

Confronting Hierarchy: the Women's Movement in the Inequality Era

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Across the country, the lights are dimming on the American dream. The economy that women first entered en masse in the 1970s is now a fundamentally insecure one, in which the hallmarks of the middle class are out of reach for most. This new reality has yet, however, to create a parallel evolution in the women's movement. To capture the engagement of the overworked and underpaid American woman, the women's movement must develop a more race- and class-conscious populist agenda and mode of organizing. Women in the United States are younger, more diverse, and less economically secure than is reflected in our professionalized field of women's rights organizations today. Feminism must evolve again (as, fortunately, it always has). Today, the fight for self-determination in the lives of American women leads us to confront hierarchy, of which the patriarchy is one expression. At the root, however, is a belief in unequal human value – manifested daily in how the powerful order the economy and the law to treat so many women and our families: immigrants, low-paid workers, women, youth and people of color.

What would a truly majoritarian women's economic agenda look like? Some elements of the needed policy agenda, such as child care and paid family leave, have recently become more associated with feminism (though even they are not the primary causes of the most well-resourced women's organizations). The Democrats' embrace of the theme "America Succeeds When Women Succeed" and the accompanying five-point agenda has moved these issues towards the center of the progressive agenda.¹

These issues are important – essential, even – and their late-breaking acceptance as part of a political agenda that is still overwhelmingly set by men is to be applauded. Real movement on these policies would be transformative for women. Childcare is now an expensive necessity for raising the majority of America's children: nearly 60 percent of all families with children under school-age (five) have all parents in the workforce.² And the US guarantees not even a single day's pay to women to care for their families, the only industrial country to do so among 173 countries studied by the Work, Family, and Equity Index³.

Other necessary policies, though, are not as readily identifiable as women's issues. With the feminization of poverty, the next women's agenda has become inseparable from a working-class agenda – a challenge to both our cultural notions of the hard-hat male working class and to the women's rights field as currently constituted.

The next women's movement should be of and for women like Patricia Locks. Patricia is a single mother in Seattle who has worked at the same company for 12 years but still makes less than

¹ "The Issues: Women's Economic Agenda" Nancy Pelosi, Democratic Leader, available at:

<http://www.democraticleader.gov/issue/women-succeed-america-succeeds/>

² News Release, "EMPLOYMENT CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILIES — 2013" Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor (April, 2014) available at: <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/famee.pdf>

³ J. Heymann; A. Earle and J. Hayes "How does the United States Measure Up? The Work, Family, and Equity Index, Institutes for Health and Social Policy" The Project on Global Working Families (2007) available at: <http://www.mcgill.ca/files/ihsp/WFEIFinal2007.pdf>

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\$22,000 a year. Yes, affordable child care and paid family leave would have helped her enormously when her daughter was younger. But fundamentally, her chief concern is making ends meet every month—and to address that reality, she is trying to make change at the country’s most powerful corporation. Her employer could have afforded to give her and its nearly 1 million other low-paid workers a raise of *\$8,000 a year* with just the money spent manipulating its stock price in one year through share buybacks.⁴ A firm siphoning so much of the value created by its employees away from productive reinvestments in the business has become routine in a hyper-financialized era of capitalism, in which wealth beats work, day in and day out. It has helped Walmart’s majority owners, the 6 richest Walton family heirs, amass a higher net worth than at least 41 percent of American families *combined*.⁵ The next women’s movement must be the kind that takes aim at the super-sized inequality perpetuated by America’s largest private employer, a business that overwhelmingly depends on women’s labor and was the site of the largest sex discrimination class action in history.

Against this backdrop, what are the core demands of the next women’s movement?

The right to a decent job. Since the 1970s – unfortunately, the same time that more women entered the career workforce -- a growing share of share of national income has gone to corporate profits while the proportion going to labor compensation has decreased.⁶ To reverse the trend, employees simply must have more power in the workplace. Weakened labor laws should be reconstituted so that Americans can exercise their right to organize unions and negotiate on their own behalf. Unions matter most to women: the union pay advantage for women is 28 percent higher, even, than it is for men.⁷ Restoring full employment is also a proven way to increase workers’ bargaining power. The nation’s monetary, tax, and trade policies should be aligned to promote full employment, not to protect the asset value of capital owners through low inflation. At the same time, the bottom of the labor market should be bolstered by raising the minimum wage, guaranteeing paid sick days to working people, revising overtime pay rules to expand eligibility and ensuring that worker protections are effective and apply to everyone, particularly the excluded domestic workforce.

