



Why We Need a Fair Shot

A Plan for Women and Families to Get Ahead

By Judith Warner

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“It doesn’t stop ... having to clean up, do laundry, cook dinner ... there’s no breathing time ... you feel you’re just consumed with all these different things coming at you.”

— Danielle Crespo, New York, New York

Danielle Crespo, a 36-year-old mother of three who works in building services and housekeeping at Richmond University Medical Center, speaks for millions of women in the United States. Earning a living, caring for her family, hoping to save for the future, and struggling every month just to make ends meet, she dreams of getting ahead, while doing all she can to get by. Her story expresses the day-to-day reality of most families’ lives in our country. Yet voices like hers have been sorely lacking from the heady debates about American women that have received so much attention over the past 18 months.

In that time, high-pitched media debates about “having it all”¹ and “leaning in”² launched impassioned conversations about the stalled progress, unequal pay, and caregiving penalties that women face in the workplace.³ Conservative lawmakers’ efforts to redefine rape⁴ and the revelation of widespread, unprosecuted sexual crimes against women in the U.S. military⁵ raised painful new questions about women’s safety, privacy, and basic dignity.⁶ Political fights over access to birth control and new state laws that impose intrusive medical exams upon women seeking abortions shocked many women into an awareness of just how embattled their bodies remain, four decades after *Roe v. Wade*.⁷ And in the wake of the Great Recession and a government sequester, deep cuts in women-heavy sectors of employment drove home the extreme vulnerability of many female breadwinners and their families.

All of these examples of personal, professional, and economic struggle—up and down the income chain and in all sorts of differently organized, educated, and politically affiliated households—have sent American women a loud and clear message: We have come a long way, maybe. But we certainly could be doing a whole lot better. Here are some facts:

- Women make up 47 percent of the U.S. labor force and hold 52 percent of all professional-level jobs. Yet only 4.2 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs⁸ and 18 percent of Congress members are women.
- Fully 40 percent of women are breadwinners,⁹ earning as much or more than their partners or providing the sole income for their families as single mothers. Yet they are only earning 77 cents for every man's dollar.
- Overwhelming majorities of Americans—Democrats and Republicans alike—say it is important for our government to consider new laws such as paid sick days and paid family and medical leave insurance¹⁰ and help fund child care for working parents.¹¹ Three-quarters of Americans believe that employers should give workers more flexibility in their schedules and work locations.¹² Yet many women are still forced to choose between earning a living and caring for their families.
- A full 40 years after the Supreme Court ruled that abortion was a private matter between a woman and her doctor, women still contend with restrictive laws imposing rules, regulations, and logistical hurdles so onerous that, in many states, *Roe v. Wade* is all but a dead letter.

Fueled by frustration, women flocked to the polls last November and voted to re-elect President Barack Obama by a 12-point margin.¹³ Their sense of urgency and outrage turned the campaign-season “War on Women” into a “Year of the Woman” in American politics, with historic gains for female candidates on both the state and federal level and more women candidates than ever before.¹⁴

“You don’t make women angry” was the lesson pollster Celinda Lake drew from the results.¹⁵ But in the wake of the dramatic election year, the sense of angry challenge and the promise of something new have faded, and many women are left feeling that all the “woman” talk has proven hollow.

Consumed with the day-to-day difficulties of making ends meet, worrying about the future, and scrambling to keep up with the many demands on their time and energies, many have grown impatient with what sounds like canned political theater as the two parties continue to vie for their favor. They have grown disgusted with the seemingly endless media coverage of the lifestyle choices of the worried wealthy and hand-wringing over the much-decried “end of men.”¹⁶ They have grown tired of commentary that reduces the complexities of their lives to sound bites.

They have seen themselves proclaimed the “winners” of our current economy—while watching their male colleagues outearn them at all ages and in all fields.¹⁷ They have been passed over for promotions, and know they are looked down upon professionally—no matter how well, how much, or how hard they work—if they make a visible priority of taking time to care for their kids. They are stressed and stretched to the full extent of their capabilities—working hard and doing as much as they can as the primary caretakers in their families—and yet still feel as if they are not spending enough time with their loved ones. They are not earning enough or saving enough. They are scared about paying for health care, college, and—above all—retirement.¹⁸ And as breadwinners responsible for their family’s economic security, they are tired of hearing their challenges narrowed down to “women’s issues”—for they know these problems deeply affect all the people who matter most in their lives.

