

# A Call for Gender Equity in the Museum Workplace

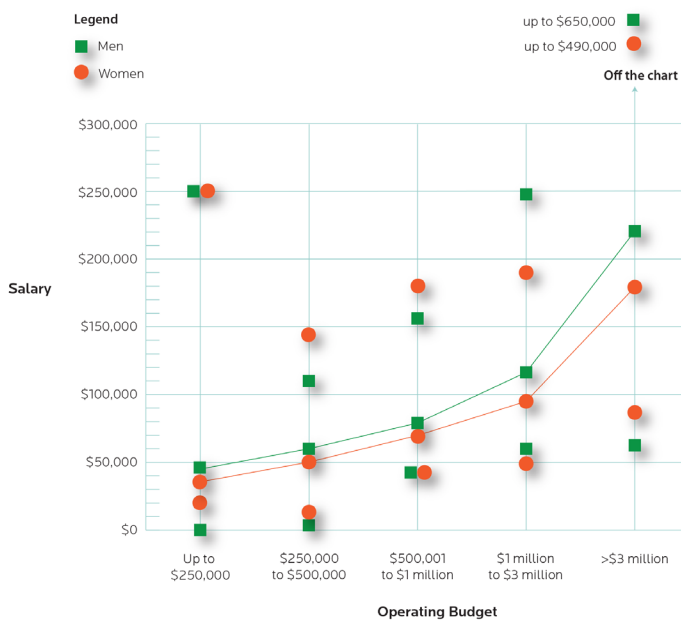
Forty-three years ago a group of women gathered at the American Association of Museums annual meeting, now the Alliance, (AAM). Calling themselves the Women’s Caucus, they asked for numerous reforms to end gender-based discriminatory hiring and promotion practices in the museum profession. At the time, women held fewer than 16-percent of museum directorships, a number that declined before it increased. The Caucus also called for a legal guide to help women challenge

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discrimination, for support for open salary information, and guidelines for fair employment practices. That was then. Today, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), women make up 46.7-percent of the museum field, working in every job title and every museum discipline. While

the field’s demographics have changed, the original Caucus wish list remains unchallenged and unchanged. The field is rife with questions of pay equity while many museums fail to offer adequate health insurance, paid family and medical leave, access to affordable childcare, and protection from sexual harassment.

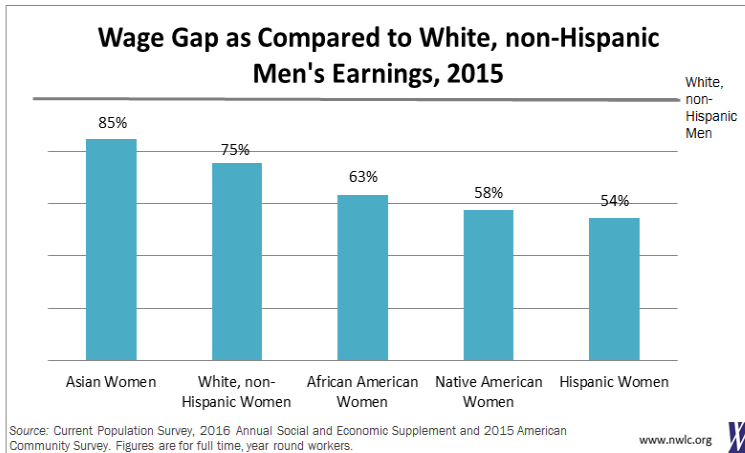
## Museum Women and the Salary Gap



Multiple studies, including the AAM National Comparative Museum Salary Survey and the American Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) Gender Gap report (both from 2014), paint a bleak salary picture for women. While AAMD notes women in art museums earn 79 cents for every dollar men earn, the AAM survey (where a majority of respondents represent the history museum sector) depicts a darker picture. Even after accounting for education levels and experience, the broader AAM survey suggests that at the director level, women earn 71 cents for every dollar earned by male directors.

Salaries of Director/CEO/President by gender and museum operating budget. Icons (squares and circles) connected by lines represent the median salaries for men and women. Icons above the lines indicate the maximum salaries for each gender, those below the lines the minimum salaries. AAM National Comparative Museum Salary Survey, 2014.

Research tells us that over the course of a career, the salary gap can mean a \$400,000 loss for white women. For women of color, the news is worse. Black and Latina women are affected disproportionately since they earn only 60 cents and 55 cents respectively for every dollar earned by white, non-Hispanic men. When women earn less, they also save less for retirement, and since they generally live longer than men, the ‘retirement gap’ results in deepening poverty for many elderly women. As the chart below illustrates, this is not a museum-specific problem, but it is one museums need to address.



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In every museum discipline, the salary gap widens as institution size grows. AAMD’s Gender Gap states that the larger an art museum’s budget the less likely it is to have a female director. The situation at big history and science museums is regrettably similar: the larger the budget, the more likely the leadership is a white male. In addition, when women work for organizations that are still largely traditional top-down hierarchies, they sometimes face the same gender discrimination of a generation ago. To compound the problem, many organizations conflate equity with racial diversity, not gender. Breaking down hiring color barriers may make a diverse staff, but it will not solve workplace equity until museums pay equitable wages.

## Reigniting the Work of the Women’s Caucus

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According to the BLS, half of all museum workers are women, putting the field at a crossroads. In one direction is a gender-balanced workplace, in another are pink collar professions like nursing, elementary education, librarianship, and social work, careers traditionally dominated by women. Think that is a good thing? Think again.

According to economists and workplace psychologists, gender-balanced workplaces are more efficient, more inventive, and more productive, while men in female-dominated professions are paid more and promoted more quickly. Last, female-dominated professions carry a social stigma. That means women earn less because they work in women’s jobs, and women’s jobs pay less because they are done by women.

