

Women and Low-Wage Work

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Introduction

Traditionally, women earn less than men. With over 60% of women in the U.S. paid labor force and over 73% of single mothers being employed in the paid labor force, it is gender that is the “key variable affecting work.”¹ Numerous scholars (Gilbert 2003; Blau 1998; Hughes and Kroehler 2005; Marger 2002) and governmental agencies have noted the importance of educational attainment, race, family issues (such as marital status and number of children), globalization, industry or occupation, and whether the person is participating in governmental assistance programs for determining whether women are defined as living in poverty. A topic that is continuously at the forefront of women and low-wage work discourse is welfare. While demographics such as race, employment, and educational attainment are necessary to understand women in the low-wage sector, welfare programs are recurrent themes throughout. Consequently, the purpose of this fact sheet is to provide easily accessible statistics and ideas concerning the aforementioned key variables as affecting women in low-wage work.

For our purposes, low-wage workers earn more than \$20 per week but less than \$218 per week (or less than \$6.20 per hour at 35 hours per week).² In addition, low-wage work is defined as earning less than \$12,000 per year in successive years.³ Women, over time, are more likely to remain in low-wage occupations than men.⁴ In the low-wage workforce, women hold the majority (59%) of low-wage jobs, and they are still more likely to be low paid than are male workers.⁵ Almost 70% of U.S. working women earn less than \$20,000 yearly, and nearly 40% earn less than \$10,000.⁶

According to Kim (2000), 8.27% of all women workers are below the poverty status. Furthermore, 16.94% of low-wage women workers are below poverty status. Additionally, only 4.76% of those low-wage women workers received any type of welfare.⁷ As a result of low-wage work for women, many times they are forced to accept work that no one else wants. These jobs are more likely to offer few or no benefits and little job security.⁸ Following is a non-exhaustive review of those variables that greatly affect women in low-wage work.

Welfare's Impact on Women and Low-Wage Work

Women that use welfare benefits generally work low-wage jobs with few or no benefits. Rice (2001) notes that one-third of those receiving welfare are adults, but that 90% of them are women. With this statistic in mind, the move from welfare to work continues to hinder women and their children because “most of the new jobs obtained by former welfare recipients pay far below the poverty line.”⁹ Furthermore, because states have cut back on training activities and education, more and more women on welfare must drop out of school in order to afford items for themselves and their children. In turn, a lack of formal education keeps these women under or near the poverty line. Additionally, women on welfare many times have nonstandard schedules which make finding affordable childcare very difficult.¹⁰

Education

Of those employed at the lowest literacy level, 56% of employed women had low wages (compared to 30% for men). About 41% of women of this functional category experienced low wages (compared to only 17% of men).¹¹ Contrary to a popular notion that women in low-wage work are uneducated, almost 42% of women in low-wage work have high school diplomas. Furthermore, nearly 30% of women in low-wage work have some college experience with 7% having a college degree or higher.¹² Rice (2001: 359) notes that “states have cut back drastically on participation in education and training activities. Thousands of women on welfare who were also in college have been forced to drop out of school. These results are all the more unfortunate, since higher education has been documented to be a successful educational strategy for escaping long-term wage poverty among poor

women.” Women are also less likely to attain a college degree.¹³ According to the statistics, one is more likely to engage in low-wage work if a college degree is not obtained.

Individual Characteristics

Individual characteristics in relation to women and low-wage work include race, age, number of children and marital status. About 30% of the female workforce is considered low-wage. Of these women, nearly three-fourths are white. Yet, “the proportion of minority women is significantly higher than white women: 35.8% and 46.6% of African American and Latino women in contrast to 26.2% of white women.”¹⁴ The majority of workers in low-wage jobs are adults. Teenagers “comprise only 7% of the low-wage workforce.”¹⁵ Specifically for women in low-wage work, nearly 45% are ages 25 to 45 years old.¹⁶ Concerning the number of children of women in low-wage work, about 17% with one to two children under the age of 6 are in low-wage occupations. Furthermore, 37% of women with one to two children under the age of 18 are in the low-wage sector occupations.¹⁷ In 2002, 13 million families were headed by single females (18% of families).¹⁸ In 1998, single parents headed 23% of all families. Women headed 76% of those single-parent families. 59% of all families that earned less than \$10,000 in 1998 were headed by single women, even though single women headed less than 18% of all families.¹⁹ For further description of these statistics, please refer to Figure 1.

