



# Advocacy Update

Sent March 26, 2015

## **Advocacy Update: Women's History Month Brings Paycheck Fairness Act Reintroduction, Inspiration to Channel Passion into Action**

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### **Happy Women's History Month!**

Indeed, it's been an excellent month so far for women's rights legislation in the United States. Yesterday, Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) and Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT-3) reintroduced the [Paycheck Fairness Act](#), a key piece of legislation to address the persisting injustice of gender pay discrimination. The bill would take steps to correct pay discrimination by closing loopholes in the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and by barring retaliation against workers who disclose their wages. In addition, the Paycheck Fairness Act would allow women to receive the same remedies in court for pay discrimination as those subjected to discrimination based on race or national origin—a critical tool for ensuring pay equity for American women. Women of Reform Judaism and the Religious Action Center [issued a statement to celebrate the bill's reintroduction](#):

In the United States today, women on average earn 78 cents for every dollar their male counterparts make. Women of color face an even greater disparity, with African American and Latina women earning an average of 64 and 54 cents on the dollar, respectively. The gender wage gap persists at all levels of education, within occupations and across industries. The pervasiveness of this disparity indicates that deeply embedded pay discrimination, rather than women's occupational decisions, is responsible for the injustice of pay inequity.

Jewish tradition has long recognized the importance of paying fair wages as a matter of justice. In Leviticus 19:13, we are taught that to withhold a worker's wages is to defraud her, an act akin to robbery. In Genesis 1:27, we learn that all human beings are created *b'tselem Elohim*, in the image of the divine, and are thus deserving of equal rights and treatment. Together, these teachings compel us to fight for fair wages for all people, so that gender no longer prevents anyone in our society from earning just compensation for their work.

The injustice of unequal pay extends beyond the United States. In Canada, women on average earn 81 percent of what their male counterparts make. WRJ and the Reform Movement have long supported an end to the indignity of pay discrimination, including the Paycheck Fairness Act for its key protections to ensure women receive equal pay for equal work. **As we officially launch the [WRJ pay equity initiative next month \(stay tuned for more details!\)](#), we will reenergize our work to ensure equal pay for equal work on a federal policy level and within our own communities. As a first step for our American women, [contact your Senators and Representative today to urge them to support the Paycheck Fairness Act!](#)**

### **Supreme Court Decides Key Pregnancy Discrimination Case**

Also yesterday, the Supreme Court issued a small victory for women's rights in [Young v. United Parcel Service, a case surrounding pregnancy accommodations in the workplace](#). The plaintiff, Peggy Young, was a UPS driver who became pregnant and requested a light duty accommodation pursuant to her doctor's advice that she avoid lifting more than 20 pounds. UPS denied Young's request, forcing her to take unpaid leave, during which time she lost her wages and her health insurance. The key question in the case is whether employers must reasonably accommodate pregnant workers if they also accommodate

*For more information on WRJ and Social Justice, visit [www.wrj.org/social-justice-home](http://www.wrj.org/social-justice-home)*

other categories of workers “similar in their ability or inability to work”—such as employees with a disability or those injured on the job. The Court affirmed this accommodation scheme but said that Young, as a pregnant woman, had not necessarily proven herself to be “similar” enough to warrant an accommodation. The case is now remanded back to a lower court to make that determination.

Leading up to the case, [WRJ, the URJ and CCAR joined an amicus curiae brief in support of Young](#), and a [diverse coalition of our interfaith partners rallied before the Court on the day of oral argument](#) to express our shared support for pregnant workers’ rights.

Rachel Laser, Deputy Director of the Religious Action Center, [commented on the decision](#):

Today’s Supreme Court decision affirms that the law does not permit employers to treat pregnant women differently than other workers with similar limitations in the workplace. Unfortunately, though, it also reminds us that existing law is not enough to ensure that all pregnant workers receive temporary and reasonable accommodations so they can stay in the workforce throughout their pregnancy. Our Jewish tradition demands in the strongest possible terms the protection of all workers as a matter of justice. We call on Congress to pass the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act so that no pregnant worker faces the agonizing choice between protecting the health of her pregnancy and continuing to work to support herself and her family.

### **I-VAWA Reintroduced for International Women’s Day**

In honor of International Women’s Day on March 8, Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL-9) reintroduced the **International Violence Against Women Act, or I-VAWA (H.R. 1340)**, a bill to provide concrete tools to change the circumstances that lead to gender-based violence across the globe, including support for equal economic opportunity, access to education, legal accountability, and public health services for survivors of violence. Take action today; [urge your Members of Congress to support I-VAWA](#) and to join the fight to end violence against women and girls across the globe.

This year, International Women’s Day coincided with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bloody Sunday and the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery. Rabbi Feldman [offered a powerful reflection on this confluence of events](#), drawing from this year’s International Women’s Day theme, “make it happen”—to turn passion into action to create the change we wish to see.

