



January 22, 2021

RE: AAUW PRIORITIES FOR THE 117TH CONGRESS

Dear Member of Congress:

On behalf of the over 170,000 members and supporters of the American Association of University Women (AAUW), I am pleased to present to you AAUW's priorities for the first session of the 117th Congress. We look forward to working with you and the other members of Congress to advance AAUW's mission of achieving equity for women and girls.

Since AAUW's founding in 1881, our advocates have taken positions on the fundamental issues of the day – educational, social, economic, and political. Our positions are rooted in our member-approved Public Policy Priorities and are a valuable foundation for action at the local, state, and federal levels. Backed by our members and supporters, AAUW continues to speak out on a wide range of issues affecting women and girls. This letter provides a list of AAUW's federal legislative priorities for the 117th Congress that we urge you to take up and move quickly to support the economic security and education of women and girls.

ECONOMIC SECURITY

Job creation and economic opportunity are critical issues for women, many of whom continue to struggle with economic insecurity and wage discrimination. Economic security is a foundational aspect of everyday life, and is particularly important for women's ability to support themselves and their families. Women are overrepresented in low-wage jobs – nearly two-thirds of minimum wage workers in the United States are women and 24 percent of minimum wage workers are women of color. As a result, millions of workers live in poverty because the federal minimum wage is inadequate for ensuring the economic well-being of workers and their families. Women face particular challenges in the workforce, including harassment, discrimination and occupational segregation. The gender pay gap persists such that, on average, women working full time still make 82 cents on the dollar as compared to men, and women of color experience even wider gaps. The global pandemic has laid bare just how much systemic inequality harms women and families as it compounds over time. There is much Congress can do to ensure women's fair treatment in our workplaces. We urge you to take immediate action on the following priorities, including the reintroduction and passage of a suite of bills that would provide women additional tools to battle the pervasive pay gap and challenge discrimination, as well as provide employers with effective incentives and technical assistance to comply with the laws.

- Swiftly pass the **Paycheck Fairness Act (PFA)** to update and strengthen the Equal Pay Act of 1963 so that it provides effective protection against sex-based pay discrimination in today's workplace. This bill takes several important steps, including prohibiting retaliation against workers who wish to discuss or disclose their wages and banning the use of salary history in determining future pay, so that prior pay discrimination does not follow workers from job to job.

PFA also closes loopholes that have weakened the law over time and equalizes remedies to ensure that women can receive the same robust compensation for sex-based pay discrimination currently available to those subjected to discrimination based on race and ethnicity. This bill also provides technical assistance to business, requires wage data collection, and supports salary negotiation training programs. PFA passed the House of Representatives with bipartisan support in the 116th Congress, so we urge expeditious passage again now.

- Swiftly pass the **Raise Wage Act**, which would gradually raise the federal minimum wage until it reaches \$15 an hour, phase out the outdated subminimum wage for tipped workers, and sunset the ability of employers to pay workers with disabilities a subminimum wage. The Raise the Wage Act passed the House of Representatives with bipartisan support in the 116th Congress, so we urge expeditious passage again now.
- Support passage of the **BE HEARD in the Workplace Act**, which provides new protections for workers by restoring workplace protections for older Americans, employees harassed by their supervisors, and workers retaliated against for bringing harassment claims. It also prohibits pre-dispute forced arbitration and expands workplace protections for employees at small businesses, independent contractors, interns, fellows, volunteers, and trainees. It will clarify protections for LGBTQ workers and strengthen current laws pertaining to workplace discrimination by clarifying the standards used in court, eliminate caps on damages for successful claims, and extend the statute of limitations for those seeking justice.
- Pass the **Ending Monopoly of Power Over Workplace Harassment Through Education and Reporting (EMPOWER) Act** to increase transparency and training in the workplace, making it less dangerous for employees to come forward and report inappropriate behavior. The bill will, increase transparency by prohibiting employers from using non-disparagement and non-disclosure clauses that cover workplace harassment as a condition of employment, require companies to report on harassment settlements and judgments, and prohibit companies from writing off costs associated with harassment litigation or settlements as tax deductions.
- Congress must ensure that all workers have the ability to care for themselves and their loved ones in times of need without risking their economic security. Passing the **Family and Medical Insurance Leave (FAMILY) Act** would create a national paid family and medical leave insurance program for all workers.
- For their own health and the health of the public, workers must be able to stay home when they are ill. Congress must pass the **Healthy Families Act** to ensure no one has to decide between their health and keeping their job.
- Congress should require employers to make reasonable accommodations to protect the health of pregnant workers by passing the **Pregnant Workers Fairness Act**. The Pregnant Workers Fairness Act passed the House of Representatives with bipartisan support in the 116th Congress, so we urge expeditious passage again now.

