Abstract: There are major changes in family life, workforce participation and demography in the U.S. While there is positive change in women’s lives, there is also resistance to change based on patriarchal beliefs, the neoliberal political economy, and entrenched ideology and societal beliefs about poor women and feminism. As part of their empowerment women need to take greater ownership of gender inequalities and not retreat from gender issues. Low-income women need the help of other allies, including women of power and influence, as well as men. Women continue to speak with many different voices. This paper addresses three ways to break down barriers between different women: 1) through educational opportunities; 2) coalition building; and 3) workplace policies and safety net programs. Can women become united despite their differences? That is the challenge as women move forward toward greater equality and progressive social justice goals.

Introduction: Low-income women today are struggling greatly with economic hardships due to workplace conditions such as low-wages, part-time and precarious work, and violations of workplace laws. (Bernhardt, et al, 2009). Due to sequestration, cut-backs to safety net programs, such as food stamps, WIC, child care, home energy assistance and unemployment benefits create additional hardships. As other safety net programs and jobs are curtailed, the need for food stamps has increased and current and proposed cuts of $39 billion over the next 10 years are considered especially damaging to poor children. (Legal Momentum, 2013). This is compounded by continued attacks on poor women and punishment for so-called immoral and irresponsible
behavior based on alleged welfare dependency and single parenthood (1). Historically and currently, race has been associated with poor women in stereotypic and demeaning ways (Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001; Ehrenreich, 2000; Legal Momentum, 2013). This is occurring while there are more women in the workplace, more women in high positions in government and industry, and more single mothers as family breadwinners (Pew Research, 2013).

Recently, the voices of influential women are being heard, particularly in the mainstream press (Slaughter, 2012; Sandberg, 2013). In these situations, influential women do not speak with one voice and they may be insensitive to the needs of poorer women (Faludi, 2013); class often dominates gender in the discourse. There is extensive economic inequality and declining social mobility. It is also questionable whether “trickle down” feminism actually occurs where low-income women automatically benefit from women in high places (Jaffe, 2013) (2). On the other hand, calling attention to women’s issues can be helpful to all women. This paper considers it important for women to reclaim gender identity, to understand the political and economic conditions that support oppression of women and to work together and help each other to achieve progressive goals, particularly for working class and low-income women.

Affluent and poor women in the U.S. are products of a political and economic system where government programs and the role of government are debased and privatization and inequality are dominant forces in the society. Because their experiences and outcomes are so different it shouldn’t be expected that all women will agree on all issues of feminism and the women’s movement. Women and feminism have many different voices, some of which protect the status quo while others may support individual or institutional, structural change. There are important difference between women based on such characteristics as race, class and ethnicity, as well as age, sexual orientation and disability. It is helpful to understand what disagreements exist and begin to try to understand why they exist. This can help to overcome barriers and enhance communication and mutual understanding among different groups of women.

Some of the obstacles to enhanced communication and support among women include: belief in a binary approach to equality between men and women and a generally patriarchal belief that this is a “man’s world”; identification of race and class as more important than gender, rather than intersectionality which views women in a multidimensional way, often related to subordination and oppression; concerns about identity politics which view gender identity as opposed to human rights and solidarity for all workers, rather than supportive of these issues; and an ongoing belief that women’s place is in the home, that women who are single parents are welfare-dependent, and that marriage is a solution to poverty. We are confronted with multiple meanings of gender and feminism – often believed to be too militant, or too self-serving, or too exclusionary, particularly alienating women of color.

There are a number of ways to change these beliefs, but historically it has not been easy. Change is particularly difficult for women at this time because today’s neoliberal economic system has made workplace conditions difficult for all working class people. Meeting the needs of low-income women as part of a larger political economic context requires major policy and workplace changes in the U.S. and globally. In this paper we suggest three ways to create change and enhance equality among women: 1) through educational opportunities, non-traditional work and career ladders; 2) through coalitions between women, immigrants, and labor unions; and 3) through progressive workplace policies and practices and enhanced safety net programs. Thus, obstacles, as well as opportunities for change are discussed.

