

Title: **Haley should step up, fight for equal pay law**
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■ WHAT OTHERS SAY

Haley should step up, fight for equal pay law

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While Gov. Nikki Haley is predictably conservative on most issues, she sometimes is willing to go against the grain, such as when she recently helped lead the effort to bring down the Confederate flag that had flown on the grounds of the Statehouse. We suggest that she now consider leading the charge to pass equal pay protections for women in South Carolina.

Haley, who, as a woman politician, has experienced gender discrimination in her public life, should be sympathetic to the plight of underpaid women in the state's workforce. And as the state's governor, she is uniquely positioned to make the case for South Carolina women.

The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009, which made it easier for women to challenge discriminatory pay in court, was the first bill President Barack Obama signed into law. As reported on Friday, the seventh anniversary of the law, South Carolina ranks as one of only four states in the nation without an equal-pay law.

The others are Alabama, Mississippi and Utah, although Utah introduced equal-pay legislation this month.

Comparing the pay of men and women can be difficult, even when they have similar jobs. Nonetheless, the disparity is so wide in many cases that the only logical culprit is gender discrimination.

Women in South Carolina make 80 cents for every dollar that similarly employed men make, according to the National Partnership for Women and Families. That comes to a difference of \$8,272 a year.

For women of color, the gap is wider. African-American women make 57 cents for every dollar a white man makes in South Carolina, while Hispanic women make 48 cents.

Opponents of an equal-pay law in the state fear that it could have a negative impact on small busi-

nesses, although we can't understand how allowing small businesses to discriminate against women employees is a worthwhile benefit. Some opponents no doubt have an aversion to the equal pay law simply because it is championed by the federal government - and specifically by Obama.

Another possible reason the law has not gained traction in the state is because the Legislature is so heavily dominated by men. South Carolina has only 22 women in the state House and only one in the Senate, or about 13.5 percent of all legislators, which is among the lowest in the nation.

In Colorado, by contrast, women occupy 42 percent of the seats in the state Legislature, the highest percentage in the nation.

Some South Carolina lawmakers have tried to push equal-pay legislation. Charleston Rep. Leon Stavrinakis, a Democrat, introduced a bill that would make it illegal for a state agency to "discriminate against an employee on the basis of gender" by paying a woman less than a man for the same work as long as they are equally qualified. But the bill has been stalled for more than a year.

Someone such as Haley might be able to break the logjam. She is a Republican and, with her final term as governor ending this year, she has nothing to lose politically.

Ironically, despite the widespread opposition to equal-pay legislation in the Legislature, it is extremely popular with voters. A 2014 Winthrop University poll found that three out of four South Carolinians are in favor of such a law.

There is no feasible reason that the women of South Carolina shouldn't have the same legal protections regarding pay as those in 46 other states and the District of Columbia. If women are being paid less simply because of their gender, they need a legal recourse, and state lawmakers need to give them one.

— Feb. 2, *The (Rock Hill) Herald*