⁴ Catherine Ruetschlin and Amy Traub, “A Higher Wage Is Possible At Walmart (2014 Update),” Demos, June 4, 2014, <http://www.demos.org/publication/higher-wage-possible-walmart-2014-update>.

⁵ Josh Bivens, “Inequality, exhibit A: Walmart and the wealth of American families,” Economic Policy Institute (July 2012), <http://www.epi.org/blog/inequality-exhibit-wal-mart-wealth-american/>.

⁶ Michael Elsby, Bart Hobijn, and Aysegul Sahin, “Offshoring Linked to Declining U.S. Labor Share, Likely to Continue” Brookings (Fall 2013) available at: <http://www.brookings.edu/about/projects/bpea/latest-conference/2013-fall-elsby-labor-share> and Tali Kristal, “The Capitalist Machine: Computerization, Workers’ Power, and the Decline in Labor’s Share within U.S. Industries” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 78 No. 3 (2013) pp 361-389, available at: <http://www.asanet.org/journals/ASR/Jun13ASRFeature.pdf>

⁷ The median male union member earned \$160 more per week than males not in unions, the median female union member earned \$222 more per week than females not in unions. “Economic News Release: Table 2. Median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers by union affiliation and selected characteristics” Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor (January 2015) available at: <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t02.htm>

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Raise the Revenue to Rebuild the Middle Class. The slogan “Taxes are a women’s issue!” hasn’t been on any protest placards lately, but it deserves to be. Go upstream from most kitchen table economic issues and you’ll find evidence of America’s revenue crisis. Take universal, affordable childcare -- it could save most women around \$10,000 a year, but cost about \$88 billion annually in public dollars.⁸ Instituting a small tax on Wall Street speculation and closing loopholes for millionaires, such as the carried interest exemption, would make that up. The nation’s tax policy should be aimed at producing enough revenue to support the majority of Americans trying to work their way into the middle class -- not, as it does today, aid the already-wealthy.

Put Wall Street in its Place. Share buybacks are just one sign of the increasing financialization of the economy, a phenomenon which makes already having money the best predictor of financial success. This is certainly a women’s issue, as women have less wealth than men on average and are less than 5% of Fortune 500 CEOs.⁹ S&P 500 companies spent 54% of their profits on buybacks over the past decade.¹⁰ Estimates of the impact of financialization tend to undercount its influence because it’s nearly impossible to measure every way that finance has driven inequality. Even so, they are incredibly sobering. For instance, a 2011 study finds that “financialization accounts for more than half of the [U.S.] decline in labor’s share of income, 10 percent of the growth in officers’ share of compensation, and 15 percent of the growth in earnings dispersion between 1970 and 2008.”¹¹ To rebalance our economy away from Wall Street, the government should impose a modest financial transaction tax; limit the size and complexity of the largest banks; equalize the tax rates for wealth and work, and curb the incentives for runaway executive compensation.

Cash Security. It’s no longer popular to even mention the word welfare, but America has slowly shredded the safety net that protects people – mostly women – when they can’t work or when work doesn’t pay. Unemployment insurance covers less than 1 in 4 workers, and cash benefits through Temporary Assistance to Needy Families have gone from covering 68 percent of people in poverty to a meager 27 percent.¹² In the absence of this cash assistance, food stamps became a lifeline for 47 million Americans during the recession, including 1 in 5 of the nation’s children.¹³ It’s time for a new commitment to a minimum basic income – a floor below which nobody will fall in the hard times that are a part of every person’s life. The nation must also recognize the ongoing jobs

⁸ “Investing in America’s Economy,” Our Fiscal Security (2010) available at: http://www.ourfiscalsecurity.org/storage/Blueprint_OFS.pdf

⁹ Judith Warner, “Fact Sheet: The Women’s Leadership Gap” Center for American Progress (March 2014) available at: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/report/2014/03/07/85457/fact-sheet-the-womens-leadership-gap/>

¹⁰ William Lazonick, “Profits without Prosperity” Harvard Business Review (September 2014) available at: <https://hbr.org/2014/09/profits-without-prosperity>

¹¹ Ken-Hou Lin and Donald Tomaskovic-Devey, “Financialization and US Income Inequality, 1970-2008” University of Massachusetts Working Paper Series, (November 2011) available at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1954129

¹² Danilo Trisi and LaDonna Pavetti, “TANF Weakening as a Safety Net for Poor Families” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (March 2012) available at: <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/?fa=view&id=3700>

¹³ “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)” US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (February 2015) available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>

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crisis in many communities, and create an emergency public jobs program that focuses not just on physical infrastructure like roads and bridges, but human infrastructure such as child and elder care.