The paper addresses economic and workplace issues of all women, particularly low-wage women who are generally marginalized in the current economic situation. There is a disconnect
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between women based on race, class, and ethnicity. This disconnect can be overcome as part of the change process. While positions of power between men and women need to change, positions of power between women also need to change, with more cooperation and collaboration between women asserting their strength and empowerment. The collective voice of all women and their allies will matter and make a difference on a societal level. So far, this hasn’t happened because feminism continues to be controversial, among men and women. Often women are not only not rewarded for asserting their gender rights, but in fact they may be punished for being perceived as too aggressive. Protections for women in the workplace are an important component of equality. The conclusion of the paper emphasizes the need for women to come together and form a diversified and coordinated feminist approach for economic solidarity that will better poor women’s lives, as well as women on all economic levels.

**Background:** The U.S. is currently experiencing major changes in family life, workforce participation, and demography in the U.S. As might be expected, as there is positive change there is also resistance to change. The women’s movement and feminism are examples of both forces at work. It is probably fair to say that this is also true on a global level. Women have made strides in areas such as education and governmental leadership, but there is continued violence, trafficking and social and economic oppression of women. Some writers suggest that as more progress is achieved, more backlash occurs (Giugale, 2013; Torregrosa, 2013).

Women continue to fight for their rights in many areas, such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, sexual assault in the military and on campuses, gender pay equity, and work-family balance policies; and there are many accomplishments. Kunin (2012) argues that anger, imagination and optimism are the ingredients that, when mixed carefully together, produce change; she adds: patience, silence, politeness, characteristics that have won women praise in the past, have to be set aside; and Collins (2009) says it may not be perfect, but women have achieved enormous liberation since the 1960s. Much has changed, but not enough.

While there may not be a comprehensive, coordinated women’s movement at the present time, there is considerable women’s activism, locally, nationally and globally. Unfortunately, many women’s voices, particularly those of low-income and working class women often go unheard or unheeded. There may be discouragement because old issues don’t seem to get resolved, such as health issues and issues of work and wages (IWPR, 2013); and hard won achievements may be undervalued. Some men in politics are not embarrassed to publicly deride women; and many faith-based organizations actively restrict women’s rights (while others are supportive). Women actions and beliefs have changed in many ways, but society hasn’t caught up.

Different women will support different goals and different strategies for change. There will be individual and institutional, structural change. But it is actually the voices of privileged women that have recently called attention to the importance of listening to and hearing the voices of many different women. Whether it is Anne-Marie Slaughter writing in *The Atlantic* about “not being able to have it all” (2012) or Marissa Mayer of Yahoo (who is also a Board member of Walmart) saying that working at home is not as productive as working in the office or Sheryl Sandberg of Facebook urging women to *Lean In* (2013) by forming small groups of women to encourage more assertiveness among women, prominent and highly paid women are speaking out with different voices and being heard. These voices have created visibility, as well as controversy.
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For more privileged and middle-class women, including the pioneering work of Betty Friedan in 1963 in *The Feminine Mystique*, personal change as a strategy may resonate more soundly than more radical social action. For women of color, historically excluded from the women’s movement (see R. Walker, 1995; A. Walker, 1983; Davis, 1983) and working class women and low-income women, a progressive agenda that requires structural change, such as changes in economic policies and workplace practices, may be more meaningful. Although more than 50 percent of women voters consider themselves feminists (Smeal, 2013), within racial, class, and ethnic groups some women consider themselves feminists, while many others do not. Here we consider some of the reasons women’s issues are often so difficult to resolve.

**Obstacles to Change:** The major obstacles to change are highly entrenched patriarchy and a political economic system that supports the inequality of women. In addition, a binary approach to gender differences is a dominant belief; and criticisms of feminism as identity politics and ideology and societal norms specifically around poor women reinforce resistance to change.

Despite decades long effort on the part of third wave feminists to call attention to differences between and among women and the view that, of course, not all men are the same (hooks, 1981; 2000; Gringeri and Roche, 2010), the binary approach to gender differences is persistent. This approach is based on the assumption that this is a man’s world, and in a man’s world, men are dominant over women and when women are upwardly mobile they strive to be equal to men.

The concept of intersectionality, developed by third wave feminists (Samuels and Ross-Sherif, 2008), with strong initiative and leadership from African-American women (see hooks, 1981) challenges the binary approach to equality. This perspective identifies the complex ways that race, class, ethnicity, and other characteristics such as age, sexual orientation, and disabilities interact and contribute to the heterogeneity, as well as the oppression of women. Gringeri and Roche (2010) and Mehrotra (2010) emphasize that it is helpful to think about intersectionality as interdisciplinary, with many different theoretical perspectives contributing to our understanding of the diversified nature of women, especially extending to, and including global women and multiculturalism.