Globalization

In the United States, wages for women are higher in the West, the Northeast, and parts of the Midwest, while they are lower in the Southeast and Mountain States.²⁰ On a global scale; however, there are a number of manufacturing jobs that compete internationally. These jobs include automobile manufacturing and various other assembly-line employment. In an effort to save money, corporations have moved these jobs to other countries. In fact, many corporations use globalization as a rationale for not increasing wages.²¹ As a result, the United States has moved away from these large, production-oriented operations to a service sector of the economy characterized by employment in low-wage occupations such as child care, health care, and food service.²² While it is noted that these types of jobs are not being exported, so they must be filled by Americans. Consequently, women are generally going to be the ones occupying these positions.

Industry & Occupation

As previously mentioned, women are disproportionately employed in those industries and occupations defined as low-wage. 26% of low wage earners work with a business with less than 25 employees.²³ 11.3% of all low wage earners are employed in eating/drinking establishments, 11% in educational services, and 10% in business services²⁴, 59% of low wage jobs are held by women.²⁵ In 1998, about 16 million, or 39% of female wage and salary workers, were paid low wages.²⁶ In 2002, among women above the age of 16, 73% worked in four occupational groups: administrative support, including clerical (23%), professional specialty (19%), service workers (except private household)(17%); and executive administrators, and managerial (15%).²⁷ As previously noted, women tend to be clustered in low-wage occupations and industries. Some of these industries include clerical and service workers. For a further description of these industries and the percentage of women who occupy these positions, see Figure 2.

Unionization

According to the Fairness Initiative, “Over the past quarter century, a variety of political, economic and corporate decisions undercut the bargaining power of the average worker, but especially those in the lower strata of the workforce.”²⁸ For many women in low-wage occupations, such as the hotel industry, joining a union provides such benefits as raising minimum wage, increasing health benefits, and offering paid leave. However, the government’s attempt to “deregulate those industries that are highly unionized” have “contributed to the deterioration in low-wage conditions and a worsening of disparities in income and wealth.”²⁹

Conclusion

With all the statistics, it is shown that women in low-wage work is not only a complex issue, but an issue with far-reaching effects. While solutions are not simple, and often involve structural changes, possible suggestions are to

increase minimum wage in order to assist women and their families, provide improvements in the Earned Income Tax Credit, and require businesses that receive public monies to provide quality jobs.³⁰ There is the realization that such legislation could only result from lobbying efforts as well as more social awareness about the situation. Educating the public is crucial to bringing both public consciousness and social reform.

Important Activist and Community Organizations

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| American Federation of Labor- Congress of Industrial Unions | www.aflcio.org |
| National Organization for Women | www.now.org |
| National Women's Law Center | www.nwlc.org |
| Women's Policy, Inc. | www.womenspolicy.org |
| American Civil Liberties Union | www.aclu.org |
| U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau | www.dol.gov/dol/wb/ |
| Wider Opportunities for Women | www.wowonline.org |
| Women Work! The National Network for Women's Employment | www.womenwork.org |
| 9 to 5 National Organization of Working Women | www.9to5.org |
| Institute for Women's Policy Research | www.iwpr.org |
| Low-Wage Work | www.lowwagework.org |

Resources for Further Information

In addition to the above mentioned sources, the following videos, books, and journal articles can be utilized in the classroom by instructors, practitioners, and students interested in learning more about women and low-wage work.

Videos

Fast Food Women. By Anne Lewis Johnson; [produced by] Headwaters. Whitesburg, KY: Appalshop Film and Video, 1991.

There's No Such Thing as Women's Work. United States Women's Bureau, Division of Information and Publications. Produced by United States Department of Labor, Division of Audiovisual Communication Services; distributed by National Women's History Project, 1987.

The Willmar 8. California Newsreel; produced by Julie Thomson and Mary Beth Yarrow; directed by Lee Grant. San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1986[?], 1980.

Breaking the Glass Ceiling (n.d.). This new, two-part series examines the obstacles preventing women from getting to the top of the corporate ladder. It includes case studies of women in the U.S. and the U.K., providing practical insights for future breakthroughs.

Books and Journal Articles

Budig, Michelle J. and Paula England. 2001. "The Wage Penalty for Motherhood." *American Sociological Review* 66: 204-225.

Handler, Joel F. and Lucie White (editors). 1999. *Hard Labor: Women and Work in the Post-Welfare Era*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.

Julia, Maria. 2000. *Constructing Gender: Multicultural Perspectives in Working With Women*. California: Wadsworth.

Lambert, Susan J. 1999. "Lower-Wage Workers and the New Realities of Work and Family." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 562: 174-190.

Matthaei, Julie A. 1982. *An Economic History of Women in America*. New York: Schocken Books.

