

Equality Act of 2015

In July 2015, legislation was introduced simultaneously into both the United States House and Senate that sought to protect the civil rights of LGBTQ Americans and women. Entitled The Equality Act of 2015, the Act would cover eight major areas of discrimination law under which LGBTQ people are not currently federally protected: public accommodations, public education, employment, housing, federal funding, jury service, legal protections and credit. This bill would amend the 1964 Civil Rights Act to include sexual orientation and gender identity, and would mandate that all sex-segregated facilities, such as bathrooms and dressing rooms, be accessible to people based on their gender identity.

The Equality Act of 2015 would ensure that any employer with at least 15 employees would be prohibited from discriminating against individuals on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, with no religious exemption. In addition, the bill would amend The Fair Housing Act to ensure LGBTQ people could not be denied the sale, rental, or financing of housing based on their sexual orientation. LGBTQ people could no longer be denied service in stores, banks, on transportation and health care services. In addition, the Act would ensure protections for the LGBTQ community from discrimination from any entity that receives federal funding. Further, the Equality Act would provide LGBTQ people equal access to credit and the term “spouse” would replace “husband/wife” terminology in the Equal Credit Opportunity Act and lastly, there would be federal protections for LGBTQ people so they could not be excluded from service as a juror because of their identity.

Additionally, the Equality Act adds “sex” to the list of protections enumerated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, ensuring women have equal access to spaces with the same protections under federal law that other categories currently have. While the Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination against women in some areas such as employment and housing, it does not prevent discrimination against women in places of public accommodation or recipients of federal funds. If this bill passes, women-owned businesses could not be discriminated against by developers who have a federal grant.

Women are often charged more for car purchases or car repairs simply because they are female. Even for a simple haircut, women are usually charged different prices than their male counterparts. While women face seemingly small discriminations, these discrepancies add up, resulting in the so-called “woman” tax. This legislation would alleviate some of the added financial burden women face simply for being women by eliminating legal protection for arbitrary and gender-motivated price differences in products and services.

Moreover, the Equality Act would protect breast feeding women from being excluded from public establishments, and pharmacies could no longer deny women access to

birth control. The bill would prevent these individuals from invoking the Religious Freedom Restoration Act to override any of the protections of the Civil Rights Act.

While LGBTQ individuals and women have made many strides, there is much more work to be done before we achieve true equality. CWA needs to reach out to our allies in the labor movement and ask them to support the Equality Act of 2015. We need to call on our communities, family, friends, and constituency groups to put pressure on our political leaders to endorse the Equality Act and to ensure true equality for all. We need to remind our leaders that our nation was founded on the idea that we are all created equal and for some, this is a reality that is long overdue.