More Savings, Less Debt. According to the Federal Reserve, half of Americans could not pay an unexpected \$400 bill without going into debt or selling something.¹⁴ Every child should have a matched savings account at birth, and public institutions like the Post Office should offer low-cost or free basic financial products to all. To halt the predatory lending that drains pocketbooks and disproportionately affects single women, federal usury limits should be established for all forms of lending and bankruptcy laws should be rewritten to provide real relief to homeowners and student borrowers.

Decriminalize Poverty. Too many women and their families are facing ruinous fines and even jail time for petty offenses. Many municipalities – particularly in communities of color -- are now making up large shares of their revenues from penalties for traffic and other civil infractions.¹⁵ In conjunction with the collateral consequences of criminal records in employment, housing and family law, this new normal is callously destroying the lives of poor women. Reform would limit civil fees to an ability-to-pay standard, drastically reduce the use of bail, and expand the use of community courts.

Debt-free college. Women are now pursuing higher education at higher rates than men, but over the past thirty years as the nation's college student body became less white and male, the public guarantee of affordability has vanished. Cuts to taxes and spending have made the new price of entry to the middle class so expensive that a student from a low-income family would have to pay 95% of her family's income in college costs, *even after financial aid*.¹⁶ Demos' Affordable College Compact would use federal leverage to encourage states to reinvest in public higher education, ultimately enabling all students to graduate from public college debt-free.

The loss of decent jobs, an economy that betrays work, a predatory justice system and no way to save for the future: these are the issues that are keeping the majority of American women up at night. To advance their agenda, however, a new women's movement will have to overcome two significant obstacles: 1) the marginalization of government through dog-whistle politics, and 2) the distorting effect of the donor class both in elections and within the movement.

Dog-Whistle Politics. As chronicled in Demos Senior Fellow Ian Haney-Lopez's must-read book *Dog-Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals are Reinventing Racism and Wrecking the Middle Class*, political elites in both parties have eroded white support for a progressive agenda by fostering a negative association between government and "undeserving minorities". As caution to progressives, I underscore the emphasis on both parties: Ronald Reagan may have invented the "welfare queen"

¹⁴ "Report on the Economic Well Being of US Households in 2013" Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve, (July 2014) available at: <http://www.federalreserve.gov/econresdata/2013-report-economic-well-being-us-households-201407.pdf>

¹⁵ "ArchCity Defenders Municipal Courts Whitepaper" (August 2014) available at: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/vwptqn3mhq9xvy7/ArchCity%20Defenders%20Municipal%20Courts%20Whitepaper.pdf>

¹⁶ Mark Huelsman, "The Affordable College Compact" Demos (September 2014) available at: <http://www.demos.org/publication/affordable-college-compact>

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image, but President Clinton benefited from it electorally in 1994 when he made welfare reform a centerpiece of his re-election campaign. Virtually all of the policies that would liberate women economically require a strong role for government. In an era of ascendant, racially-charged libertarianism, when Tea Party pundits can attack Obamacare as “white slavery” and “reparations”, progressives must tackle racism head-on. White women are not immune to this scapegoating.¹⁷ Even policies as broadly popular as equal pay are vulnerable to unconscious bias: among white liberals in a recent study, evoking Black and Hispanic women increased racial resentment and depressed support for a gender-based fair pay policy.¹⁸ What are the lessons for the next women’s movement? Racial attitudes cannot be ignored, within the movement and without. Race-based hierarchy is in the air we breathe: it is political malpractice to keep assuming that women, or liberals, have been metabolizing it differently. Fortunately, confronting implicit bias helps diffuse it¹⁹, and organizations and leaders can actively work to surface this pervasive problem through racially-conscious organizational practices and advocacy strategies.

Distortions of the Donor Class. The new women’s movement must also deal with the distorting effect of the donor class not just in our electoral system but also in our organizational structures and cultures. As Demos has summarized in our foundational report *Stacked Deck* (2012), those with the most influence on our policymaking are wildly unrepresentative of the public as a whole, both because of the race, age and class gaps in voter registration and turnout and, more significantly, because of large donor dominance in the process of electing officials. Less than 1 percent of the public writes significant checks to congressional campaigns, and this affluent donor class is less supportive of policies that would reduce inequality and increase mobility, such as raising the minimum wage, offering affordable college, or expanding the safety net²⁰. Elected officials mirror the donor class in terms of demographics (90 percent of all U.S. electeds are white, and 2/3 are white men) and in their policy decisions²¹. Political scientists have found that the working and middle class have no independent ability to sway their elected officials if the donor class is not

¹⁷ See, for example, <http://niemanreports.org/articles/the-welfare-queen-experiment/>

¹⁸ Erin Cassese, Tiffany Barnes, and Regina Branton, “Racializing Gender: Public Opinion at the Intersection” *Politics and Gender* Vol. 11 No. 1 (March 2015) available at:

http://tiffanydbarnes.weebly.com/uploads/3/7/2/1/37214665/cassese_barnes_branton_forthcoming.pdf

¹⁹ For resources, see “Challenging Implicit Bias” Within Our Lifetime, available at

<http://www.withinourlifetime.net/2014campaign/Toolkit/index.html#10>.