When it comes to attacks on feminism based on identity politics there is a belief that issues of human rights and economic justice pertain to all people and that feminism, for example, encroaches on worker solidarity. On a global level, however, human rights organizations worldwide are supportive of a multitude of women’s issues. For Amnesty International “women’s rights are an essential component of universal human rights”. In fact, in many organizations it is abuse of women that is at the center of human rights work (e.g. Global Fund for Women).

As Fonow, et.al (2011) note there is good reason why special attention should be devoted to women’s economic participation and rights:

……the current era of neoliberal globalization is characterized by the feminization of labor; the feminization of poverty; the huge number of migrant women working as nannies or domestics; the growth in the trafficking of women; and women’s continued responsibility for child care, housework, and elder care (p.4).
Edin and Kefalas (2005), in interviews with 162 low-income women in a poor urban area in the Northeast, generally challenge, empirically, many of the more popular beliefs about low rates of marriage and out-of-wedlock births among poor women. They find that marriage is very important for low-income women and that, in fact, there are few differences between the poor and the affluent in attitudes and values toward marriage. Attitudes toward marriage have changed dramatically for all women. But poor women would rather not marry than experience a marriage that ends in divorce; and there is support for the marriageability principles related to poor men (Wilson, 1987; Edin and Nelson, 2013). These authors also challenge the notion of welfare dependency by noting that even with declines in welfare, marriage rates have not increased. They stress the importance of having children for poor women. And they conclude that it is not single parenthood that causes poverty, but rather that it is poverty that more likely causes single parenthood. Thus, marriage as a solution to poverty is probably not a tenable hypothesis. It is also interesting to note that many conservative writers who vehemently support the virtue of not working outside the home for middle class women are equally vehement in their support of poor women working outside the home.

Thus, it appears that many barriers to equality for women may rest on beliefs about poor women that are incorrect. Women are much more liberated than it might appear in popular writings. But as noted earlier, society has not kept up with personal changes and beliefs among women. The challenge is how to break down barriers that currently exist and increase inclusion so that institutional and structural change can catch up with the reality of women’s lives. Changes in educational policies and programs and more inclusive career opportunities are some of the changes that are needed.

**Non-Traditional Work, Career Ladders and Higher Education:** Although there have been major changes in women’s participation in the workforce, with almost two-thirds of married women employed out of the home and women the sole or main breadwinner in 40 percent of households with children under age 18 (Pew Research, 2013), gender discrimination and so-called traditional “women’s work” continues to be highly entrenched in the workplace. Women are 34 percent more likely to be poor than men (up from 29 percent in 2010); and 50 percent of jobs in the U.S. pay less than $34,000 a year; 49 percent of minimum wage jobs are occupied by adult women, disproportionately women of color. U.S. Census data indicate that 58 percent of first births in lower-middle class households and 40 percent of all U.S. births are to unwed mothers; and low wages are much more common for single mothers than for other U.S. workers (Legal Momentum, 2013). In 2011, the median income for single mother families was $25,353, 32 percent of the median income for two parent families (Legal Momentum, July, 2013). Newly created jobs pay a lot less than jobs lost (Meyerson, 2013). The working poor are largely part-timers, women, Black, Hispanic, and lacking formal education. (Bureau of Labor Statistics). In 2012, 46.5 million people in the U.S. lived in poverty (i.e. 15 percent of the population), including 21.8 percent of children under age 18.

While breadwinner moms are on the rise, there are important class differences among working women. Legal Momentum (2013) reports that older married women, disproportionately white and college educated, have a median family income of $80,000; while the majority of breadwinner moms (more than 60 percent) are younger single moms, never married, less educated, Black and Latina, with a median income of $23,000. Despite their above average employment rate, the poverty rate of 41 percent for single mothers in the U.S. is far above the average poverty rate for single parent families in other high income countries. Less generous
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income support programs, and the greater prevalence of low wages in the U.S., help explain the exceptionally high poverty rate for single parent families in the U.S. These inequities can be corrected as government and women and their allies acknowledge change that has occurred and become committed to continued progressive change in economic and workplace policies and practices. So-called traditional women’s work is an example where continued change needs to occur.

