

# Time for Mississippi to close pay gap: Column

**Lynn Fitch and Sonya Williams-Barnes, Guest columnists**

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This morning, 246,000 children woke up in Mississippi living in poverty. Three-quarters of those children live in a household headed by a woman. In fact, we have the highest percentage of single-mom families in poverty in the country — more than 78,000 households.

If we help lift women out of poverty, we lift their sons and daughters out of poverty, too. We can break the generational cycle that has given Mississippi the nation’s highest overall poverty rate for far too long. Ensuring equal pay for equal work needs to be a part of our strategy to end poverty.

Four out of five low-wage jobs in this state are worked by women. [And according to a 2016 study by WalletHub, Mississippi ranks seventh worst in the nation for working single mothers.](http://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/politics/politicalledger/2016/05/03/working-moms-study/83884286/) This is for a variety of factors, not all of which affect low-income working moms, such as our low ranking in the ratio of female to male executives.  But, Mississippi’s 27 percent pay gap affects women at every level of income. The American Association of University Women reports that it typically takes mothers nearly a year and a half to earn what fathers earn in a year.

The National Partnership for Women and Families estimates that the lost wages of working Mississippi women total nearly $4 billion a year in lost spending power. If the pay gap were closed, women would have funds to buy 77 more weeks of groceries or pay nine months of utility bills or mortgage payments. That’s a lot less dinners of soup made from free ketchup packets. That’s a lot more roofs under which children can get a good night’s rest.

That’s also a lot more money flowing back into the economy to help local businesses reinvest in our communities. And, when we leave behind the distinction of having the nation’s highest poverty rate, Mississippi becomes a far more appealing place to the kinds of businesses that we are trying so hard to attract here. That means more and better jobs, too.

We’re not just breaking the cycle of poverty; we’re creating a whole new cycle of prosperity for all Mississippians.

[Mississippi is one of only two states that doesn’t have any wage equity laws on the books](http://www.clarionledger.com/videos/news/local/2017/01/10/gender-pay-gap/96423740/). That’s a glaring omission that needs a bipartisan remedy. And, we’re proud to have bills introduced in both the House and Senate by both Republicans and Democrats, including Sen. Sally Doty and Representatives Sonya Williams-Barnes, David Baria, Becky Currie and Orlando Paden. They’re all similar with their own small differences; but every one of them seeks to end the pay gap in Mississippi.

[Gov. Phil Bryant has been quoted as saying that he “unequivocally” supports equal pay](http://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2017/01/10/fitch-end-gender-wage-gap-ms/96390152/). This is not a Democrat issue. It is not a Republican issue. It is a very human issue, with very human impact. This is about doing what is right.

Some say that education and experience explain away the wage gap. But, while higher education and technical training are important to increasing women’s economic security, they alone will not close the wage gap. In fact, there is ample evidence that the pay gap persists into higher-earning, white-collar jobs. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, a woman with a bachelor’s degree working full-time, year-round earned on average $35,298 in 2015, compared with a man with the same level of education who earned $50,472.

Others say that there is a 50-year-old federal law against wage discrimination and that ought to be enough. We disagree. Every state in the U.S. except ours and Alabama has taken additional steps to mitigate the wage gap. Don’t discount the power of what that communicates to young women.

Tuesday is a critical deadline for both chambers to act on the legislation that has been introduced. These bills deserve to advance out of committee so that we can have a serious dialogue about pay fairness. It’s time for Mississippi to stop hiding behind D.C.’s coattails and take a leadership role for Mississippians.

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