At the Center for American Progress, we believe that for women and their families to get ahead, we need to change the national conversation—and then move from *talking* to *doing*. We too are tired of talk that is forever focused on individual women and their private problems, rather than on the bigger social and political issues that drive and sustain their difficulties. We know that this talk alienates many women and does not include men. We also know that it ignores the fact that what most women say they want is, very simply, what everyone in our country needs: a *fair shot* at the American Dream. Not just “equal rights”—as was true in the 1970s—but rather, opportunities to find good jobs with fair pay, good medical care that addresses all of their families’ health needs, and family-friendly workplace policies that help build job security and peace of mind.

We at CAP feel that, as a nation, we have never taken decisive steps to develop policies and update our institutions to embrace the changing realities of modern women’s and families’ lives. We know that the substantive difficulties that American women face are neither inevitable outgrowths of their contemporary working lives nor intractable “conflicts” that their families must try to work out on their own. We maintain that these problems persist because of deliberate policy decisions made in the past, and that these decisions must now be revised, in recognition of the changes in contemporary families’ lives.

What women say they most want and need—economic security, good health care, and workplace structures that can help them better combine work and family life—are interconnected. For too long, however, efforts to promote progress on these fronts have been fragmented. In the face of constant conservative attacks on families’ basic economic strength and well-being, advocates for women and families have been locked into defensive battles that sapped their resources. Our new Fair Shot campaign will be different.

Over the coming months, in partnership with American Women, the Planned Parenthood Action Fund, and the Service Employees International Union, the Center for American Progress will fight for policies that strengthen women's economic security and promote women's health and the health of their families. We will work for the election of more women to high office, advocate for workplace solutions that will guarantee men and women a fair shake, and promote women's opportunities for growth and leadership.

The cornerstone of this campaign is a comprehensive, common-sense policy agenda that spells out solutions to the most pressing challenges American women and their families now face. Specifically, this agenda includes:

Economic security

Make sure women earn what they deserve and have a fair chance to succeed in the workplace.

- Raise the pay of minimum-wage workers, 62 percent of whom are women.¹⁹
- Enact stronger equal-pay protections such as the Paycheck Fairness Act to hold employers more accountable for discriminatory pay practices, ensure vigorous enforcement of equal-pay laws, and empower women to uncover discrimination and negotiate fair salaries.
- Renew legal efforts to fight gender-based stereotypes and combat forms of gender-specific bias such as pregnancy discrimination.
- Empower women in the lowest-paid jobs to embark upon career pathways that can lead to higher wages and better skills, and enable them to work collectively to improve their economic opportunities.

Make workplaces more responsive to the needs of working families, and ensure that all families can give their children the best start in life.

- Support federal paid family leave legislation to provide workers with up to 12 weeks of leave at partial salary to care for a new child or seriously ill family member or to recover from a serious illness.
- Support the Healthy Families Act, which would allow workers to earn up to seven days of earned sick time per year.

- Work with employers, policymakers, and advocates to promote flexible workplace practices for all.
- Expand access to affordable, high-quality preschool and child care.

Women's health

Promote women's health throughout the continuum of their lives.

- Support congressional legislation to ensure that all women—regardless of where they live—have access to abortion services without having to contend with impossibly burdensome state restrictions.
- Ensure that women get accurate and medically appropriate information from their doctors on all health matters without political interference.
- Fully implement the Affordable Care Act, which contains provisions that guarantee women's access to vital preventive services, protect against sex-based medical discrimination, provide coverage for maternal health services and contraception, and help women make informed health decisions throughout their lifetimes.
- Enable healthy pregnancy and delivery by making sure that women have access to affordable care; information on how to maintain a healthy pregnancy; and unbiased, multilingual, and culturally competent medical care.

Leadership

Promote women's leadership at all levels of government, the workplace, and beyond.

- Eliminate the structural barriers to women's equal participation and advancement in politics and the private sector.
- Identify workplace practices that disproportionately hold women back and time-tested workplace solutions that would level the playing field.
- Change the elements of workplace culture that demand unlimited availability and overwork in favor of more balanced work-life expectations for men and women alike.

After decades of steady progress, women have flat-lined in a wide range of areas where they should still be advancing. As a result, they are not reaching the prominent positions in public service or the private sector that would give them the power to affect meaningful change. There are indications that younger generations of women see a more limited horizon of choices than did the Baby Boomers and their immediate successors in Generation X. This is unacceptable.

As we rebuild our economy and seek to rise to the challenges of an uncertain future, we cannot afford to leave women behind. As consumers and, increasingly, as breadwinners, women are key drivers of our nation's growth. But they cannot fully contribute if our society fails to provide the structures they need to have a fair shot at success.

Together, we can do better.

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Endnotes

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