As is often observed, low status and low pay generally mark a profession as women’s work. Caregiving, whether caring for children or the elderly, is an example of a profession generally seen as a traditional function of women and which is generally undervalued as a paid and unpaid endeavor. This is a good example of how distinctions between traditional and non-traditional work need to be broken down and how gender differences between occupations need to be addressed. Weinstein (2013) discusses the need for caregiving to become middle-class work. She notes that wages for caregiving are so low in New York City, with average wages of $23,500, that 40 percent of caregivers use Medicaid and/or food stamps. Weinstein urges the need for government supports such as minimum wage, overtime protection, child care subsidies and career ladders. When manufacturing declined, women often became locked into the service economy. But especially here women need to identify and take hold of opportunities for change. It is optimistic to note that the U.S. Department of Labor has recently announced that it will extend minimum wage laws and overtime protection to all home care aides who care for the elderly and people with disabilities as of January, 2015. This measure will end a 38 year ruling that excluded home care workers from receiving these basic protections from the Fair Labor Standards Act (Coalition on Human Needs, 2013).

In regard to health care generally, women in the health care field mainly occupy clinical positions. Although women constitute 47 percent of medical school graduates, they are only 18 percent of hospital CEOs and 4 percent of health care company CEOs. High profile women in health care cite mentoring, risk-taking and collaboration as key to advancement in leadership roles (ModernHealthCare.com, 2013). With the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, there are new opportunities emerging in the health care field as more individuals become eligible for health care services. The possibility of career ladders for women in health care is growing as many different kinds of health care professionals are needed. But good salaries and benefits are essential here. Some of the shortage of nurses, for example, can be corrected with wage increases. The demand for registered nurses is expected to grow 26 percent from 2010 to 2020, faster than the average for all occupations. But there is a need to create a new culture of health care professionals, where more women in positions of power acknowledge their power and lead the way in helping to provide growth opportunities for all women.

In the emerging innovative fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM occupations), women can play a much larger role. As of 2011, 26 million U.S. jobs – 20 percent of all jobs – were considered STEM jobs. STEM occupations appear to be the new avenues for economic and social mobility and a route to the middle-class. At the present time, women make up less than 25 percent of workers’ in STEM occupations (IWPR, 2012). A recent article by Rothwell (2013) of the Brookings Institution indicates that for many STEM jobs, a four year college degree is not necessary; and in fact more focused vocational training is a more important prerequisite. The polarization of employment, with job growth concentrated in the highest and lowest-paid occupations, while jobs in the middle have declined, has had a major impact on women. But there is potential for growth in the middle range with some manufacturing returning and innovative technologies developing, including green industries (IWPR, 2013). The
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Brookings Institution (Bradley and Katz, 2013) emphasize innovation and the need to help workers get the skills they need for new technologies. The National Skills Coalition (2013) calls for a skills strategy and the need to make substantial new investments in adult education and occupational skills.

Community colleges which provide much of the training necessary for career advancement for low-income women are currently overcrowded and underfunded, while serving more than a third of the almost 18 million undergraduates in the U.S. Legal Momentum (2013) discusses the failure of the Department of Labor’s affirmative action mandate adopted in 1978 to increase women in apprenticeship programs for the skilled construction trades. The report states that the legislation has failed to achieve its purpose, as women still hold fewer than 3 percent of skilled trades apprenticeships and jobs.

It is not only low-income women who experience discrimination in the workplace; elite women also experience gender inequity. (Sorokin, 2013). The Harvard Business School has implemented a program to achieve gender equity among its students and faculty. The program has met with much resistance and some success: some women are receiving better grades and becoming more assertive (i.e. personal change). But the hardest job is change in the workplace when women graduate from the program. Kantor (2013) writes

........ women never heard about many of the most lucrative jobs because the men traded contacts and tips among themselves…. in intellectual prestige, they were pulling even with or outpacing male peers, but they were not “touching the money”

Women were advised that they were not wanted in certain firms and men were doing them a favor by warning them beforehand. Kantor goes on to say “The deans had not focused on career choice, earning power or staying in the workforce; they felt they first needed to address campus issues.”

