

National Organization for Women



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Open Letter to President Obama: NOW Urges a 2012 Wake-Up Call for the Nation

Dear President Obama,

The National Organization for Women (NOW) is deeply invested in the message you will soon send to the people of this nation through your State of the Union Address.

We write at a time of continuing economic stress, when political and business leadership are failing the nation. Our democracy is imperiled by the dominance of money in elections, allowing wealthy and powerful interests to exert an outsized influence in Congress and state legislatures. Solutions to deep social and economic problems are thwarted by politicians serving narrow moneyed interests. Social institutions that have protected workers and the most vulnerable in society are being dismantled at all governmental levels. And yet, as if to divert public attention from these challenges, right-wing elected officials are waging a war against women, spending their time and energy on restricting access to abortion care and even birth control, while pressing to shut down family planning clinics across the country. Small wonder that the public has lost faith that "the system" works fairly and that their voices are being heard and their needs met. Meanwhile, the gap between the richest one percent (or more accurately, the richest one-tenth of one percent) and everyone else is growing -- a reality that hits women hardest, leaving them more reliant on the very programs the elites are so eager to slash, including Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, child care, tuition assistance, and others.

Poverty Rate at Record Levels - In this land of supposed plenty, it is a profound tragedy that 46 million women, men and children are living in poverty. Of those, 20 million have been pushed into "deep poverty," meaning they must survive on one-half (or less) of the official federal poverty income. In this land of supposed equal opportunity, it is deplorable that fully one-quarter of African-American women and Latinas are poor, and more than 40 percent of single women who head families now live in poverty. Although women's employment has picked up in recent months, women have lost, cumulatively, nearly 300,000 jobs since the "recovery" began in the summer of 2009. With the nation's overall unemployment rate persistently high at 8.5 percent, with 13 million jobless and another eight million working part-time but wanting full-time work, it is clear that we desperately need a fundamental and far-reaching response.

Major Public Employment Initiative Needed - Nothing less than a 1930s Depression-era massive jobs creation effort is required now to meaningfully lower the unemployment rate. The private sector cannot and will not generate the more than 22 million jobs required in the near term. Despite near-zero interest rates and wildly favorable tax treatment, business leaders are not willing to make the investments needed to grow the economy because demand for products and services is inadequate. Government austerity only makes the situation worse, as spending cuts intensify unemployment and

depress consumer demand for products and services. To put the country back on the road toward full employment, the federal government needs to create jobs directly, for example by transferring money to state and local governments to rehire laid-off teachers, nurses, child care workers, social workers and public safety workers; and fully funding programs like Head Start, child care assistance, family planning clinics and Violence Against Women Act initiatives -- all of which would help restore the jobs women have lost through no fault of their own. In addition, unemployment insurance must be extended and our tattered social safety net strengthened to help families in dire poverty and those who because of disability or family responsibilities cannot work outside the home. Finally, the jobs created must be jobs with livable wages, with good benefits, retirement security and equal pay for work of equal value. All of this is the least that a wealthy nation can and must do, and it requires honest and courageous political leadership.

We urge the administration to cease using tax relief as a way to stimulate the economy. The business community's unwillingness to increase hiring is not driven by taxes (tax rates are already at historic lows), but by too little demand for goods and services. In particular, the Social Security payroll tax holiday is troubling because pressure to make it permanent will inevitably be intense. If made permanent, this tax cut would essentially choke off a significant portion of Social Security's dedicated funding stream -- a devastating first step toward dismantling the entire program. If tax relief is used, the Making Work Pay initiatives, which successfully put money in the pockets of people who would spend it, are a far superior form of stimulus.

Time for Fair Pay Past Due - NOW urges you to continue to exert strong leadership to improve women's economic well-being by stressing the importance of equal pay for women and their families. If the 23-cent gender wage gap were to be erased tomorrow, a substantial number of the 34 million poor women and their children could be brought out of poverty, and many millions more middle class working families would see household income grow, and their ability to save and spend would be greatly enhanced. The gender wage gap is closing at a glacial pace. Without better laws like the Paycheck Fairness Act and a more equitable sharing of wealth, it will be another 50 years before there is pay parity between women and men. Affordable opportunities for training and post-secondary education, without requiring students to take on massive debt, are needed for young women and low-income students to break out of the low-wage occupational segregation that contributes to the wage gap. Continued funding of science, technology, engineering and math education -- with a wider door for women and people of color -- is essential to assure strength in a competitive global economy.

