



Business and  
Professional  
Women/USA

## BPW/USA HISTORY

The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs was founded in July 1919. While mobilizing for World War I, the U.S. Government recognized the need for a cohesive group to coordinate identification of women's available skills and experience. A Women's War Council, financed through a federal grant, was established by the War Department to organize the resources of professional women.

Throughout the years, three major issues shaped BPW's legislative agenda: elimination of sex discrimination in employment, the principle of equal pay, and the need for a comprehensive equal rights amendment.

**1920s** – “BPW Goodwill Tour” of Europe initiated the founding of the International BPW Federation. With the theme, “Better Business Women for a Better Business World,” National Business Women's Week was established to celebrate and dramatize the contribution of women to the country.

**1930s** – BPW worked to prohibit legislation or directives denying jobs to married women. BPW lobbied hard and successfully to legislatively end the legal practice of workplace preference for unmarried persons and, in the case of married persons, preference for males.

**1940s** – At the advent of World War II, BPW developed a classification system for women with specialized skills critical to the effort; BPW supported the formation of women's branches of the Armed Forces. While wage discrimination has existed in the U.S. since women and minorities first entered the paid workforce, its prevalence was not felt until the massive influx of women sought work during World War II. Immediately following the war, the Women's Pay Act of 1945 – the first ever legislation to require equal pay – was introduced in the U.S. Congress. It would take another 18 years before an equal pay bill would make it to the President's desk to be signed into law.

**1950s** – As BPW became more active in legislative issues, the national executive office was moved from New York to Washington; the BPW Foundation was incorporated in 1956. The Foundation provides research information, career development programs, and scholarships to disadvantaged women, workshops and other training opportunities. BPW/USA educates businesses, governments, civic agencies and legislators about concerns of women by sharing research and other resources reflecting the status of America's workingwomen. The Marguerite Rawalt Resource Center opened, becoming a major resource on the history of women and women in the workplace.

**1960s** – The establishment of “Status of Women” commissions in the U.S. in 1963 was largely due to BPW efforts. President Kennedy recognized the leading role that BPW played in securing passage of the Equal Pay Act by giving BPW's National President the first pen he used when signing the Act into law.

The “Young Careerist” development program was initiated by BPW/USA to develop the business skills of women aged 25 and better prepare their career-futures.

The first National Legislative Conference, held in 1963 in Washington, later developed into BPW’s current Policy & Action Conference, where members lobby Congress and the Administration on BPW’s legislative issues.

**1970s** – BPW intensified efforts to eliminate discrimination based on sex and marital status in credit, capital, and insurance practices. A legislative strategy to achieve the Congressional votes needed was developed and the BPW Political Action Committee (BPW/PAC) was formed in 1979 to endorse federal candidates.

**1980s** – BPW tackled “comparable worth” by calling for newspapers to stop their occupational segregation in their classified ads (clustering of women in a few restricted occupations of low-paying, dead-end jobs). Numerous state and municipal governments revamped their pay scales, recognizing dissimilar jobs may not be identical, but may be comprised of tasks, educational requirements, experience and other characteristics that are equivalent or comparable. In 1986, San Francisco became the first in the nation to approve a pay equity referendum, implementing \$34 million in equity increases for employees in female and minority-dominated jobs.

The “Red Purse Campaign” of 1988 drew national attention to wage disparity. Using the “BPW” letters to represent **B**etter **P**ay for **W**omen, BPW capitalized on the national media attention focused on the red purse.

Continuing with BPW’s focus on workplace issues, BPW lobbied Congress for passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act. After nearly a decade, the FMLA passes in 1993.

At the Hartford, Connecticut Convention in 1985, BPW’s Legislative Platform expanded to include the Equal Rights Amendment Preamble. Also at this Convention, BPW initiated the \$2.65 million campaign to renovate the national headquarters at 2012 Massachusetts Avenue (“Project 2012”).

**1990s** – Discussions on “comparable worth” are expanded to include enforcement and strengthening of existing Equal Pay legislation. The Pay Equity Employment Act of 1994, followed by the Equal Pay Act (introduced in 1994) and the Paycheck Fairness Act (introduced in 1997) became BPW’s focus legislation through the ‘90s.

Workplace equity issues including sexual harassment, the glass ceiling, health care reform, dependent care, tort reform, increasing the minimum wage, lifetime economic security and pay equity continued to be BPW’s targeted issues. Then-Secretary of Labor, Elizabeth Dole, and First Lady Barbara Bush addressed BPW’s members at the White House Briefing during the 1990 “Lobby Day” event.

At the Minneapolis, Minnesota 1992 Convention, BPW/PAC announced the first-ever endorsement of a presidential ticket by endorsing Clinton-Gore. BPW’s grassroots membership worked as never before in GOTV (Get out the Vote!) campaigns. From voter education forums, working in candidate campaigns, fundraising for candidates and registering women to vote, 1992

proved to be the “Year of the Woman,” electing a record 4 women to the U.S. Senate and an unprecedented 24 women to the House. This political activism continued to the 1996 elections where BPW joined other women’s groups endorsing the Women’s Vote Project.

BPW celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary at the 1994 St. Louis, Missouri Convention with Gloria Steinem as the keynote speaker. Also in October 1994, the syndicated cartoon, “Cathy,” celebrated National Business Women’s Week, one of BPW’s Signature Events.

BPW battles attacks on affirmation action in the states: 1996 in California, 1998 in Washington, and 1999 in Florida.

Social Security Reform became a front-burner issue for BPW in 1999 and continues to be an issue BPW follows closely. The wage gap contributes to a \$250,000 loss in social security benefits to the average woman.

**2000s and the new Millennium** – BPW expanded its '90s "Making Workplaces Work" initiative to the "Working Family Values" Program, and more recently, the theme of "Workplace Equity & Work-life Balance," with education and awareness, focusing on pay equity, dependent care, workplace flexibility, and social security reform. BPW initiated "The Women & Social Security Summit" in February 2001 and coalesced with the National Council of Women's Organizations, OWL, National Council of Negro Women and American Association of University Women, to focus on one specific issue during our annual "Lobby Day"-keeping social security a guaranteed part of retirement.

BPW continues to be branded as the premiere grassroots organization addressing the wage gap, with most of our Local Organizations participating in events to focus on Equal Pay Day, usually the 2nd Tuesday of April. In 2002, the "Take the Pay Equity Pledge" Campaign asked candidates for Congress to sign a pledge to support the Paycheck Fairness Act. As pledge cards came in, BPW's Local Organizations held press conferences and distributed press releases on those candidates friendly to BPW's focus issue-Pay Equity.

2003 marked the 75th Anniversary of National Business Women's Week™ (NBWW). In recognition of the vital role of women in business, leaders of Business and Professional Women/USA (BPW/USA®) and the BPW Foundation rang the closing bell at the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) on Tuesday, October 21, 2003.

The ringing of the bell at the NYSE launched a six month focus on women’s issues that saluted the 75th Anniversary of National Business Women’s Week™ and acknowledged the accomplishments of workingwomen and their important role in the business community. The celebration included a six month national discussion with workingwomen and business leaders on “WOMENomics: The Economics of Work-life Balance” and the distribution of a nationwide survey on workplace equity and work-life balance issues.