All of this illustrates the pervasiveness and intransigency of gender discrimination in the workplace and in society. While personal change may be more comfortable for middle-class and more affluent women, personal change can lead to structural change, but it is not automatic. Influential women can affect structural change in the workplace and society by understanding and challenging the barriers that exist and consciously working toward economic justice goals.

In addition to traditional and non-traditional occupations for women, there are distinctions among students, as well. Not only are there differences between rich and poor, there are also important age differences. It is noted that in addition to younger students who are likely to attend four year colleges, there are also older students who are turning to school as a result of occupational displacement during the recession and changes in family and workplace demands. These individuals are more likely to be seeking vocational goals but often have little or no guidance about what to study or even what schools to attend (Sanchez, 2013). With regard to Pell grants, the main source of federal financial aid for low-income individuals, these grants tend to be low and difficult to obtain, with stringent eligibility requirements.. There is also evidence of low completion rates for older, non-traditional students from four year and community colleges related to a number of factors such as limited financial aid and complicated work, family and educational responsibilities. Sanchez (2013) notes that older non-traditional students now make up nearly half of all Pell grant recipients, but only 3 percent ever earn a bachelor’s
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degree. Originally intended for traditional low-income students, now 44 percent of Pell grantees are 25 years old and older with vocational training as a goal.

All of this suggests the need to reassess and reexamine educational goals based on gender, age, and economic status, and not assume that one size fits all in education. Passage of Title IX of the Higher Education Act in 1972 marked a major step forward in equality for women in education. But as we see with all women’s issues, there is always a struggle around implementation which requires constant vigilance.

Educational opportunities and goals need to reflect changes in family life and the workplace, including improving the match between educational efforts and employment opportunities. There is a need for a better fit between demand and supply in the workplace. (3).

Failure to adjust educational requirements to accommodate different student characteristics and the workplace often results in blaming the victim for lack of educational success. Despite many barriers, there are opportunities for coalition-building in the workplace where women are already playing a dominant role.

Coalitions of Women, Immigrants, and Labor Unions: Based on U.S. Census data (2010), William Frey (2013) of the Brookings Institution reports that the U.S. is becoming a majority-minority population faster than expected. He writes that due to immigration, more deaths and fewer births among the white population and an explosion of minority births, the U.S. should be a majority-minority nation by 2043; but for younger age groups, the tipping points will come much earlier: 2018 for children under age 18. In 2012, 14 states had less than 50 percent white persons under age five.

Women currently make up more than half of all immigrants to the U.S. and 4.1 million are undocumented. The “feminization of migration “ with millions of women working in transnational situations affects the rich and poor. Unfortunately, immigration policies have often reinforced the exploitation of women; and immigration policies are often related to race. Global women and U.S. women have a strong stake in what is happening to each other. What happens in India, China, Bangladesh matters and affects all of us whether for transnational reasons, gender issues, wages or worker rights and protections.

At the present time, Congress is considering immigration legislation with a number of provisions that continue to be controversial. Pathways to citizenship with work restrictions and continued deportation of undocumented workers have major implications for women and unification of families (Elk, 2013). Immigration reform that provides preferential treatment for highly skilled workers to enter the country while simultaneously imposing harsh border controls and restrictions on less skilled workers continues patterns of inequality that have important gender implications (Sengupta, 2013 (4)).

The addition of a large number of immigrant women and other women in the workforce and as entrepreneurs should be seen as welcomed opportunities for trade union revitalization. Women have played an active role in the labor movement; but historically, the relationship between women and the labor movement has not been totally supportive. Boris and Orleck (2011) note that

….. the priorities of the women’s movement and sex-based rights and those of the labor movement for class solidarity often diverged during the twentieth century. Working class feminists struggled against middle-class feminists who focused
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primarily on achieving equality with male professionals and executives. They also battled men who sought to exclude women from unionized jobs and denied organized women workers a full share of power in the labor movement.

There have even been women-only unions in the past to deal with the issues of exclusion of women from traditional unions, such as the Women’s Trade Union League established in 1903 in the U.S. by working class and wealthier women to fight sweatshop conditions and other egregious practices in the workplace. But Boris and Orleck go on to say that history has shown that when feminists and unions worked together, both benefitted. Today, unions are participating much more fully in collaborative efforts with women’s organizations, faith-based groups and other community organizations to strengthen the voice of working class individuals (Greenhouse, 2013).

