

## **History of the Federation of Business and Professional Women (BPW/USA)**

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. The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs was founded on July 15, 1919. 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.

### **1930s**

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

### **1940s**

War II, BPW developed a classification system for women with specialized skills critical to the effort and 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**

The national executive office relocated from New York to Washington, as BPW became more active in legislative issues. The BPW Foundation was incorporated in 1956, creating a branch to provide research information, career development programs, and scholarships to disadvantaged women, workshops and other training opportunities. 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 due largely to BPW efforts. President Kennedy recognized BPW's leading role 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. Virginia Allan Young initiated the "Young Careerist" Program to develop the business and presentation skills of young women between 25-35 years of age. The first National Legislative Conference, held in 1963 in D.C., 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 was developed to achieve the Congressional votes needed 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 the occupational segregation in 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 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.

### **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. 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 75th 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 throughout the nation: 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 \$200,000 loss in social security benefits to the average woman.

### **2000s**

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.