²⁰ Communications, “Overall Spending Inches Up in 2014: Megadonors Equip Outside Groups to Capture a Bigger Share of the Pie” Center for Responsive Politics, (October 2014) available at:

<http://www.opensecrets.org/news/2014/10/overall-spending-inches-up-in-2014-megadonors-equip-outside-groups-to-capture-a-bigger-share-of-the-pie/> and Adam Lioz, “Stacked Deck: How the Bias in Our Big Money Political System Undermines Racial Equity” Demos (December 2014) available at:

<http://www.demos.org/publication/stacked-deck-how-bias-our-big-money-political-system-undermines-racial-equity>

²¹ Adam Lioz, “Stacked Deck: How the Bias in Our Big Money Political System Undermines Racial Equity” Demos (December 2014) available at: <http://www.demos.org/publication/stacked-deck-how-bias-our-big-money-political-system-undermines-racial-equity>

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aligned with them²². More and more economic justice advocates are realizing that our democracy has a class constituency problem, and are supporting reforms that would amplify the voices of small donors, such as the Government by the People Act currently in the U.S. House.²³ Both Connecticut and New York City have experienced increased racial and gender diversity in their governments after adopting public financing – and more progressive economic policies such as paid sick days have followed suit.²⁴

If we realize that the race and class makeup of donors colors public priorities, what does that suggest for our own advocacy institutions? Social distance between, say, an organization’s board and women like Patricia Locks can confound the movement’s vision for what liberation requires today. The next movement will have to confront the easy pairing of “socially liberal and economically conservative” among so many upper-income women. Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* is the most recent vivid example of this dissonance: a billionaire sought to catalyze a movement of women to topple gender hierarchy by more aggressively climbing atop the class hierarchy.

Forefronting policy issues like child care which affect women across the income spectrum is a start, but without changing the underlying dynamics of power and relationships in the movement, we shouldn’t be surprised to see fault lines re-emerge in the final policy details. (Do Democrats compromise to protect child tax credits or Head Start centers? 529 tax shelters or community college tuition relief?) That is why the movement must be not just for Patricia, but of Patricia. There is no substitute for organizing, for the powerful effect of authentic relationships across race and class lines. The next women’s movement must assume that its members hold cultural biases, be disciplined about race and class diversity in its leadership and membership, and offer the experience of healing bias and social distance as part of the work.

What are the key milestones for developing this next movement? In 2016, a working-class women’s agenda dominates the candidates’ debates. In its wake, at least \$200 million in foundation, donor and – critically – member funding fuels a new wave of relational organizing of the scale we haven’t seen since the 1970s. House parties across the country become a part of the cultural fabric, with women intentionally reaching past their segregated social networks. The organizing offers women immediate mutual aid in their lives, the ability to win local reforms (say, new after-school centers), political education and avenues for state and federal activism. In 2020 and 2024, a wave of candidates emerges from these networks, ordinary women running on a platform to create a higher standard of living for women and their families.

Is it possible? #BlackLivesMatter, a movement begun by three women, has captured a yearning for belonging deep enough to touch hundreds of thousands of people across the intersecting lines of

²² Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens” *Perspectives on Politics* Vol. 12 No. 3 (September 2014) pp 564-581, available at <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=9354310>

²³ Adam Lioz, “The Government By The People Act” Demos (February 2014) available at: <http://www.demos.org/publication/government-people-act>

²⁴ J. Mijin Cha and Miles Rapoport, “Fresh Start: The Impact of Public Campaign Financing in Connecticut” Demos (April 2013) available at: <http://www.demos.org/publication/fresh-start-impact-public-campaign-financing-connecticut>

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race, class, gender and sexuality.²⁵ In the words of one faith-based activist who has been involved in the movement, “I organize for immigrant rights, for workers’ rights, for women’s rights – but it didn’t all come together until I went closest to the rawest pain, and then I could see that it’s all connected.”

²⁵ Heather Smith, “Meet the BART-stopping woman behind “Black Lives Matter” Grist (December 2014) available at: <http://grist.org/politics/stopping-a-bart-train-in-michael-browns-name/>