Taniguchi, Hiromi. 1999. "The Timing of Childbearing and Women's Wages." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61: 1008-1019.

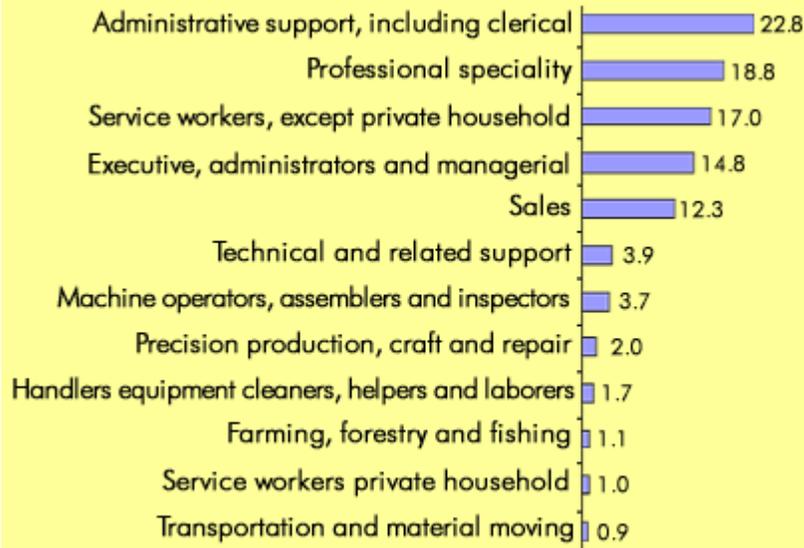
Figure 1³¹

| Category | Percent of— | | |
|---|-------------------|------------------------|--|
| | all women workers | low-wage women workers | workers in category who are paid low wages |
| All women, 18–64 years | 100.00 | 100.00 | 38.50 |
| Age: | | | |
| 18–24 years | 16.87 | 30.61 | 69.92 |
| 25–45 years | 55.46 | 44.96 | 31.24 |
| 45 years and older | 27.67 | 24.43 | 34.01 |
| Education: | | | |
| Less than high school | 11.00 | 21.22 | 74.35 |
| High school | 36.08 | 41.86 | 44.70 |
| Some college | 32.88 | 29.86 | 34.99 |
| College degree or higher | 20.04 | 7.06 | 13.57 |
| Race or ethnicity: | | | |
| White | 80.43 | 79.42 | 38.05 |
| Black | 14.75 | 15.82 | 41.31 |
| Native American | .91 | .91 | 38.57 |
| Asian | 3.90 | 3.85 | 37.96 |
| Hispanic (any race) | 9.86 | 13.80 | 53.96 |
| With no children less than 18 years old | 56.04 | 53.02 | 36.45 |
| With children less than 18 years old: | | | |
| 1–2 children | 36.05 | 37.39 | 39.95 |
| 3–4 children | 7.58 | 9.25 | 47.02 |
| 5 or more children | .33 | .34 | 40.60 |
| With no children less than 6 years old | 83.28 | 82.32 | 38.09 |
| With children less than 6 years old: | | | |
| 1–2 children | 16.17 | 16.96 | 40.39 |
| 3 or more children | .54 | .72 | 51.53 |
| Marital status: | | | |
| Married | 49.31 | 42.89 | 33.50 |
| Separated, divorced, or widowed | 22.45 | 20.96 | 35.98 |
| Nevermarried | 28.24 | 36.15 | 49.33 |
| Disabled | 2.59 | 3.50 | 52.00 |
| Noncitizen | 6.31 | 9.76 | 59.63 |

Figure 2³²

Fast Facts about Women in the Labor Force

In March 2002, more than four-fifths of women 16 and over in the civilian labor force were employed in five occupational groups



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, [March 2002 Current Population Survey](#) [PDF].
[Graph description](#)

¹ Kerbo, Harold. 2003. *Social Stratification and Inequality: Class Conflict in Historical, Comparative, and Global Perspective* (5th Ed.). Boston: McGraw Hill.

² Lerman, Robert I. and Stefanie R. Schmidt. June 1999. *Functional Literacy and Labor Market Outcomes*. Available online at:

www.dol.gov/asp/programs/history/herman/reports/futurework/conference/nalsfina/nalsfina.htm

³ Andersson, Fredrik, Harry J. Holzer, and Julia I. Lane. July 2003. *Worker Advancement in the Low-Wage Labor Market: The Importance of Good Jobs*. Longitudinal Employer- Household Dynamics: U.S. Census Bureau.

