

Can Women Afford to Make Political Decisions

Is it OK that our politicians aim low? Do those with vision succeed?

I was alarmed at the small thinking I found in the 20 congressional visits we made recently in Washington about women's economic security. We went to DC representing 200 donors from the Women Donors Network who make hundreds of millions in investments in the health and well being of the least among us; women, children, young, old, sick, frail and those born to less opportunity.

The big questions about economic vitality for the 99% got small answers. Big questions about getting decent jobs for poverty-mired women, turned into work on increasing the minimum wage and getting home health aides up to the minimum. Big questions about changing the constitution to preserve the right of free speech for people but not corporations, turned into a fight for disclosure requirements.

Heads nodded as we pointed out, women in low wage jobs with children (the majority of homeless and hungry) cannot make it off the social safety net without equal pay as men, paid sick leave, the right to unpaid family medical leave, and especially *paid* family medical leave to care for sick child or parent.

You can see at minimum wage only teenagers living at home will be well-fed and have a few hours of leisure. At the Massachusetts rate of \$8.00 per hour, you would make only \$16,000 gross per year. And that's gross; you can't afford taxes, rent and food, and 'extras' like a "T" pass, pizza on Sunday nights, diapers, or waterproof boots. Crittendon Women's Union finds it takes \$28,000 per year to have economic independence as a single adult. Add 2 children to your life and it really takes \$65,880 here in Massachusetts.

April 9th is how far into 2013 women would have to work to earn the yearly wages that men earned by the end of December in the previous year. Are you OK with that?

What if women earned equal pay to men? What if White women, African American women and Latinas, earned equal pay to men, not the current 77, 64 and 55 cents to the dollar respectively? Imagine the school books, warm coats, healthy food, stable housing, family vacations, gym memberships, volunteer hours on the PTA, and the ability to run for public office that would happen for half of our talent pool.

Ever see a poor woman run for office? Imagine the budget decisions we would make! Imagine the boost to the economy! (look to San Francisco's thriving economy after wage hikes.) Imagine the time available to fix asthma producing pollution in our cities, get preventive dental and medical care, or arrest the methodical defunding of our public education system. What about a robust public transportation system that enabled us all to get to work and reduced

global climate change? What other improvements would happen if women who understood dire economic challenges were helping shape the city and state budget priorities!

Maybe it's not just our politicians who are aiming too low. Maybe it's us.

Are we satisfied that poor kids stay poor? That women have the lowest wage jobs; are most likely to die poor, hungry, cold? What is our vision for the new economy, who would be included in its success and shouldn't we discuss cutting subsidies to cash heavy corporations that pay their CEO's in the millions before we discuss cutting benefits to struggling families? Imagine the economic skill it requires to feed and clothe your children on \$16,000 a year.

Imagine that the dad's wages are no more than the moms, so they take turns staying home with the sick kid, and she doesn't lower her aspirations or thwart her chance for promotion by covering all the kids sick days and all the snow days? And if their wages and salaries are equally important to their economic viability, will they both make time to care for their aging parents? Will this make for more family involved men? Will this help the professional employers and low wage employers provide flexible leave or work hours, so all adults may nurture the families that America needs? Will this benefit the non-traditional types of families to provide the opportunities for their kids' success too? Will this make our economy stronger and our quality of life richer?

Do I think that equal pay by gender and race would solve all our challenges? I could be aiming too low.

Maria Jobin-Leeds founded the Women's Pipeline for Change which helps women of color enter public service. She understands that our unequal access to wealth perpetuates unequal levels power in our democracy.