

Beyond equality: Supporting women in the workplace

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August 26 is [Women's Equality Day](#) - commemorating women's suffrage but also calling attention to all the ways women still seek equality in their daily lives.

Equality is a beautiful word - ringing with the spirit of a time women's rights were hard-fought but burgeoning across our country. But as we've collectively thought about these concepts over the decades since, we know women need so much more than just equality.

Consider [the popular graphic circulating around the internet](#) - designed to help us all wrap our heads around evolving concepts and language of equality.

- The first picture shows two people tasked with picking fruit from a crooked tree. Inequality is the fruit falling randomly into the hands of the person standing where the tree slants toward the ground.
- The next picture represents equality as both people receive matching ladders - though the ladder is only high enough to help the person picking from low branches.
- Equity is reflected in the next picture, as each person receives the proper size ladder they need to reach their branches whether low or high.

- Finally we see a picture of justice. Justice is propping the tree to straighten it. A sustainable and long-term solution disrupting an inequality to fix the root problem.

Let's apply these concepts to women in the workplace - a space rife with inequality, inequity, and injustice since times long past. Today, just under half the American workforce is women and nearly one-third mothers. Many of these strong and resilient working women are shouldering layer upon layer of discrimination and disenfranchisement. These include women who are single parents (80% of single parent families are led by women), living in poverty (75% of the nation's poor are women and children), and BIPOC (Black women are disproportionately represented among poor American women - comprising around 22% of women in poverty but only around 13% of the general population).

Is equality alone enough to help women:

- get a foot in the door - get equal footing?
- save for next week's groceries - save for a family home?
- feed their families - feed their minds?
- maintain a savings account - maintain their mental health?
- find a seat at the table - find the power to build the table?

Consider single mom June working at minimum wage. Her employer caps hours in her position at 32/ week so they aren't required to provide her and her family any company benefits. Even a small raise can decrease June's public benefits (including

access to reasonable daycare, food, and health care for her family of three children). Even if full-time work was an option, higher wages could mean paying out of pocket for private health insurance premiums and copays. All this means June and her family would end up living on less and struggle to get ahead. June understands this all too well.

Her employer also understands and exploits these realities - increasing profit margins but failing employees as the typical employee does not share in a company's economic growth. Compounding this, throughout her employment, June has struggled with her prenatal and postpartum health. As toxic stress builds, she sometimes needs a day off to manage her stress levels and care for her family, but her employer is unsupportive.

Equality is not enough for June. The rules of the workplace and system are applied equally to her - but yet she flounders. June needs equity and justice, including fair opportunities based on her needs. How would things change for June if she could earn more money while keeping her critical benefits longer? What if she had time to stabilize in a new full-time position while building a cushion for her family? How could her employer support June with days off outside traditional paid sick days? With such changes, could June pull her family out of generational poverty once and for all?

Consider single mom Kelli working a full-time job and making just enough to get by. Kelli has four kids and struggles to juggle their schedules - doctor appointments, special school events, help with homework - with her 9-5 obligations. Even more, she struggles to find and afford childcare. She qualifies for some child care assistance, but the waiting lists for these facilities are long and they may be on the wrong side of town. Kelli fights to maintain balance - meeting the demands of her family and her employer while maintaining her own physical and mental health. Her requests for more work-from-home time are consistently denied. She wants to progress in her career but doesn't have the bandwidth to go back to school. She passes by small opportunities that do come up because the pay raise will disrupt her sparse but needed benefits. She feels stuck on a treadmill with few options for positive change.

Equality is not enough for Kelli. She makes the same amount as the others in her position and has had equal opportunity to apply for advancement. Kelli needs equity and justice, including fair opportunities based on her needs. What if Kelli could consistently access affordable childcare close to home? What if she could contemplate dramatic growth in her position without fear of the “[benefits cliff](#)” - and with the support of her employer. With flexibility to work from home or move her hours around - is it possible her productivity would go up instead of down as she achieves the life-work balance she needs. How might Kelli’s life - and the lives of her children - change in these alternate realities? Now and into the future?

When we look beyond equality for women in the workplace - the old narrative changes. We are no longer talking about giving women the tools they need. We are no longer talking about incentives for employment. Notions of “exploiting the system” or “not wanting to work” become stale and irrelevant. Only when workplace opportunities meet women where they are, and systems permanently change to empower them, can we ALL experience the full benefit of the powerful contributions women can make.

This article is part of Legal Aid’s [“Big Ideas” series](#).

Last updated on August 25, 2022.

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