These barriers, including biased hiring and promotion practices, significantly impact women's careers: They make it difficult to earn a living wage which discourages or prevents women, particularly women of color, from joining the field. To add to that, many museums and heritage organizations ignore the work/life imbalance that impedes women's lives. Poor or non-existent health insurance, coupled with unpaid family leave, impacts not just women but their families as well. These barriers don't drop from the sky. They exist because museums foster, nourish, and enforce them. Without equitable workplaces, how can museums create equitable programming and exhibitions or inclusive collections? The field needs to fix this problem now.

With museum workers and AAM leading the way, we need to reignite the work of the Women's Caucus, by creating a Gender Equity in Museums Movement (GEMM). As AAM states in its current strategic plan, equity is "vital to the future viability, relevance and sustainability of museums" so the field must acknowledge that workplace barriers are everyone's responsibility. AAM, national in scope and broad-based in support, must serve as a catalyst and a convener for equity to nurture, cajole, and demand change from the field. Change must also come from museum boards, staff leaders, and museum studies programs, along with professional associations of all sizes and disciplines, who should take AAM's lead making equity a strategic plan focus area. This is an unprecedented opportunity to improve museum workplaces while serving as role models for other non-profits.

## Gender Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

We would be remiss if we didn't acknowledge that, just as in the wider world of work, questions of gender equity prompt a spectrum of reactions in the museum world. For some, the work begun by the 1973 Women's Caucus remains unfinished. For others, gender equity is a myth and unnecessary

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in a field rife with women. And for some, issues of gender are overlaid and inseparable from race and identity, making questions of childcare or sexual harassment in the museum workplace irrelevant if it is impossible to get a foot in the door.

We believe the increase in women working in the museum field doesn't solve the problem. Open doors are meaningless when accompanied solely by words not action. Organizations who declare their hiring practices open, but build language into advertisements and interviews that serves as a sifting mechanism for race, class and gender, make access to museum careers difficult, if not impossible. Problems of equity affect

women no matter where they work, but museums are peculiar environments often advocating big values up front, while employees struggle backstage. We believe museums are uniquely positioned to model workplace equity in a way that challenges how we think about the humanity of human resources. We're at a crossroads where diversity, equity, accessibility, race, and identity are part of a highly charged national dialogue. As these powerful conversations coalesce, shouldn't museums participate as role models for change?

# A Call to Action: Change Comes from the Top and the Bottom

Museums must create, adopt and promote field-wide gender equity guidelines that will:

- Recognize and speak openly about the fact that inequity and bias exist in museum workplaces.
- Prioritize the importance of human capital over buildings and understand that it is staff that pushes museums forward, not capital improvements.
- Pay equal salaries for equal work, and offer equitable access to benefits.
- Advocate for equitable wages among museum women first. Are the black, Hispanic, transgender and queer women on your staff making the same amount for similar work as the white women on staff?
- Incorporate gender equity similar to diversity and inclusion language in mission and vision statements, strategic plans, and success metrics.
- Adopt and use values statements and HR policies that address gender equity, diversity, and inclusion for board, staff, and volunteers as these policies guide daily operations.
- Create an equity advisory council made up of staff, board, volunteers, and stakeholder representatives to institute, review, and evaluate equity work throughout the organization.
- Encourage organizations to have professionally trained HR offices and/or an HR Committee on the board; in the case of smaller organizations, find ways to offer access to HR professionals to support employees with gender-related questions or problems.
- Provide a clear written process for employees to raise concerns around unconscious bias, workplace bullying, sexual harassment or discrimination.
- Offer training from outside experts for all staff on gender equity issues on a regular basis.
- Support access to leadership training for women and by women.
- Create and support mentorship and sponsorship opportunities both in and outside the museum.

Professional associations and graduate programs must teach, encourage, and foster:

- The importance of career and network building.
- Skills in resume-building and salary negotiation.
- Leadership training for women.
- Training in understanding bias and its affect on career building.
- Support for programs dealing with gender equity.
- Support for salary negotiation and transparency.
- Equity, diversity and inclusion value statements as part of AAM accreditation and other association-sponsored capacity-building programs.

## How You Can Help

Women have a long and often storied history as museum founders, philanthropists, collectors, and volunteers. As both employees and volunteers, they were and are catalysts in the creation of museums large and small, building a legacy of successful preservation efforts, a commitment to education and public engagement, an early embrace of modernism, the creation of the first children's museums, and breaking audience color barriers.

Those of us in 21st-century museums are forever indebted to them for their courage, imagination, and entrepreneurship. As individuals, you honor their legacy and keep their vision alive by:

- Talking. Don't stay silent. Start conversations about gender equity at your workplace, or in your state, regional, or national museum association.
- Identifying actions your museum can take to address equity issues. Advocate among colleagues and champions to move these issues to the top of leadership agendas.
- Encouraging your museum to create a values statement. Museums that can't state what they believe in have a hard time acting on those beliefs.
- Making sure your museum's strategic plan addresses workplace equity at all levels, from board members to staff to volunteers.
- Involving yourself in a mentorship program as a mentor or mentee, either inside or outside your museum.
- Having conversations with emerging professional women about the next steps in their careers; supporting robust mentoring programs.
- Sharing this manifesto widely. Help GEMM get people talking and thinking about equity. Use the hashtag #GEMMuseum in your social media posts.
- Share examples of equity in practice with us here at GEMM by emailing us at [gemmuseums@gmail.com](mailto:gemmuseums@gmail.com) or you can post examples on our Padlet [Equity in Practice](#)
- Join the conversation: Participate in GEMM, colleagues working for equity in the museum workplace. Let us know how you'd like to help: [gemmuseums@gmail.com](mailto:gemmuseums@gmail.com)

## **For GEMM**

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