Benefits Must be Improved, Not Reduced - Social Security retirement, disability and survivor payments have protected millions against the harsh effects of the recent recession. States' flagging economies have been buoyed by Social Security checks sent each month to their residents. Without Social Security's retirement income, a substantial proportion of the retired population would be impoverished. Even so, twice as many women as men over 65 are now living in poverty. Pensions are disappearing, household income and retirement savings are eroding, race and gender pay discrimination rob women and their families, and the recent recession has taken a toll on housing values and nest eggs for millions of would-be retirees. Social Security must be strengthened to keep retirees out of poverty and to meet new economic and demographic realities. Benefit improvements that recognize the contributions of those who stay home or work part-time to care for children, elderly and ill family members, as well as those who are underemployed due to economic circumstances they didn't create and don't control, are in order. These can easily be paid for by adjustments in financing, such as lifting the cap on taxable income, and other more modest reforms.

Medicare and Medicaid are equally essential programs. Half of all Medicaid dollars go to support nursing homes, without which thousands of elderly women would be without shelter or care, and tens of thousands of their care providers would be thrown out of their jobs. And, as numerous studies have repeatedly confirmed, because Medicare is the solution to our nation's out-of-control health costs, the

eligibility age for Medicare should be lowered, not raised. Your leadership to advocate for improvements -- opposing all efforts to reduce benefits -- in our most important public insurance programs is critically important.

Equal Marriage Rights Needed - We applaud the administration's leadership in halting the military's offensive and harmful Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, which saw thousands of capable women and men forced to resign from military service because of disclosure about their sexual orientation. However, work to advance the basic rights of LGBT individuals is not over. The federal Defense of Marriage Act must be repealed, and we urge your administration to take the lead. Ending workplace discrimination without exceptions for religious employers -- as if an institution could have a "conscience" -- and extending spousal benefits to same-sex couples are also imperatives.

Full Health Care Coverage for Women - The Affordable Care Act will bring health insurance coverage to more than 30 million uninsured persons. Only the most short-sighted and mean-spirited of politicians would try to undo this law's promise of saving upwards of 45,000 lives each year. Enactment of this historic legislation was a singular accomplishment for your administration. However, restrictions placed on coverage for abortion care are unwarranted, and must be reversed. One in three women will have an abortion in her lifetime, making that procedure a common and necessary part of women's basic reproductive health care. Restricting it on religious grounds goes directly against the grain of our country's most cherished values -- religious freedom and the principle of equality for all. The same can be said of restricting access to contraception, which is unconscionable and violates women's fundamental constitutional rights. Polls show that a majority of the public supports coverage for the full range of reproductive and preventive health care services for women, and we look to you for leadership in standing firm against male-dominated religious extremists bent on withholding reproductive health care from women. NOW is appreciative of the administration's recent decision against expanding a religious refusal clause for insurance contraceptive coverage under the Affordable Care Act. However, we reiterate our call for elimination of any such refusal clause. No employer should be exempt from following the rules.

Millions Turned Away - Full Funding for VAWA Needed - Finally, we urge that your administration advocate for full funding of another historic law, the Violence Against Women Act. At a time when shelters are facing budget cuts and higher demand for services, it is essential that the federal government provide sufficient funding. The recession and high unemployment have placed pressures on families in ways that can result in violence. In a 2010 one-day census, some 9,541 requests for help had to be turned away due to lack of resources. This translates to 3.5 million unmet requests for safety and services annually. We are failing these women and their children, and adequate financial assistance by the federal government to anti-violence programs must be assured.

In closing, the National Organization for Women believes that the nation is at a crucial juncture in history that demands strong, principled leadership to restore a broadly representative democracy and which also requires effective action to reduce income inequality. We ask for your administration's commitment to achieving these goals, as they are essential for fairness and justice in our society.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Terry O'Neill", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Terry O'Neill
President