

# POWER MOVES: Social Security Tips for Women



2026 marks the 91st year of the Social Security program supporting Americans in retirement, disability, and survivorship. It's a milestone worth celebrating, especially for women, who have long been at the heart of the program's story. Ironically, the first monthly Social Security check went to a woman named Ida May Fuller, who worked just shy of three years as a legal secretary before filing for benefits on November 4, 1935. In January 1940, she received her first benefit payment of \$22.54. Over the next 35 years, she collected nearly 1,000 times what she paid into the system—a testament to the longevity-focused support Social Security was designed to provide.<sup>1</sup>

Fast-forward 85 years, and women continue to be a powerful presence among Social Security beneficiaries. As of March 2026, roughly 70.9 million income beneficiaries received Social Security benefits, including workers, dependents, survivors, and disabled workers.<sup>2</sup> Nearly 55% of income beneficiaries are women, yet their average monthly benefit of \$1,780 continues to lag behind a man's at \$2,181.<sup>3,4</sup> This fact alone speaks to the critical need for women to fully understand their options before making a claiming decision.

While women have historically received lower average Social Security benefits than men, often driven by wage disparities, caregiving interruptions, and part-time work, the trajectory is changing. As more women increase their earnings and take on primary breadwinner roles, they are better equipped to enhance their benefits, financial autonomy, and long term income stability.<sup>5</sup>

A recent survey of women conducted by the CFP Board revealed that 44% of women are the primary earners in their households and are increasingly becoming the financial decision-makers.<sup>5</sup>

This evolution is worth celebrating, yet it highlights the importance of making informed and strategic decisions when claiming Social Security, one of the few sources of inflation-protected, lifelong retirement income for retirees. Whether you are approaching retirement, divorced, widowed, or simply planning ahead, this guide offers insights for maximizing your Social Security benefits. It aims to assist you in navigating your retirement journey with greater confidence, knowledge, and empowerment.

## Aim for Social Security Autonomy

To become eligible for Social Security retirement benefits, you must earn at least 40 credits over your working life. In 2026, you earn one credit for every \$1,890 in Social Security taxable wages or self-employment income and can earn up to four credits per year. That means most people qualify after about 10 years of work.<sup>6</sup> This is step one to gaining Social Security “independence.” Once you’ve stepped over the 40-credit threshold, you are no longer dependent on a spouse or former spouse for future eligibility, a positive for overall financial stability and future economic independence. But don’t stop there if you have the ability to keep working to boost your benefit. Here’s why.

Your monthly income benefit amount is calculated using your highest 35 years of earnings, adjusted for inflation.<sup>7</sup> If you have fewer than 35 years of earnings, the Social Security Administration (SSA) counts zeros for the missing years when calculating your benefit.<sup>8</sup> This can significantly reduce your monthly benefit. So, the more years you can work to reach or exceed 35 years of earnings, the higher your future monthly income benefit will be.

**Power Move:** While some women may qualify for benefits based on a spouse’s or ex-spouse’s earnings record (explored later), it’s smart to aim for autonomy whenever possible. Earning eligibility and maximizing your benefit gives you greater control and stability, especially in divorce, widowhood, or other unexpected life changes. Even part-time or second-career work later in life can help you replace low or zero-earning years with higher ones, resulting in a meaningful difference in your future monthly income.

## Understand the Long-Term Implications of the Timing of Your Claim

You can start receiving Social Security retirement benefits as early as 62, but doing so reduces your monthly benefit by as much as 30% if your full retirement age (FRA) is 67. This reduction is generally permanent, meaning your monthly amount will not increase once you reach FRA, with few exceptions. Additionally, if you claim benefits before your FRA and continue working, your benefits may be temporarily reduced (discussed later).<sup>9</sup>



Full retirement age varies depending on your year of birth. Refer to the chart here: [www.ssa.gov/benefits/retirement/planner/agereduction.html](http://www.ssa.gov/benefits/retirement/planner/agereduction.html). If you were born on January 1st, refer to the year before your birth year to determine your FRA. You will receive the full amount of your monthly income benefit if you wait until your Full Retirement Age (FRA) to claim your benefits. And for each month you delay claiming past your FRA (up to age 70), you earn monthly delayed retirement credits, an increase of about 8% per year, which can result in a benefit 24–32% higher than a claim your FRA (between 66 and 67).<sup>11</sup>

### Here's a simplified breakdown<sup>11</sup>:

- Claim at 62: about 70–75% of your full benefit
- Claim at FRA (66–67): 100% of your full benefit
- Claim at 70: up to 124–132% of your full benefit

**Power Move:** Delaying Social Security can help provide a larger stream of lifetime income designed to support a longer retirement and rising costs over time. Since women tend to live longer than men (often well into their 80s or 90s), a higher monthly benefit can help provide financial stability in your later years, when other resources may be dwindling. If you can afford to delay your claim until your Full Retirement Age (FRA) by either working longer, using other savings to cover your income in the meantime, or coordinating your claim with your spouse, it may significantly enhance your long-term income sustainability.



