



Policy Brief

Women in the Workforce: Advancing Equality and Well-being

Why Does This Matter?

If women do not achieve their full economic potential, not only will global and local economies suffer, but also population health and well-being. Currently, many long-standing challenges to women's equality in the workforce exist within the United States and have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges include profound wealth and earnings inequality, occupation segregation, a lack of paid leave policies, and a lack of accessible, affordable childcare. These challenges disproportionately impact women because of their multiple roles as family caregivers, teachers, and members of the workforce. Traditionally, working mothers are more likely to work a "double shift" (i.e., a full day of work caring for children or older adult family members, or both, along with household responsibilities), thus spending [60% more time](#) doing unpaid work than men. During the pandemic, many women persisted in the labor force as a result of working in jobs characterized by low wages, inflexible scheduling, and a lack of paid leave.¹ This, in turn, contributed to increased stress, longer work hours, and a greater risk of burn out among mothers in the workforce. If progress for women continues at the same pace as it has since 1960, it will take [until 2059](#) for women to reach pay equity with men.

Policy Implications

In order to advance equality in the workforce, address structural challenges, and improve population well-being, employers, communities, and policymakers must work to: (1) improve pay and benefits for women across all occupations; (2) build a strong and equitable care infrastructure that acknowledges the caregiver's role and time investment; and (3) transform gender norms within the home and work environments to promote a culture of equality.

Companies/employers could:

- Improve pay and benefits for women across all occupations by:
 - promoting pay transparency standards by eliminating pay secrecy policies in the workplace; offering incentives to improve employer accountability for pay practices
 - supporting federal measures to increase the minimum wage and improve equal pay protections
 - increasing access to flexible scheduling and remote work; reducing any penalty associated with time off for all employees

¹ Despite articles and headlines indicating that "One in three mothers may be forced to scale back or opt out of the workforce" (e.g., McKinsey-LeanIn *2020 Women in the Workplace Study*), when comparing labor force participation rates for 2020 and 2021, we see that about 1 in 60 college graduate women and nearly 1 in 30 non-college graduate women left the labor force, which is much less than the one in four figure reported in many headlines. From Goldin, C. (2021) *Assessing Five Statements about the Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Women* [White paper]. Retrieved from https://www.nber.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/GOLDIN_SEANWhitePaper.pdf

Policy Implications (continued)

- Build a strong and equitable care infrastructure that acknowledges the caregiver's role and time investment by:
 - providing and encouraging uptake of paid paternity leave
 - providing paid family and medical leave protection equal to or above national standards
 - extending healthcare coverage to all workers (full and part-time) and their families
- Transform gender norms within the home and work environments to promote a culture of equality by:
 - strengthening workplace policies related to paid family and medical leave and sick days
 - creating policies and companywide initiatives to prioritize gender equality and diversity in hiring and promotion practices, such as requiring recruiters and management to have a minimum of 50% women representation (e.g., [DNB group](#))
 - investing in programs that provide mentorship, skill development, executive training, and other career-related support to women in attaining leadership roles and setting targets for women's representation in top management, executive level, and board membership positions

Communities could:

- Improve pay and benefits for women across all occupations by:
 - strengthening community relationships to ensure women and families have greater access to opportunities, information, and resources
 - forming coalitions to implement programs focused on strengthening the capacity of women and youth to participate in the workforce. Examples include workforce development and training programs targeted to the needs of women business owners, young entrepreneurs, and women wanting to transition careers or re-enter the workforce after taking time off
- Build a strong and equitable care infrastructure that acknowledges the caregiver's role and time investment by:
 - increasing public-private partnerships to improve the quality of existing childcare programs and to expand access to childcare and other resources. Examples include [Smart Start in North Carolina](#).
 - cultivating stronger social networks in people's communities (e.g., strengthening community connectedness and increasing access to services and environments that are important to people in the community)
- Transform gender norms within the home and work environments to promote a culture of equality by:
 - increasing awareness in schools and communities regarding gender norms and the importance of diversity, respect, inclusion, and equality of all genders
 - establishing and supporting community initiatives to promote gender equality by engaging men and boys to address harmful masculinity norms, prevent violence, and promote men's caregiving. An example large-scale initiative is [Promundo](#) – an organization based in Brazil
 - working with community leaders and religious leaders to empower women to have a voice

Policymakers could:

- Improve pay and benefits for women across all occupations by:
 - enacting the Raise the Wage Act of 2021 (or similar policy) to raise the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour and eliminate the \$2.13 [tipped minimum wage](#), which will help boost wages for roughly 32 million people
 - enacting a national paid family and medical leave program that is sustainably funded to provide paid leave to all employees
 - example models include Canada's [Paid Parental Leave](#) Program which provides benefits to the person who is away from work because they are pregnant or have recently given birth for up to 15 weeks, plus an additional 35 weeks of paid parental leave that either parent can take
 - eliminating the self-employment tax and expanding health insurance tax breaks, unemployment insurance, and other social benefits to include self-employed workers