Many heroes joined Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the Edmund Pettus Bridge that day and throughout the struggle for civil rights. Our nation’s soul owes them a debt of gratitude: the freedom riders who risked their lives in the cause of justice; the students who faced gauntlets of hatred for the right to go to school; the men and women who sat together at lunch counters; the lawyers who defended them and challenged unjust laws; the clergy who spoke truth from the pulpits of churches and synagogues despite bomb threats and arson; and the politicians who, finally, heard their pleas and changed their hearts.

Jewish faith leaders and activists also stood with King and embraced the civil rights movement. We sent our youth to the South to register voters and our rabbis were arrested alongside King and other faith leaders. These inspirational leaders lived the dictum we know so well — pray as if everything depends upon God, but act as if everything depends upon you.

Indeed, as we reflect on the progress we’ve made and the work that still remains, let us renew our commitment to action and to working toward a more just world.

[Want to make sure you’re always in the know?](#) Sign up for the Religious Action Center’s email updates to receive the latest updates and opportunities for action to support these critical pieces of legislation.

### **Vote in the World Zionist Congress Election**

Shifting our focus abroad this Women's History Month, we look to Israel, where we also have an opportunity to make a real difference for women's rights and religious pluralism, which we know go hand in hand.

Right now, the American Zionist Movement (AZM) is holding elections to determine US Jewish representation to the World Zionist Congress (WZC), the highest legislative body of the World Zionist Organization (WZO). The WZO provides a forum for all the world's Jews to come together and deliberate about issues affecting both Diaspora Jews and the state of affairs in Israel.

145 seats in the Congress are dedicated to the AZM. The composition of the Congress has both financial and policy implications in Israel, as the power each party holds within the Congress, and the policy positions of those parties, will determine how resources are allocated within Israel.

In short, these elections are the strongest way for American Reform Jews to promote and encourage the ideals of justice, equality and democracy **in Israel itself** and help build the kind of Jewish state we all know is possible.

WRJ has advocated for and supported the State of Israel from its earliest days and works in partnership with the [Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism \(IMPJ\)](#), the [Israel Religious Action Center \(IRAC\)](#), [Women of the Wall \(WOW\)](#), and [WRJ-Israel](#), composed of nearly 30 Israeli women's groups. We are committed to the peace process as well as advancing religious pluralism and equal rights for women in Israel. WRJ cares deeply about international Jewry and works collaboratively with the [World Union for Progressive Judaism \(WUPJ\)](#) and other organizations to secure the rights and well-being of Jews wherever they live.

The representatives on the ARZA slate are a diverse group: women and men, young and young-at-heart, rabbis, cantors, educators, lay leaders and future leaders in our community. The slate includes robust representation by WRJ women, including President Blair C. Marks, Executive Director Rabbi Marla J. Feldman, and Past President Lynn Magid Lazar. My colleague at the Religious Action Center, Liya Rechtman, is also on the slate, a manifestation of her support—and the support many of us share—for a progressive, inclusive and peaceful Israel. [Read Liya's reflection on why she's on the ARZA slate here.](#)

From now through April 30, [the polls are open in the 2015 World Zionist Congress election](#). Every single Jew has an important—and real—opportunity to make their voice heard. By voting for ARZA Representing Reform Judaism, you're supporting gender equality, religious equality, and peace through a commitment to a two-state solution.

### **Passover Preview: Incorporating Social Justice Into Your Seder**

Passover is rich in social justice themes. It is impossible to study the story of our redemption and not feel compelled to eradicate injustice in the world today. Take the opportunity during your seder to explore how the Pesach story ties to the crucial social justice issues of our time. There are countless connections! The [Religious Action Center has a wealth of social justice resources](#) and [WRJ has a ton of programming ideas](#), and it's not too late to incorporate them into your celebrations. If you're still making plans, consider hosting a social justice seder using one of the RAC's [themed haggadot](#) to explore how the Pesach story ties to the crucial social justice issues of our time. Or, if you've already planned your seder, see where there might be room for a shorter [reading insert](#) to highlight these connections. If your sisterhood is hosting a women's seder, try one (or all three!) of our readings that highlight the role of women in the Passover story and the importance of fully valuing their impact in society throughout history and today:

- A [Miriam's Cup](#) supplemental reading
- A [reproductive justice insert](#)

- A [‘Bread of Affliction’](#) reading to pay reverence to working women

Whether it’s women’s rights, [pluralism in Israel](#) (with a brand new resource from ARZA!), [hunger and homelessness](#), [human trafficking](#) or [civil rights](#), the themes contained within the Exodus story and the observance of the holiday may resonate on a personal level and provide motivation to perform mitzvot.