

Original Article

Equal Pay: Equal Power - Economic Justice for Women

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Manuscript ID:

JRD -2025-170723

ISSN: 2230-9578

Volume 17

Issue 7

Pp. 138-140

July 2025

Submitted: 17 June. 2025

Revised: 27 June. 2025

Accepted: 12 July. 2025

Published: 31 July. 2025

Abstract

The principle of "equal pay for equal work" is a cornerstone of economic justice and gender equality, yet wage disparities between men and women persist globally and in India. This paper examines the historical evolution, structural causes, and socio-economic consequences of the gender wage gap, emphasizing its deep links to women's empowerment. It analyzes international and national legal frameworks, including ILO Convention No. 100, CEDAW, and Indian wage legislation, alongside persistent challenges such as occupational segregation, gender bias, inadequate enforcement, and the undervaluation of care work. Case studies from India highlight intersectional discrimination faced by rural, Dalit, and minority women, particularly in the informal sector. The paper proposes strategies to achieve wage parity, including stronger enforcement mechanisms, pay transparency, investment in care infrastructure, promotion of women in STEM and leadership, and societal gender sensitization. Achieving equal pay is not solely an economic necessity but a human rights imperative—one that can drive inclusive growth, reduce poverty, and enhance women's agency across all spheres of life.

Keywords: Equal pay, Gender wage gap, Women's empowerment, Economic justice, Wage parity, Occupational segregation, Pay transparency, Informal sector, Gender discrimination, India.

Introduction

The struggle for equal pay is not just about wages—it is about dignity, equality, and justice. Despite the progress made in gender rights over the last century, the wage gap between men and women remains a stark symbol of enduring inequality. The principle of "equal pay for equal work" is enshrined in international human rights documents and national constitutions, yet in practice, women in almost every country earn less than men for the same work or work of equal value. This chapter explores the relationship between **equal pay and women's empowerment**, examining how wage parity contributes to a more just and balanced society. It analyzes the structural causes of the gender wage gap, evaluates the legal and policy frameworks in India and globally, and proposes actionable recommendations for achieving economic justice for women.

Historical Context of Equal Pay

The idea of equal pay gained international attention during the labor movements of the early 20th century. Women entering the workforce during World War I and II faced wage discrimination, prompting early calls for wage equality. The **International Labour Organization (ILO)** adopted **Convention No. 100 in 1951**, promoting equal remuneration for men and women. In India, the **Equal Remuneration Act of 1976** was a significant legislative step, followed by wage reforms under the **Code on Wages, 2019**.

Despite these efforts, **cultural biases, lack of enforcement, and economic structures** continue to perpetuate wage disparities.



Quick Response Code:



Website:

<https://jrdrv.org/>

DOI:10.5281/zenodo.16926254



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How to cite this article:

Humbe, S. D. (2025). Equal Pay: Equal Power – Economic Justice for Women. *Journal of Research & Development*, 17(7), 138–140. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16926254>

Causes of the Gender Wage Gap

1 Occupational Segregation

Women are often concentrated in low-paying sectors such as education, healthcare, textiles, and domestic work, which are undervalued in economic terms despite being essential to society.

2 Gender Stereotypes and Biases

Deep-rooted beliefs about gender roles lead to discrimination in hiring, promotions, and leadership opportunities.

3 Lack of Access to Education and Skills

In many societies, girls and women still face barriers to accessing quality education, vocational training, and digital literacy.

4 Unpaid and Invisible Labor

Women undertake a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic and care work, which limits their ability to participate in paid employment or to take on full-time, high-paying roles.

5 Inadequate Legal Enforcement

While laws exist, weak implementation, lack of awareness, and limited access to legal remedies restrict their impact.

Economic Impact of Wage Inequality

Wage inequality has far-reaching consequences—not just for women, but for families, communities, and the overall economy. When women are underpaid, their access to healthcare, education, housing, and financial independence is compromised.

Micro-level effects: Reduced income leads to financial dependency, domestic stress, and limited decision-making power.

Macro-level effects: The national GDP suffers due to underutilization of women's potential. According to **McKinsey Global Institute (2018)**, achieving gender parity in labor markets could add **\$770 billion** to India's GDP by 2025.

Legal and Policy Frameworks

1. International Provisions

ILO Convention No. 100 (1951): Calls for equal remuneration for work of equal value.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): Urges countries to eliminate gender-based discrimination in wages and employment.

2. Indian Legal Framework

Article 14 and 39(d) of the Constitution of India guarantee equality before the law and equal pay for equal work.

Equal Remuneration Act, 1976: Prohibits wage discrimination and promotes equal pay.

Code on Wages, 2019: Consolidates wage laws and reiterates the principle of equal pay across sectors.

However, **lack of data transparency, limited monitoring mechanisms, and social taboos** make enforcement difficult, especially in the informal sector.

Equal Pay and Power: A Deeper Link

Equal pay is not only a financial matter—it is about **power and control over one's life**. When women are paid fairly: They gain autonomy in making decisions about their health, education, and family.

They are more likely to invest in their children's future, thus breaking cycles of poverty.

They are better positioned to engage in political and social leadership.

Thus, **equal pay directly contributes to building women's agency**, both at individual and societal levels.

Case Study: India's Wage Gap Reality

In India, the gender pay gap is particularly severe in the **informal sector**, which employs over 90% of the female workforce. Women in agriculture, domestic work, and garment manufacturing earn **30–40% less** than their male counterparts.

A report by **Oxfam India (2022)** reveals:

Women in India earn **only ₹83** for every ₹100 earned by men.

Women in rural areas, Dalit women, and those from minority communities face **intersectional wage discrimination**.

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and **microfinance programs** have empowered some women, but systemic changes are necessary to address the root causes of wage inequality.

Strategies to Achieve Equal Pay

1 Strengthening Legal Enforcement

Strict monitoring of wage policies in both public and private sectors.

Quick and accessible grievance redressal systems.

2 Pay Transparency

Mandatory wage reporting and audits by employers.



Public access to salary data by gender and role.

3 Investing in Care Infrastructure

Public funding for childcare, eldercare, and maternity benefits to support women's employment.

4 Encouraging Women in STEM and Leadership

Scholarships, mentoring, and training for girls in science, technology, and management fields.

5 Public Awareness and Gender Sensitization

Nationwide campaigns to challenge stereotypes and promote the value of women's work.

Conclusion

Equal pay is not merely an economic issue—it is a human rights imperative. It is the key to unlocking women's full potential and ensuring their participation in economic, social, and political life. Achieving wage parity would not only benefit women but would transform entire economies, reduce poverty, and foster inclusive growth.

In India and across the world, the fight for equal pay must be strengthened with robust legal frameworks, progressive policies, and societal transformation. **Economic justice begins with equal pay—and equal pay empowers women with equal power.**

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