Policy Implications (continued)

- reinstating the federal government's [collection of pay data](#) from employers in order to collect comprehensive pay data from employers through regulatory mechanisms (e.g., Obama administration's pay data collection rule)
- ensuring women have full control over their bodies and health by implementing federal policies that guarantee women access to affordable comprehensive reproductive health care and family-planning services
- Build a strong and equitable care infrastructure that acknowledges the caregiver's role and time investment by:
 - establishing a set of federal minimum standards related to paternity leave, family leave, medical leave and caregiver leave; flexible working arrangements for workers who are parents or caregivers; and legal protection for those applying for or making use of family-related leave and flexible working arrangements similar to the European Commission's Work-Life Balance (WLB) Directive.
 - Other example models include the [National Workplace Flexibility Initiative](#)
 - financing a permanent expansion of the American Rescue Plan Act's (ARPA) child tax credit benefits that applies to all U.S.-born children regardless of their parents' legal status; providing additional assistance to families in states where the cost of childcare averages more than \$300 per month
 - other examples include [promoting universal pre-kindergarten education](#) as laid out in the Biden Administration's *National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality*
 - directly investing in care facilities (child and older adult care) and the [caregiving workforce](#) to address issues of limited availability, high cost, and inconvenient program hours, all of which create barriers for working mothers
 - improving the long-term care system by directly investing in both facility and home-based services (e.g., [home-or-community-based care](#)). This could include long-term care (LTC) policies that will provide a more inclusive and equitable system for delivering LTC services based on individuals' social circumstances (e.g., family support, demographic region, etc. rather than based on income). LTC policies could also federally support, recognize, and incentivize informal caregivers. Examples of countries with successful publicly funded LTC systems include those in Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands.
- Transform gender norms within the home and work environments to promote a culture of equality by:
 - requiring employers to set targets for increasing women's representation at all levels
 - implementing a comprehensive strategy to help prevent the formation of gender stereotypes in children through early education
 - enacting orders and policies to promote gender equity and inclusion in the workplace
 - examples include [banning gender-based restrictions](#) on occupations held and hours worked as well as spousal consent requirements

These implications highlight the need to take an ecologically grounded focus to advance women's equality in the workforce that emphasizes multiple levels and is appropriately framed through an intersectional lens because these structural challenges are exacerbated for women with intersecting identities. As emphasized in the literature, the experience of oppression cannot be categorized by gender or race or even a sum of socially constructed categories. Thus, to dismantle barriers to women's equality in the workforce and improve well-being, we must focus on the multiple intersecting social identities that women may hold and how they interact with workplace contexts and the broader structures to shape experiences of inequality in the workplace.

What the Research Says

- The pay gap is significant. For every dollar that a White male earns working full-time, White females earn [79 cents](#), Black females earn 63 cents, Native American females earn 60 cents, Latinas earn 55 cents, and Asian American and Pacific Islander females earn 52 cents
- At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, [more than two-thirds](#) of working mothers who were low-income and roughly 75% of women working part-time jobs were not paid when they had to take time off due to school and daycare closures
- More than [1 in 5 adults](#) in the U.S. – 53 million people – serve as unpaid caregivers to family members that have a disability or illness. The Family Caregiver Alliance estimates that as many as 68% of these caregivers are women
- Increasing women's representation in politics and leadership decreases bias against women and is positively related to educational attainment and work force participation as a recent [study](#) has shown

Facts at a Glance

- Occupations dominated by women and minoritized groups (e.g., home care aides, healthcare workers) are excluded from federal labor and employment protections, such as the [Fair Labor Standards Act's guarantee of minimum wage and overtime pay](#). Evidence also demonstrates that as an occupation becomes more female-dominated, [median wages decline](#)
- In West Virginia, [one of the states with the highest proportion of people living in poverty](#) in the U.S., the cost of child care averages about [\\$600 a month](#), which is more than twice the amount provided by the American Rescue Plan's \$300 monthly child tax credit
- An estimated [1.6 million](#) fewer mothers of children under 18 years of age were employed in January 2021 compared to January 2020, reflecting a 6.4% decline
- To qualify for Medicaid for LTC in a nursing facility, individuals must be at the federal poverty level and have exhausted all of their personal assets and ability to pay for their care privately (Medicaid.gov, 2015)
- Women represent just [5%](#) of CEOs among 3,000 of the largest U.S. companies and occupy only [10%](#) of top management positions in S&P 1500 companies

This policy brief was principally drafted by Kirby Magid with contributions from Gita Jaffe.

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