It is helpful to understand women’s current activism in the workplace in relation to specific industries where women have a dominant presence. For example, the membership of the American Federation of Teachers is more than 70 percent female and women have played an active role in educational reform nationally. Women have also played major roles in organizing flight attendants and dealing with issues of marriage, weight, age, sex, and pregnancy in that occupation. Caring Across Generations is an organization that focuses on care-giving for seniors and people with disabilities. This organization helps to organize consumers and providers and advocates for increasing pathways to legal status for in-home care workers, as well as educational opportunities and career ladders (IWPR, 2013). Founded in 2007, the National Domestic Workers Alliance, most of whom are immigrant and women of color, has achieved a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in New York State, Hawaii, and California. This organization, with women leadership, now has an alliance of 35 membership organizations in 19 cities and 11 states. These in-home care worker organizations work collaboratively with unions and other organizations and are generally led by women.

In addition, the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United (ROC), up against major lobbying by the National Restaurant Association (which is also a member of the reactionary American Legislative Exchange Council - ALEC), is an example of an occupation, dominated by women in the lowest paid positions, that has been doing battle with management (Medina, 2013). Their strategies are threefold:

prong one:: organize workers, punish the worst employers and win wide-ranging settlements; prong two: promote the high road to profitability and best practices in the industry; and prong three: change local and national policy (Flanders, 2013).

MomsRising, an organization of 1.1 million members has been fighting for work-family balance issues, among other family friendly and women friendly issues for many years. Worker Centers have also provided an array of advocacy services. (Fine, 2006). The United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) is a labor union with 1.2 million workers in the U. S. and Canada who, in collaboration with other organizations, such as Our Walmart and the National Organization of Women (NOW), have been helping Walmart workers in their effort to receive benefits and overcome illegal retaliation and low wages. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) is helping to organize fast food workers to raise wages. Women have played a
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major activist and leadership role as change agents in a variety of organizations. Sometimes this activism has occurred within trade unions; often in groups, like 9to5, organized to fulfill specific women’s goals. Women of color – both immigrant and U.S. born – are now often leading women-dominated unions and worker associations. At this time, there is a great deal of opportunity for change within labor unions working in collaboration with a variety of women and immigrant activist community groups; immigrant activism continues to grow. Local and national government in the U.S. need to be responsive by enacting progressive workplace and safety net policies and programs.

Wages, Other Workplace Practices, and Safety Net Programs: Under the New Deal in the 1930’s, a number of progressive laws were enacted to protect workers’ rights. But the Social Security Act of 1935 also excluded about half of the workers in the American economy. Among the excluded groups were agricultural and domestic workers, a large percentage of whom were African Americans. During this period, however, the labor union movement was in a period of major growth, but not always friendly to women.

More recently, labor is under attack in both the private and public sectors. The National Labor Relations Board, for example, established in 1935 to enforce labor laws against employers, has not had an unblemished record of supporting workers. With regard to striking, for example, which is protected by labor laws, employers continue to threaten to move jobs and lockout workers; this is also true for unions requesting wage increases. The Fair Labor Standards Act, passed in 1938 mandated a 40 hour workweek, minimum wages, overtime pay, record keeping, and child labor standards in the private and public sectors. Here again, there have been major violations of these laws (Bernhardt, et.al. 2009).

Since deindustrialization, beginning in the 1970s and the rise of neoliberalism with labor rights profoundly challenged, the role of government protections is more important than ever. The Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009, enacted early in Obama’s presidency, which extends the time limits for filing grievances based on pay discrimination, is an example of a positive step in protecting women’s rights. But subsequent requests for hearings around pay discrimination by Walmart have been rejected by the U.S. Supreme Court. (Pieklo, 2013).

The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 was a step forward for women’s rights. The federal legislation provides up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave after a child’s birth, adoption, or parental illness. However, only half of the total workforce is eligible, with employers with fewer than 50 employees and part-time workers excluded from eligibility. The fact that the leave is unpaid is a hardship for many. The U.S. is only one of four countries that does not provide paid leave for new parents.

