

## **Celebrate Women's History – Make History**

This March, as we prepare to Celebrate Women's History Month let's look back at almost 100 years of Business and Professional Women's (BPW) Foundation's mission to help working women. There is no doubt about the impact BPW/USA and BPW Foundation have had on Women's History Month. First, a brief history of the occasion.

### **The Origins of Women's History Month**

Women's History Month is celebrated worldwide and highlights the contributions of women to events in history and contemporary society. In 1987 The United States congress officially passed a declaration for Women's History Month in March.

Women's History Month traces its beginnings back to the first International Women's Day in 1911. International Women's Day (IWD), originally called International Working Women's Day, is marked on March 8 every year.

In February of 1980 President Jimmy Carter issued a presidential proclamation declaring the week of March 8th, 1980, as National Women's History Week. The proclamation stated, "From the first settlers who came to our shores, from the first American Indian families who befriended them, men and women have worked together to build this nation. Too often the women were unsung and sometimes their contributions went unnoticed. But the achievements, leadership, courage, strength and love of the women who built America was as vital as that of the men whose names we know so well... I ask my fellow Americans to recognize this heritage with appropriate activities during National Women's History Week, March 2-8, 1980. I urge libraries, schools, and community organizations to focus their observances on the leaders who struggled for equality - Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, Lucy Stone, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Harriet Tubman, and Alice Paul. Understanding the true history of our country will help us to comprehend the need for full equality under the law for all our people. This goal can be achieved by ratifying the 27th Amendment to the United States Constitution, which states that 'Equality of Rights under the Law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.'" Carter was referring to the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have become the 27<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution at the time. Unfortunately it was never ratified. The actual 27<sup>th</sup> Amendment (passed after Carter's presidency) instead focuses on Congressional salaries. Since then, it has become traditional for the [President to issue a proclamation](#) honoring Women's History Month.

### **Where we stand today**

In March 2011, the Barack Obama administration released a report, *Women in America: Indicators of Social and Economic Well-Being*, showing women's status in the U.S. in 2011 and how it had changed over time. This report was the first comprehensive federal report on women since the report produced by the Commission on the Status of Women in 1963.

Highlights from the report include:

- **Education** - As the report shows, women have made enormous progress on some fronts. Women have not only caught up with men in college attendance but younger women are now more likely than younger men to have a college or a master's degree. Women are also working more and the number of women and men in the labor force has nearly equalized in recent years. As women's work has increased, their earnings constitute a growing share of family income.
- **Income** - Yet, these gains in education and labor force involvement have not yet translated into wage and income equity. At all levels of education, women earned about 75 percent of what their male counterparts earned in 2009. In part because of these lower earnings and in part because unmarried and divorced women are the most likely to have responsibility for raising and supporting their children, women are more likely to be in poverty than men. These economic inequities are even more acute for women of color.
- **Health Insurance** - One out of seven women age 18-64 has no usual source of health care. The share of women in that age range without health insurance has also increased.

Another startling reality is the percentage of women in this country living in (or on the verge of) **poverty**. A 2014 Shriver Report entitled "A Woman's Nation Pushes Back from the Brink" reveals that, in an era when women have solidified their position as half of the U.S. workforce and as two-thirds of the primary or co-breadwinners in American families, the reality is that one in three American women is living at or near the brink of poverty. That's 42 million women and the 28 million children who depend on them, living one single incident—a doctor's bill, a late paycheck, or a broken-down car—away from economic ruin.

## BPW Foundation's Role

Overall progress has been made for women in the work place, but the United States still has a way to go in regard to pay equality for women. As the first foundation dedicated to conducting research and providing information solely about working women, BPW Foundation (and its predecessor, BPW/USA) has played a pivotal role in many of the events shaping women's history in this country.

In 2007 BPW Foundation conducted the first research on women veteran's transition to civilian careers and in 2010, BPW Foundation identified mentoring as a critical need of transitioning women veterans during its inaugural Joining Forces for Women Veterans National Summit. Through information gathered at the summit, the need for mentors was identified and in 2012 BPW Foundation launched Joining Forces for Women Veterans and Military Spouses Mentoring Plus. First Lady Michelle Obama recognized this "mentorship gap" in the White House's selection of BPW Foundation as the lead organization for a large-scale mentoring initiative to benefit women veterans and military/veteran spouses. BPW Foundation has since forged partnerships with more than 54 corporations and non-profit organizations to fulfill this mandate and at the recent White House Champions for Change: Women Veterans event The First Lady recognized BPW Foundation "for the exceptional work that they do every day for women's veterans."

## Marching Forward

Through groundbreaking research, a network of national supporters and as a neutral convener of employers and employees, BPW Foundation is continuing to lead the way in developing and advocating for policies and programs that “work” for both women, women veterans and businesses.

In the spirit of National Women’s History Month let’s take a look back at Business and Professional Women’s historic timeline:

- 1919 The National Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs is founded
- 1920 BPW Goodwill Tour of Europe initiated the founding of the international BPW Federation
- 1930 BPW/USA worked to prohibit legislation or directives denying jobs to married women
- 1940 BPW/USA developed a classification system for women with specialized skills critical to the war effort and supported the formation of women’s branches of the Armed Forces
- 1950 Business and Professional Women’s (BPW) Foundation was incorporated in 1956
- 1960 President Kennedy recognized BPW/USA’s leading role in securing passage of the Equal Pay Act by giving BPA/USA’s National President the first pen he used when signing the Act into law
- 1970 BPW/USA intensified efforts to eliminate discrimination based on sex and marital status in credit, capital, and insurance practices
- 1980 BPW/USA launched its Red Purse Campaign with the theme “Better Pay for Women”
- 1990 BPW/USA lobbied Congress for passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act. After nearly a decade, the FMLA passes in 1993
- 2005-10 BPW Foundation conducts groundbreaking research on women veterans’ transition to civilian life; including the first-ever survey of 1,600 women veterans and a Summit in Washington
- 2012 [Joining Forces for Women Veterans and Military Spouses Mentoring Plus](http://www.joiningforcesmentoringplus.org) is launched and begins matching mentors with mentees. It expands to include caregivers of wounded warriors and women who have lost a loved one serving our nation.