## Uncover Opportunities to Leverage Cash Flow from a Spouse

While working and earning your own retirement benefit is ideal, you should understand the requirements to be eligible for benefits under a current or former spouse's record to avoid missing an opportunity to increase cash flow. If you are currently married, you may be eligible to receive up to 50% of your spouse's full retirement benefit (if you file earlier than your FRA, you will receive less than the full amount).<sup>9</sup>

### To qualify, you must:

- be married for at least one year<sup>11</sup>
- be at least age 62; and
- your spouse must have claimed his/her benefits

### If you are divorced, you may qualify under your ex-spouse's record if<sup>9</sup>:

- The marriage lasted at least 10 years
- You are unmarried
- You are at least 62 years old
- Your ex has claimed benefits or, if not, is at least 62 or older, and you've been divorced for a minimum of two years

**Important Note:** If your benefit amount is higher than that under your spouse or former spouse's record, you will receive your benefit instead. If your benefit amount is lower, the Social Security Administration (SSA) will "top up" your benefit to match the higher spousal benefit level. However, remember that in this situation, you may initially only receive your lower retirement benefit until your spouse files. After your spouse's filing, you will be entitled to the additional amount that brings your benefit up to the higher spousal benefit.<sup>9</sup>

**Power Move:** Spousal (or ex-spousal) benefits do not reduce your spouse's or ex-spouse's benefits.<sup>10</sup> And the ability to claim based on their record can be a useful way to supplement your income, especially if you are a lower earner or do not qualify for benefits. It's important to understand that while the Social Security Administration (SSA) allows eligible spouses and former spouses to collect the higher of their retirement benefit or the benefit based on their spouse's or ex-spouse's work record, continuing to work to boost your benefit has several advantages. Working not only fosters financial independence and increases your chance of saving for retirement, but it also provides an opportunity to earn a higher benefit than you may be able to collect under your spouse or former spouse's record.

## Make Informed Survivor Cash Flow Decisions

If your spouse or ex-spouse passes, you may be eligible for Social Security survivor benefits. Many women in retirement may be entitled to more as survivors than from their work record, if a consistent level of higher earnings by their spouse. Maximizing survivor income should begin with a clear understanding of the impact of the first spouse's death on the survivor's income; proactive planning combined with intentional and coordinating claiming helps protect the surviving spouse's cashflow.

If you are a widow, you may claim up to 100% of your deceased spouse's benefit if the benefit is greater than your own (including any delayed retirement credits he/she earned), provided you wait until your survivor full retirement age or you are at that age or older at the time of your spouse's death. Generally, you also must have been married for at least 9 months.<sup>13</sup>

You can claim survivor benefits as early as age 60 (or age 50 if you are disabled or become disabled within 7 years); however, if you claim earlier than your FRA, the benefit will be permanently reduced by as much as 28.5% if taken at age 60 (age 50, if you are disabled). If you are a young widow, you may be entitled to benefits earlier than 60 if you care for the dependent children of your deceased spouse, referred to as caregiver benefits. However, these benefits will stop once the youngest dependent turns 16 unless the child is disabled with a disability that began before age 22. Once you are no longer entitled to caregiver benefits, you must wait until you reach 60 to become eligible for surviving spouse benefits. However, if you remarry before age 60, you will lose eligibility for surviving spouse benefits unless that marriage later ends in divorce, annulment, or death.<sup>14</sup>

You can switch to the higher benefit if you are already collecting your retirement benefits when your spouse passes away if the survivor benefit is higher. Similarly, if you claim the survivor benefit first, you can later switch to your higher retirement benefit as late as age 70, provided that your benefit exceeds the survivor benefit.<sup>15</sup> This strategy can be advantageous for widows



with substantial earnings, as it helps to maximize cash flow in later years. If you're divorced, you may also qualify for survivor benefits if the marriage lasted at least 10 years and you are currently unmarried (or remarried at age 60 or later).<sup>14</sup>

**Power Move:** Couples should proactively plan for survivor income when deciding when to file for benefits. This should involve focusing on a unified claiming strategy that maximizes lifetime cash flow and survivor income. Generally, the higher-earning spouse should delay their claim for as long as possible to maximize inflation-adjusted lifetime and survivor income. Upon the first spouse's death, only the higher of the two benefits will remain, requiring the survivor to live on less. Therefore, the longer the higher-earning spouse waits to increase the eventual income benefit, the more the survivor can expect to collect as a source of lifelong continued cash flow.