Paid sick days continues to be a struggle. Although enacted in some states, it has not been enacted federally and coverage for many employees is generally restrictive. While employers continue to lament the hardships that paid sick days present (Mandelbaum, 2013), a report by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research on Oregon’s program (IWPR, 2013) documents the advantages and the limited hardships of the program for employers. Nonetheless, there is continued stigma around utilizing workplace flexibility.

Another struggle is around the minimum wage. With $7.25 per hour on the federal level (although somewhat more generous is some states) and $2.13 per hour for tipped workers, wages for full-time workers are well below the federal poverty level. There appears to be some growing support to raise the minimum wage on the state and federal levels. Governor Brown of California
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has recently approved a minimum wage law of $10 per hour; and other governors and President Obama are considering this option. There seems to be some populous movement here, but there are many conservatives in this country who believe that there should be no minimum wage at all (5).

Since welfare reform (TANF) in 1996 and the economic recession beginning in 2007, there have been major changes in social policy and structural change in the workplace. Although the cornerstone of TANF is short-term benefits contingent on seeking and obtaining employment outside the home, the job situation has been fraught with problems. Kaufman (2013) discusses how discretionary TANF is, state by state, how exclusionary the program is, with many eligible families not receiving aid, and how mandatory work requirements have stifled educational opportunities and career pathways. In 2012 only 11 percent of children in single parent families received cash public assistance, but 41 percent received food stamps (Legal Momentum, July, 2013) (6). The effects of national sequestration has limited services in such areas as low-cost housing, Head start and other preschool programs, home delivered meals to the elderly, food stamps, and unemployment benefits; cut-backs in workers and the increase in involuntary part-time workers affect all services.

The federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) enacted in 1975 is considered one of the most effective anti-poverty programs for low and moderate income individuals and families who are employed outside the home. This program, which has also been implemented in many states, provides a cash rebate to families depending on taxes already paid, family income and family size. Less well known but very important are the Child Tax Credit for dependent children and the Child and Dependent Care Tax credit for child care or other dependent care costs.

The availability of subsidized child care, which is often in very limited supply in the U.S., can be a make-or-break decision on women’s work outside the home. After-school programs, child care programs on campuses, the help of friends and neighbors and greater availability of universal pre-school are crucial alternatives. The need for activism exists in many different domains.

There are many women’s issues that require changes in workplace policies and practices, including: paid sick days, overtime pay, transparency in promotions, vacations with pay, women-friendly work-family balance policies, child care subsidies, paid maternity leave and gender pay equity. Full employment policies, increased minimum wage and safety net benefits that supplement low pay and precarious work require both national and local attention. The gridlock in government on the national level reinforces the need to look to local and state governments for progressive action and change (7).

Solutions and Conclusions: This paper emphasizes the importance of women reclaiming their gender identity, the importance of understanding the political and economic context that are the basis of women’s status in the society, and the importance of women coming together to help each other, particularly to assist low income women. We have suggested three ways for change to occur: through educational and career opportunities; through coalitions of women, immigrants, and labor unions; and through changing workplace policies and practices and safety net programs to enhance the equality and self-sufficiency of low-income women. We have attempted to present obstacles, as well as opportunities for change which illustrate the complex nature of women’s issues.

For example, Coontz (2013) writes in the New York Times that feminists should certainly support a campaign for progressive work-family balance policies but she says
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..... we must stop seeing work-family policy as a women’s issue and start seeing it as a human rights issue that affects parent, children, partners, singles and elders. Feminists should certainly support this campaign. But they don’t need to own it. (emphasis added)

These sentiments are antithetical to the positions supported in this paper which argues that feminists do need to own these issues. But it illustrates some of the differences within feminism and the women’s movement. The idea that work-family balance policy is a women’s issue as well as a family issue continues to be controversial among women. There are also many other issues in the workplace that require a women’s voice, with women in leadership positions.

At the present time, there are many women writing about gender issues, with many different voices. There are women writing about the importance of spending time in the kitchen with their daughter (Benton, 2013). There are women writing that universal sisterhood is dead and elite, well-educated women are moving away from other women. (Wolf, 2013). And there are women who write about the pressures on women to remain conventionally feminine and the continued exclusion of women from science occupations (Pollack, 2013). Other women write about problems leaving the workforce and then trying to return (Warner, 2013). But there are also men who write about women helping other women (Bryant, 2013). All of this illustrates the importance of understanding and supporting the ongoing dialogue between women, as well as men.