EQUAL ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Since the passage of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which respectively prohibit race and sex discrimination in federally funded education programs, schools have made significant strides in providing equal access to education. By simply creating the same opportunities to learn for all students, schools have paved the way for new levels of achievement. Despite these gains, barriers to equity in education persist, particularly for women and historically

marginalized populations. It is estimated that 70 percent of all jobs by 2027 will require some form of education beyond high school, which makes clear that higher education is no longer a luxury but a necessity. As the skill requirements of jobs continue to increase, equitable access to postsecondary education for all students must likewise increase. COVID-19 has upended education with a sharp decline in students enrolling in college or prioritizing work over school to make ends meet during the pandemic-induced economic recession. This has resulted in far too many students – largely students of color and students from low-income families – lacking equitable access to quality institutions of higher education, and once admitted, suffering from low levels of degree completion accompanied by high levels of student loan debt. And despite six decades of critical civil rights protections in education, two-thirds of college students experience sexual harassment. The gender divide in career and technical education programs also remains wide, with women still concentrated in areas leading to lower wage occupations. Significant investments must be made to break down barriers, ensure education is equitable, accessible, and affordable, and open pathways to opportunity for all women. We urge you to take immediate action on the following priorities.

- The **Higher Education Act (HEA)** has played a vitally important role in providing greater opportunity for students of color and low-income students to attend institutions of higher education. Congress must reauthorize HEA to include provisions that provide meaningful access to education, increase student persistence in and completion of a quality, racially equitable postsecondary education, address the total costs of college and affordability issues, and establish accountability systems to ensure students receive value from their higher education. These accountability systems must not limit opportunity for, or disincentivize enrollment of, low-income students or other students who might face greater barriers to degree completion.
- Congress must pass the **Patsy T. Mink and Louise M. Slaughter Gender Equity in Education Act (GEEA)**, which provides additional resources, training and technical assistance to educational entities to support compliance with Title IX. This bill establishes an Office of Gender Equity in the U.S. Department of Education to coordinate activities within the Department and among other federal agencies. In addition, GEEA supports the work of thousands of Title IX coordinators by providing annual training and technical assistance. This bill also authorizes competitive grants to K-12 schools, colleges, local educational agencies, or states to support their gender equity work.
- The **Hold Accountable and Lend Transparency on Campus Sexual Violence Act (HALT) Act** would strengthen prevention efforts by our federal government and colleges and universities nationwide to eradicate and respond appropriately to sexual violence and other forms of discriminatory harassment and gender-based violence. The HALT Act would also mandate comprehensive campus climate surveys so that institutions could adequately address, prevent, and understand harassment and discrimination within the school community, determine the effectiveness of existing policies, and understand what is needed to develop new policies that are effective and responsive to the needs of the campus community.
- The **STEM Opportunities Act** would combat factors that limit the advancement of women and underrepresented groups in STEM. The bill requires federal science agencies to collect critical demographic data on the recipients of federal research awards and promotes data-driven research on the participation and career trajectories of women and underrepresented minorities in STEM at institutions of higher education. The bill directs the National Science Foundation (NSF) to develop and disseminate guidance to universities to aid them in identifying

any cultural and institutional barriers limiting the recruitment, retention, and achievement of women and minorities in academic and government STEM research careers and to develop and implement current best practices for reducing such barriers. It authorizes NSF to award grants to universities to implement or expand research-based practices targeted specifically to increasing the recruitment and retention of minority students and faculty.

CONCLUSION

AAUW stands unwavering in its commitment to improving the lives of women and their families, and we are ready to serve as a resource to you and your staff as we work on this progress together. Co-sponsorship and votes associated with these bills may be scored in the AAUW Action Fund *Congressional Voting Record for the 117th Congress*. Additional information on AAUW's broader federal policy priorities is attached.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at 202.728.7617 or nielsonk@aauw.org, or Leticia Bustillos, Federal Policy Manager, at 202.785.7732 or bustillosl@aauw.org, if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kate", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Kate Nielson
Director of Public Policy & Legal Advocacy