If your spouse predeceases you, ensure that you are fully aware of your options before making a claim for survivor benefits. Often, choosing the option to claim the smaller benefit first (either your own or the survivor benefit) and later switching to the higher benefit will maximize cash flow better than simply choosing the higher benefit right away. If you are unsure about whether this strategy applies to you, consult a financial professional who can help you navigate your options before making a decision.



## Think Twice before Claiming while You Work

While you can work and receive Social Security benefits simultaneously, you may be surprised by an unwelcome withholding of your monthly benefits if you file before reaching your FRA and earn above SSA's annual earnings limit.

Here's how it works. In 2026, if you're under FRA for the entire year and earn over \$24,480, your benefits will be withheld \$1 for every \$2 of income exceeding the limit. For example, if you earn \$10,000 above the limit, SSA will withhold \$5,000 in benefits before paying your monthly benefit. If your monthly benefit is \$1,000, SSA will withhold your first five months before paying your monthly benefits in month six.

In the year you reach your FRA, a more lenient rule applies: \$1 is withheld for every \$3 you earn above \$65,160, but only until the month you reach FRA. Once you reach your FRA, there's no limit on how much you can earn. You can work and earn as much as you want without reducing your benefits.

When applying the earnings test, the SSA counts only wages and earnings from self-employment; they do not include passive sources of income such as pensions, IRA distributions, capital gains, or earnings from your spouse.

It's important to know that benefits withheld due to excess earnings aren't lost forever. Once you reach your FRA, Social Security will recalculate your benefit, and you'll receive a slightly higher monthly amount to account for the months your benefits were withheld.<sup>16</sup> However, if you're

relying on your Social Security benefit to supplement your paycheck, exceeding the earnings limit could cause a temporary drop in income, especially if you're counting on that cash flow to cover essential expenses.



If there's a chance your income will exceed the threshold, it may be wiser to delay claiming and consider other sources of income, such as retirement account withdrawals or additional part-time work, to bridge the gap until you can claim benefits without penalty. Also, keep in mind that the earnings limit applies not only to early retirement claims but also to spousal benefits and survivor benefits claimed before FRA. A conversation with a qualified tax or financial professional can help you weigh your options and avoid an unexpected financial shortfall.

**Power Move:** While there are definite advantages to working and collecting Social Security in retirement, such as the potential to replace zero or low-earning years to boost your lifetime benefit, the decision becomes more nuanced when your earnings trigger benefit withholding. If you rely on Social Security to supplement your income for essential living expenses, having those benefits temporarily reduced due to the earnings limit could create a cash flow gap that may be difficult to manage. Sometimes, it might be wiser to tap other income sources first and delay your claim to avoid this disruption.

By waiting until your FRA, you not only sidestep the earnings cap altogether, but you also lock in higher lifetime monthly benefits. And if you choose to keep working, the added perks, such as social engagement, continued employer health coverage, and increased opportunities to save, can be financially and emotionally meaningful.

## Create Tax-Efficiency in Your Claiming Strategy

Many people are unaware that as much as 85% of their Social Security benefits can be federally income-taxable when received. Whether or not you'll pay taxes on your benefits depends on your "combined income," which is the sum of your adjusted gross income (AGI), non-taxable interest, and half of your Social Security benefits. If you file as single and your combined income is between \$25,000 and \$34,000, up to 50% of your benefits may be taxable; if it's over \$34,000, up to 85% may be subject to income tax. For married couples filing jointly, a combined income between \$32,000 and \$44,000 exposes up to 50% of benefits to federal taxation, and a combined income above \$44,000 could cause up to 85% to be taxable.<sup>9</sup>

This tax treatment can catch many retirees off guard, especially women, who are more likely to live longer and may eventually face what is sometimes referred to as the widow's tax penalty. This occurs when a woman transitions from filing jointly to filing as a single taxpayer the year after a spouse dies, often leading to higher taxes on a reduced household income. The outcome is often reduced income, taxed at a higher rate, particularly when stability and predictable income are most essential.

