

**Time is now for Republicans to take back the lead on pay equity**

**By Lynn Fitch and Vivian Dailey, Guest Columnists**

Republicans included equal rights for women in each of our party platforms since 1944 and then led the charge to include a prohibition on sex discrimination as Title VII to the Civil Rights Act.

It was a Republican Congresswoman, Winifred C. Stanley, who wrote the language that would become the Equal Pay Act of 1963.

And it was the Republican Nixon Administration that brought the landmark Equal Pay Act case, Corning Glass Works v. Brennan, on behalf of female workers.

Yet, in recent memory, Republicans have allowed Democrats to define the issue and run the narrative when it comes to appealing to women voters on pay equity. We have all but abandoned the field to the Democrats, allowing them to mis-categorize pay equity as a liberal issue and to mis-identify themselves as the only ones who care about equal pay for equal work.

But the time has come for us to remember our history as leaders on pay equity. Ivanka Trump was front and center last summer at the Republican National Convention speaking about the actions — not just words — then-businessman Donald Trump had taken to support women in the workplace:

“At my father’s company, there are more female than male executives, women are paid equally for the work that we do, and when a woman becomes a mother she is supported, not shut out. Policies that allow women with children to thrive should not be novelties, they should be the norm.”

The concept of pay equity fits squarely in the Republican credo. We place a high value on equality of opportunity, and having a level playing field is an important piece of that. Economists have found that the playing field is far from level when it comes to gender pay equity. The gap in Mississippi, specifically, is significant at 27 percent, which is much higher than the 19 percent national average.

Some of the inequities are due to blatant discrimination. Those are the cases in which the federal law, and if there were a state law, can protect women. Between 2000 and 2009, only eight cases were pursued in federal court in Mississippi under the federal Pay Equity Act. So, thankfully those cases are low in number, but they do exist, and Mississippi women deserve protection when they occur.

But some of the inequities are due to other subtle cultural norms that get inadvertently reinforced in pay structures. Those are the cases that the law Treasurer Lynn Fitch proposed last year could address. It included legal incentives for employers to voluntarily review and address their pay scales.

A fellow Republican, Clinton Mayor Phil Fisher, conducted such a study, and as a result, Clinton is the only metro-Jackson municipality without a gender wage gap. We believe this methodology is very much in line with Republican values, addressing the issue while keeping the government, and even trial lawyers, out of the employer-employee relationship to the maximum extent possible.

Mississippi Republicans need to show women that we consider them a critical part of the state workforce. We are one of only two states in the nation without a pay equity law — Alabama being the only other one. Red states have put pay equity laws on their books in full accord with their Republican values. In doing so, they have demonstrated to the women in their workforce that they believe women deserve that level playing field on which to compete.

Women earn about 60 percent of the degrees at Mississippi’s four-year colleges, and women make up about 48 percent of our state workforce. We need to give those talented, smart female graduates a reason to stay in Mississippi, to create businesses and jobs here, and to help grow our economy.

Studies also show that millennials of both sexes want to work for companies that address pay equity. This is an important value in this new and growing part of the employee pool. We send a significant message to them all when we address this issue as state leaders.

Additionally, an economic analysis by Wells Fargo indicates that closing the pay gap can improve labor supply, which in turn improves GDP growth. Mississippi’s economy has been struggling to bounce back after the Obama-era recession. Closing the pay gap at the state level is one tool that we have yet to try to reinvigorate our economy.

Pay equity is good policy for Republicans to pursue, and we think it is good politics, too. The GOP once led for women as the chief advocates for equal pay for equal work. We think the time is now for Mississippi Republicans to pick up the mantle again.

*Lynn Fitch is Treasurer of the State of Mississippi. Vivian Dailey is the incoming president of the Mississippi Federation of Republican Women.*