While we continue to be concerned about insecure, irregular and exploitative working conditions for all working people, and we need to engage men in the egalitarian struggle, a gendered lens and acknowledging and increasing the leadership of women really matters. As Lanning, et al (2013) say “we need a gender politics that is less about how women can succeed in a man’s game, and more about how to change the rules of the game”. This is crucial since so much about women’s leadership is currently about succeeding in a man’s world and overcoming the glass ceiling largely imposed by men. Women need to be encouraged to support inclusion and to identify commonalities and differences in family and workplace needs among different women that require personal and structural change. The sheer number of women in the workforce changes the workplace environment. But as more women achieve social and economic mobility, these individuals need to identify with gender issues and understand the political economy in order to help themselves and others. That is the challenge we all face.

In addition to the workplace changes, education, immigration policies, labor unions, community organizations and social welfare policies are opportunities for change. The concept of intersectionality, developed by third wave feminists (see Samuels and Ross-Sherif, 2008) identifies the complex ways that race, class, ethnicity, and other characteristics such as age, sexual orientation, and disabilities interact among women. Fraser (2013) argues that when women strive for equality within the existing political economic system, rather than challenging the status quo, they may contribute to a neoliberal ideology that curtails opportunity and self-sufficiency for all working people. A political economic context helps to explain why structural change is needed, but it doesn’t preclude the ideas that individual change and gender can make a difference.
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Individual change, such as assertiveness, risk-taking, and self-confidence are often considered an important part of women’s upward mobility in the workplace. But we are also aware that low-income women often have little power in the workplace (sometimes also true for more affluent women but in a different way) with few allies in positions of leadership and influence (Sorokin, 2013). It may be that feminism and fighting for equality is a luxury for low-income women who are struggling for survival on a daily basis; high achieving women may feel too insecure in their positions to be helpful to other women; and the goals of feminism may not be clearly defined. We might also ask do women’s rights need a social movement? When some women have a choice whether to work outside the home and others don’t have this choice, the stakes are clearly different in terms of what is important. There are many questions to answer, but that is part of the journey ahead.

There are many areas in women’s lives that need to change; and many different obstacles and opportunities for change. Different strategies for change will meet the needs of different women. Personal and structural change can interact and both are needed.

Education, awareness, collaboration, mutual support, and social and political action are all needed because enormous pressures exist that resist equality and progressive goals.

Despite Hanna Rosin’s (2013) recent popular writings that patriarchy has ended and women are now in charge, there is too much evidence to the contrary around so many of the unresolved issues discussed in this paper to truly accept what seems like a premature conclusion. But Rosin is another women’s voice. Most women are still seeking to achieve equality and self-sufficiency in a world where women’s rights are human rights and women’s strength and feminist engagement enhance the well-being of poor women and the solidarity of all women in the workplace.

Notes

(1) Paul Krugman (Nov. 1, 2013) discussing the war on the poor says “that war is now the central defining issue of American politics”. The war on women is part of that struggle.

(2) Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany, has been criticized by some feminists for making a lot of concessions unfavorable to women. Clemens Wergin (Oct. 22, 2013), writing in the NY Times, says “Part of what makes Ms. Merkel effective, both as a conservative leader and as a role model, is that she doesn’t stress women’s issues”.

(3) The cost of higher education is a crisis for many students; this must be a part of educational reform.

(4) As technology industries expand, in Silicon Valley, for example, they have also become more politicized, particularly around immigration reform to increase the pool of skilled workers from other countries by issuing more special visas so these individuals can work in the U.S.

(5) Those who most often oppose an adequate minimum wage often also oppose government programs. However, as a result of less than a living wage, more than half of fast-food workers rely on government programs, such as food stamps, EITC, health insurance and welfare to supplement their wages, costing nearly $7 billion a year (Chen, 2013). Burk (2013) notes that
government contractors are often paid so poorly that they, too, rely on government benefits to subsist.

(6) The Department of Agriculture currently reports the total number of food stamp recipients at nearly 48 million.

(7) J.K. Rowling, the extremely successful creator of Harry Potter, writes about her struggles with stigma and poverty as a single mother prior to her success. She credits the British welfare state for her survival during very hard economic times and worries about current austerity measures in the UK.
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