**Power Move:** Much like proactively planning for survivor income when determining the timing of the higher earner's claiming age, forward-thinking strategies before retirement, whether you are single, divorced, or married, can help mitigate the risk of tax erosion on Social Security benefits later. Contributing to Roth IRAs or workplace Roth accounts, if offered, and Health Savings Accounts while working can create sources of retirement income that are tax-free and do not increase your combined income. Another option to optimize tax efficiency is to coordinate the timing of your Social Security claim with how and when you draw from other retirement income sources to preserve more of your net income over the long term. For example, drawing down tax-deferred retirement accounts or IRAs early in retirement to bridge income while delaying your or your spouse's Social Security claim to secure a higher lifelong retirement benefit could create a more sustainable, tax-efficient, inflation-protected income strategy. A well-thought-out income strategy maximizes your savings and enhances financial stability during retirement, especially if you are healthy and may spend several years managing expenses alone.

## Collaborate with Professionals

While this Smart Guide is designed to equip you with the essential knowledge and critical factors to consider in your Social Security claiming decision, remember - you don't have to navigate it alone. Social Security is just one piece of your broader retirement picture.

To make the most of your benefits and to create a more tax-efficient retirement income strategy, consider enlisting the support of an A-team of qualified professionals, including a tax advisor, financial professional, and, if needed, a Social Security specialist. They can help you personalize your strategy to reflect your unique needs, challenges, and goals while mitigating potential risks like longevity, rising healthcare costs, inflation, or the potential impact of losing a spouse.

<sup>1</sup>SSA.gov Women's History Month and Social Security <https://www.ssa.gov/blog/en/posts/2026-03-23.html>

<sup>2</sup>SSA.gov Monthly Statistical Snapshot, March 2026 Table 2: [https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/quickfacts/stat\\_snapshot/](https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/quickfacts/stat_snapshot/)

<sup>3</sup>SSA.gov What Every Woman Should Know Publication No. 05-10127 pg. 2 Feb. 2025 <https://www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10127.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>SSA.gov 2025 Annual Statistical Supplement released March 2026 pg. 3 <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/supplement/2025/supplement25.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>Building Wealth: Insights on Women's Aspirations & Growing Financial Power (2025) pg. 4 [www.cfp.net/-/media/files/cfp-board/knowledge/reports-and-research/womens-initiative/building-wealth-insights-on-womens-aspirations-growing-financial-power.pdf](http://www.cfp.net/-/media/files/cfp-board/knowledge/reports-and-research/womens-initiative/building-wealth-insights-on-womens-aspirations-growing-financial-power.pdf)

<sup>6</sup>SSA.gov Social Security Credits (2026) <https://www.ssa.gov/benefits/retirement/planner/credits.html>

<sup>7</sup>SSA.gov Social Security Benefit Amounts (2026) <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/cola/Benefits.html>

<sup>8</sup>SSA.gov Your Retirement Age and When You Stop Working (2026) <https://www.ssa.gov/benefits/retirement/planner/stopwork.html>

<sup>9</sup>SSA.gov Retirement Benefits (2026) pgs. 3 & 10; Publication No. 05-10035 <https://www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10035.pdf>

<sup>10</sup><https://www.aarp.org/social-security/faq/does-my-spousal-benefit-reduce-amount-spouse-gets/>

<sup>11</sup>SSA.gov Effect of Early or Delayed Retirement on Retirement Benefits [https://www.ssa.gov/oact/ProgData/ar\\_drc.html](https://www.ssa.gov/oact/ProgData/ar_drc.html)

<sup>12</sup>SSA.gov Who can get Family benefits: Spouses and Ex-Spouses <https://www.ssa.gov/family/eligibility>

<sup>13</sup>SSA.gov Who can get Survivor benefits: Spouses and Ex-Spouses <https://www.ssa.gov/survivor/eligibility>

<sup>14</sup>SSA.gov Survivor Benefits pgs. 2, 3, & 8 Publication No. 05-10084 April 2026 <https://www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10084.pdf>

<sup>15</sup>SSA.gov What you could get from Survivor benefits: Survivor and other benefits <https://www.ssa.gov/survivor/amount>

<sup>16</sup>SSA.gov How Work Affects Your Benefits (2026) Publication No. 05-10069 <https://www.ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10069.pdf>