustments totaling $3 million.12 Rather than a one-off intervention, this internal audit has become standard operating procedure.13 Moreover, Salesforce has applied this review to the many companies it has acquired.
Contrast Salesforce with leading institutions in the Jewish community, where major umbrella organizations—from the JCCA to Hillel to the JFNA—have made no tangible commitments to tackling the gender pay gap. Last year’s *Forward* salary survey revealed that the gender pay gap for CEOs in Jewish institutions has continued to widen. Their 2014 survey found that women earned 60.74 percent of their male counterparts’ salary. The 2016 survey revealed that women’s salaries dropped to 58 percent. Even when evidence of pay inequity comes to light, the Jewish community remains largely complicit. When it was revealed recently that Jennifer Gorovitz (née Spitzer), the first woman to head one of the twenty largest Jewish Federations (San Francisco), was paid $75,000 less than her male predecessor and $150,000 less than her male successor, the silence from her colleagues and board members was deafening.

A welcome exception to this silent treatment has been the Reform Movement Pay Equity Initiative, led by Rabbi Mary Zamore of the Women’s Rabbinic Network and Rabbi Marla Feldman of Women of Reform Judaism. They have convened experts and movement leaders to address equitable compensation for women professionals in Reform institutions. Their initiative has committed to designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions that close the wage gap in their Jewish community. Funding for this initiative comes mostly from the Jewish Women’s Foundation of New York, outside the Reform Movement. Despite studies and anecdotal evidence of the widespread gender pay gap, Jewish communal institutions have not prioritized pay equity in their individual organizations nor on the collective agenda.

The wage gap also exerts impact on the leadership gap. Women who earn less than their male counterparts are being told, essentially, that they offer less value to their workplaces and communities. When we underpay women, we do not see them as leaders. Recent research underscores the challenge of dismantling our deeply embedded mind-sets about leadership. Tina Kiefer, a professor of organizational behavior at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom, conducted an experiment in which participants were given a simple prompt: “Draw an effective leader.” Both men and women almost always drew a male figure. When we fairly compensate women, we will become more willing to trust in them as leaders.

To close the gap, we need creative solutions. Along with innovative ideas enacted by other countries, cities, and corporations, we can
look to American symphony orchestras. To remove historical patterns of gender bias in musician selection, several orchestras decided to audition candidates behind screens. The results were dramatic. The number of women musicians leapt from 5 percent to 35 percent. But even curtains weren’t sufficient in all cases. Some selection committees began noticing the sound of women’s high heels as they entered behind the screens to audition. Carpets were laid to muffle the heels and ensure gender-blind assessment of musical excellence.

Any institution or community that claims to be committed to justice and equality must prioritize measures that address wage inequality. How do we lay down the carpet? That is, how do we change our systems to ensure equity, rather than asking women to wait?

As the authors of this piece and a mother-daughter pair, we feel uniquely positioned to speak to the feminist opportunities of this moment. The mother has spent decades in feminist movements advocating for broad-scale change. The daughter has just set out on her path to envision and demand more equitable institutions. We know that it has taken many years of advocacy to create the conditions for women to speak out now. Together, we see a new possibility for closing the wage gap if Jewish leaders can commit to adapting these effective strategies for change.

Notes
2. Ibid.
4. Ibid.


13. Ibid.


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Jennifer Spitzer, personal interview with the author (Shifra Bronznick), January 2018.


21. Ibid.