⁴ Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics Program. 2002. *LEHD Fact Sheet: Low Wage Work*. U.S. Census Bureau.

⁵ Kim, Marlene. September 2000. *Women Paid Low Wages: Who They Are and Where They Work*. Monthly Labor Review 26-30.

⁶ Campbell, N.D. and M.D. Greenburger. 1995. "Affirmative Action: Under Attack." *National Women's Law Center Update* (Spring/Summer).

⁷ Kim, Marlene. September 2000. *Women Paid Low Wages: Who They Are and Where They Work*. Monthly Labor Review 26-30.

⁸ Rice, Joy K. 2001. "Poverty, Welfare, and Patriarchy: How Macro-Level Changes in Social Policy Can Help Low-Income Women." *Journal of Social Issues* 57:2.

⁹ Rice, Joy K. 2001. "Poverty, Welfare, and Patriarchy: How Macro-Level Changes in Social Policy Can Help Low-Income Women." *Journal of Social Issues* 57:2.

¹⁰ Presser, H.B., and A.G. Cox. 1997. "The Work Schedules of Low-Educated American Women and Welfare Reform. Part 1." *Monthly Labor Review* 120 (4):25-28.

¹¹ Lerman, Robert I. and Stefanie R. Schmidt. June 1999. *Functional Literacy and Labor Market Outcomes*. Available online at:

www.dol.gov/asp/programs/history/herman/reports/futurework/conference/nalsfina/nalsfina.htm

¹² Kim, Marlene. September 2000. *Women Paid Low Wages: Who They Are and Where They Work*. Monthly Labor Review 26-30.

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- ¹³ U.S. Census Bureau. March 2003. *Women and Men in the United States: March 2002*. Current Population Reports by: Renee E. Spraggins.
- ¹⁴ Fairness Initiative on Low-Wage Work. Available online at: <http://www.lowwagework.org/facts.htm>
- ¹⁵ Fairness Initiative on Low-Wage Work. Available online at: <http://www.lowwagework.org/facts.htm>
- ¹⁶ Kim, Marlene. September 2000. *Women Paid Low Wages: Who They Are and Where They Work*. Monthly Labor Review 26-30.
- ¹⁷ Kim, Marlene. September 2000. *Women Paid Low Wages: Who They Are and Where They Work*. Monthly Labor Review 26-30.
- ¹⁸ U.S. Census Bureau. March 2003. *Women and Men in the United States: March 2002*. Current Population Reports by: Renee E. Spraggins.
- ¹⁹ Friends Committee on National Legislation. June 2000. *Women and Poverty: Gender-based Economic Inequality and Its Causes*. FCNL Perspectives.
- ²⁰ Caiazza, Amy, April Shaw, and Misha Werschukul. 2004. *Women's Economic Status in the States: Wide Disparities by Race, Ethnicity, and Region*. Prepared for the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR).
- ²¹ NOW with Bill Moyers: Politics and Economy, Downward Mobility. Available online at: <http://www.pbs.org/now/politics/wagesqanda.html>
- ²² Fairness Initiative on Low-Wage Work. Available online at: <http://www.lowwagework.org/facts.htm>
- ²³ Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics Program. 2002. *LEHD Fact Sheet: Low Wage Work*. U.S. Census Bureau.
- ²⁴ Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics Program. 2002. *LEHD Fact Sheet: Low Wage Work*. U.S. Census Bureau.
- ²⁵ Kim, Marlene. September 2000. *Women Paid Low Wages: Who They Are and Where They Work*. Monthly Labor Review 26-30.
- ²⁶ Kim, Marlene. September 2000. *Women Paid Low Wages: Who They Are and Where They Work*. Monthly Labor Review 26-30.
- ²⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. March 2003. *Women and Men in the United States: March 2002*. Current Population Reports by: Renee E. Spraggins.
- ²⁸ Fairness Initiative on Low-Wage Work. Available online at: <http://www.lowwagework.org/facts.htm>
- ²⁹ Fairness Initiative on Low-Wage Work. Available online at: <http://www.lowwagework.org/facts.htm>
- ³⁰ NOW with Bill Moyers: Politics and Economy, Downward Mobility. Available online at: <http://www.pbs.org/now/politics/wagesqanda.html>
- ³¹ Kim, Marlene. September 2000. *Women Paid Low Wages: Who They Are and Where They Work*. Monthly Labor Review 26-30.
- ³² U.S. Census Bureau. 2003. U.S. Census Bureau Public Information Office. Available online at: <http://www.census.gov/pubinfo/www/multimedia/WomensHistory.html>