

Fighting for Equality: Esther Peterson Leads the Way on Equal Pay

Topic: Gender equality, Civic action

Grade: Level: 3-8

Subject Area: History, Civics

Time Required: 60 minutes

Overview

In this lesson, elementary students conduct historical research on individual and collective efforts to achieve gender equality in the United States. First, students investigate the fight for voting rights for women by listening to and discussing *Elizabeth Started All the Trouble*, a nonfiction picture book by Doreen Rappaport. Then, they analyze an historical photograph to learn about the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Esther Peterson, the highest-ranking woman in the Kennedy Administration. Lastly, an assessment brings a civic engagement component to the lesson as students research the gender pay gap today, and then take action to address that issue.

Goal

Using children's literature and primary source material, students will learn about women who fought for equal rights and the strategies they used and continue to use to achieve change.

Essential Question: How have women worked to fight for equal rights?

Objectives

Students will:

- analyze a work of nonfiction to learn about three barriers women faced in history and three ways women worked to achieve equal rights.
- analyze a photograph with Esther Peterson, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Labor Standards in the Kennedy Administration and learn about her essential role in the passage of the Equal Pay Act of 1963.
- research the current gender wage gap and take action to address the issue.

Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

National History Standards Historical Thinking:

2. Historical Comprehension 3. Historical Analysis and Interpretation

Standards for History and Social Science Practice (PS) 3. Organize information and data from multiple primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1 Read closely to determine what the text says

explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

MA Standards for History and Social Science Practice

1. Demonstrate civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. MA Standards for History and Social Science Practice

Historical Background

In 1960, although women made up more than one third of the labor force, they only earned about 60 cents for every dollar earned by men. Although legislation to advance equal pay had been attempted in 1870, and from 1945 through 1963, a new effort during the Kennedy Administration would result in another step forward towards gender equality.

President Kennedy appointed Esther Peterson, a former labor organizer and lobbyist, as Director of the Women's Bureau in the Department of Labor and later as the Assistant Secretary of Labor Standards. At her urging, Kennedy created the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women and supported her work in organizing the passage of the equal pay legislation. Her leadership in collecting data and bringing together key lawmakers, community and religious leaders, and labor activists was essential in the effort.

When President Kennedy signed the historic legislation on June 10, 1963, he remarked that it was a "significant step forward," but acknowledged that "much remains to be done to achieve full equality of economic opportunity." Historians consider the Equal Pay Act to have been one of the most significant initiatives since the early twentieth century in furthering the rights of women.

Today, women continue to earn less on average than men. According to 2018 data reported by the National Women's Law Center, women were paid 82% of the income for men.

Materials

- *Elizabeth Started All the Trouble* by Doreen Rappaport
- Photograph [AR7965-G](#) of the signing of the Equal Pay Act on June 10, 1963, from the collections of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum (Note: You can retrieve photo by typing AR7965 in the SEARCH function at jfklibrary.org.)
- List of True/False statements about the status of women in 1960

Procedure

1. Read and discuss *Elizabeth Started All the Trouble* by Doreen Rappaport. Have students indicate barriers to women or unequal treatment as the story is read. List students' suggestions.
2. Reflect on the story. Who were some of the women who led the movement for equal rights? What did they do to achieve change? What were some of their

greatest achievements? How did the suffragists move President Wilson to support the 19th amendment to the Constitution which would give women the right to vote?

3. Focus on the last two pages of the book and the text,

“The women had triumphed after battling for the vote for seventy-two years. But they knew their work was not over. There were still many unfair laws to change so that women could have true equality with men.”

“And we’re still working on it.”

4. Introduce the topic of equal rights for women 40 years after the passage of the 19th amendment by having students respond to True/False statements about women in 1960, including one on equal pay.

Suggested statements for the True/False activity.

In 1960:

- White women age 21 and older had the right to vote. (True – the 19th amendment to the Constitution was ratified in 1920.)
 - A woman could lose her job for being pregnant. (True – the Pregnancy Discrimination Act was not passed until 1978.)
 - Airlines could fire women flight attendants who gained weight. (True – it was not until the late 1960s that laws were passed to prevent this type of discrimination.)
 - John F. Kennedy asked a woman to be Secretary of State. (False – Kennedy did not appoint any women to top level positions but there were many women who worked in the White House and in other departments.)
 - Women were not paid the same as men for the same work. (True – Women earned about 59 cents for every dollar men earned.)
5. Transition to discussion of Equal Pay Act in Kennedy Administration. Project the photograph [AR7965-G](#) and explain to students that it was taken on June 10, 1963 after the signing of the Equal Pay Act, a law which made it illegal to pay women less money than men for the same job.
 - Ask students, “What is going on here?” As students provide observations and interpretations, ask, “What do you see that makes you say that?” Keep prompting students with, “What more can you find?”
 - If students do not notice the pens in the photograph, draw attention to them and ask what they might be and why they are in the photo.
 - Notes on people, places and things:
 - Ceremonial pens on the President’s Desk – directly to the left of the President, there is a stand with several pens in it. It is common for a president to hold a ceremonial signing when he/she signs a bill into law. People who have been instrumental to the passage of the law are invited to the signing. The president often uses several pens to sign his/her name and then distributes them to those to those present.

- Esther Peterson (directly behind President Kennedy) served as Director of the Women's Bureau in the US Department of Labor and Assistant Secretary of Labor for Labor Standards. It was at Peterson's urging that Kennedy established a Commission on the Status of Women which was chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt. Peterson led the effort to pass the Equal Pay Act. She worked with women's organizations, labor unions, legislators, and citizens -- some of whom are pictured in the photo -- to gather information and support. For a full listing of who is in the photograph, visit:
 - President Kennedy is handing a pen to Dorothy Height, President of the National Council of Negro Women from 1957 – 1997. She was one of the most important leaders in the civil rights movement and helped plan the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom with Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders. She served on the President's Commission on the Status of Women.
 - The Equal Pay Act of 1963 was the first law in which the federal government addressed pay equity for women.
6. President Kennedy supported the initiative and signed the Equal Pay Act into law. The women and men pictured with him, along with many others, conducted research, gave speeches, held meetings, and even protested in their efforts to secure the passage of the Equal Pay Act.

Assessment

Students research equal pay today. Using the evidence they gather, they plan an action to promote the cause of equal pay. This could include writing a letter to a federal legislator, giving a speech, creating a pamphlet, or writing an editorial for a local paper.

Recommended websites

Association of American University Women:

<https://www.aauw.org/research/the-simple-truth-about-the-gender-pay-gap/>

Infographics, graphs, and charts with specific information on women of different ethnicities, pay gaps in specific job areas, and an interactive map of the US with information on each state.

Fact Sheet on the wage gap from the National Women's Law Center

<https://nwlc-ciw49tixgw5lbab.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/The-Wage-Gap-Who-How-Why-and-What-to-Do-2019.pdf>

National Committee on Pay Equity

<https://www.pay-equity.org/day.html>

Information on Equal Pay Day (held on the day that “symbolizes how far into the year women must work to earn what men earned in the previous year.”) Includes an “Equal Pay Day Kit”, descriptions of activities on past Equal Pay Days, and a list of actions individuals and organizations can take to work towards equal pay.



After signing the Equal Pay Act on June 10, 1963, President Kennedy hands a pen to Dorothy Height, civil rights activist and former Director of the Women's Bureau in the Department of Labor. Esther Peterson (in light-colored suit behind Kennedy), Assistant Secretary of Labor for Labor Standards, led the effort to pass this landmark legislation. For the names and positions of each person pictured, see [AR7965-G](#).