



The Urgent Need to Support Women Workers on the Lower Rungs of the Labor Market

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One of the most difficult challenges facing the nation today is rapidly growing income inequality, including growing economic gaps among women. Although much progress has been made toward ensuring equal rights for women and improving their situation in workplaces and society at large, highly educated women in professional and managerial occupations have benefitted disproportionately. Often left behind and forgotten are the majority of women working in less privileged sectors of the economy – especially women of color and immigrants, but also non-college educated white women born in the United States. Many of these working women are the sole or major wage-earners for their families.

Lagging wages and tough working conditions for most Americans are problems that have been growing for decades, and there are no quick fixes. But local, state and federal governments could take two immediate steps to deliver important benefits that would make an immediate difference for millions of workers, especially women, stuck at the lower levels of the labor market.

First, **paid family leave and paid sick leave can be extended to all workers**, including those employed at small businesses. Most managers and professionals at large firms already have access to these forms of paid leave – which allow workers to continue to hold their positions and receive much needed basic wages when they are sick or need to care for newborns or sick or disabled family members. But many women struggling with family responsibilities while working in white-collar and blue-collar jobs do not have paid leave rights. California, New Jersey and Rhode Island have created state-level paid family leave programs; Connecticut, California and many cities, including major metropolises like New York and San Francisco, have legislated paid sick days programs. These make a real difference in women's lives, and should be extended nationwide.

Recent polls suggest paid leave measures have broad public support from conservatives and liberals alike. One piece of model legislation is the proposed federal FAMILY Act (see <http://www.nationalpartnership.org/research-library/work-family/paid-leave/family-act-fact-sheet.pdf>), which would create a universal paid family and medical leave program and deserves immediate passage. This would be a vast improvement on the existing federal law, the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act, which requires that workers be granted only unpaid leaves and exempts far too many employers from even this minimal requirement.

A **higher minimum wage** is another very popular step that would immediately improve economic prospects for many working women stuck at the bottom of the labor market, helping their families and communities in the process. Right now, the U.S. federal minimum wage is only \$7.25 per hour, the same level as half a century ago once inflation is taken into account. Women in the paid labor force are hurt disproportionately by low wages, because they still earn far less than male workers do. Laws that significantly raise the minimum wage

can be passed by states and cities even when the U.S. Congress will not act – and women workers and the families that depend on them will reap the greatest benefits. Last spring, Seattle demonstrated the right way forward by raising the minimum wage to \$15 an hour.

Much needs to be done to improve the economic prospects of America's working women, especially the vast majority who work in everyday jobs without the generous benefits and salaries that many professional and managerial women can claim. The two steps outlined here are not enough – but they would be an excellent beginning.