



Professional Women: A Gendered Look at Inequality in the U.S. Workforce

This fact sheet analyzes the state of women in the professional workforce. It is divided into two parts: Identifying Barriers and Crafting Solutions.

Part I identifies and overviews the problems that professional women currently face in the U.S. workforce. This fact sheet will primarily focus on wage inequality, but will also touch on issues like biases in academia, the cost of childcare, inadequate family leave policies, and pay secrecy.

Part II focuses on solutions to closing the wage gap and the various other issues that prevent women from achieving equality at work. At the individual level, women can make gains at closing the wage gap by joining or forming a union, as the gap among union members is much narrower than among non-union professionals. To achieve systematic change, legislation at the state and federal levels must be enacted to allow women to have the same ability to join the workforce as men and to prevent pay discrimination.

Women made great progress towards equality in the workplace during the last century, signaling the problems of this century can be overcome.

Part I: Identifying Barriers

A Historical Perspective of Women at Work

The number of women (single, married, childless, or mothers) who work has undergone a dramatic shift in the last 100 years. At the beginning of the 20th century, only about one fifth of women worked. Today, the majority of women are in the workforce.

- The number of working women in the United States has risen from 5.1 million in 1900, to 18.4 million in 1950, to 73.5 million in 2015.¹
- Women accounted for 18 percent of the labor force in 1900 and 47 percent in 2015.²
- While in 1900 only 20.4 percent of all women worked, in 2015 about 57 percent of women were in the labor force.³
- In 2015, women made up the majority, 51.5 percent, of workers in management, professional, and related occupations.⁴
- However, women only hold 4.4 percent of CEO positions at S&P 500 companies.⁵
- Labor force participation has increased most dramatically among married women—with 68 percent in the labor force.⁶
- Most mothers, even those with young children, participate in the labor force.⁷ In 2015, 64 percent of mothers with children under the age of six were in the workforce. Most of them worked full-time.⁸ Among all mothers with children under 18, 71 percent were in the labor force.⁹ In the professional workforce, 39 percent of female workers had children under 18.¹⁰

- A little over half of all multiple job holders in 2015 were women, up from 22 percent in 1974. Women are the majority (64 percent) of temporary and part-time workers.¹¹

Occupational Distribution Differs Between Men and Women

Although women constitute the majority of professional employees, their occupational distribution remains concentrated in jobs traditionally held by women, while they struggle to establish a foothold in male dominated fields, like engineering and computer science.

- In 2015, 75 percent of healthcare practitioner and technical occupations and 73 percent of education, training, and library occupations were held by women.¹²
- In comparison, women filled only 25 percent of computer and mathematical occupations, and 15 percent of architecture and engineering occupations in 2015.¹³

Still, the different distribution of men and women among specific professional occupations was less pronounced in 2015 than 30 years prior.

- The percentage of technical writers who were female increased from 36 percent to 58 percent between 1985 and 2015.¹⁴
- Women pharmacists increased from 17 percent in 1985 to 57 percent in 2015.¹⁵
- The percentage of female chemists increased from 21 percent in 1985 to 36 percent in 2015.¹⁶

Women and Education: Leaping the Gap

Women have made significant strides in closing the education gap but remain underrepresented in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. STEM jobs tend to be higher paying than many other professional occupations.

- Women have been earning more bachelor's degrees than men since 1982 and they have been earning more master's degrees than men since 1987.¹⁷ Women received 57 percent of bachelor's degrees in the 2013–2014 academic year.¹⁸
- Women earned 52 percent of all doctoral degrees in academic year 2013–14, while in 1971 they earned only 10.6 percent of all doctoral degrees.¹⁹
- The proportion of women in law school increased from 4.2 percent in 1963–64 to 47 percent in academic year 2012–13.²⁰
- In 2016, women were 48 percent of all students enrolled in medical school.²¹
- “Women make up almost exactly half of all recent STEM graduates. But they make up less than a quarter of all graduates in the 20 highest-paying STEM fields, and more than two-thirds of graduates in the 20 lowest-paying majors.”²²
- Men and women remain segregated by college major, with women making up nearly 80 percent of education majors and men making up 80 percent of engineering majors. The support and opportunity for women to pursue careers in STEM fields are important for achieving pay equity. In science and engineering, for example, women are still paid less than men but tend to earn more than similarly educated women in other sectors of the workforce.²³

- Studies have shown that there is bias against women in the STEM fields—hiring decisions for lab positions, selection for mathematical tasks, evaluation of research abstracts for conferences, research citations, invitations to speak at symposia, postdoctoral employment and tenure decisions all disfavor women.²⁴
- To further enforce this point, a study by science researchers at Yale, found that there is a “pervasive” discrimination towards female undergraduates in the science fields. The study found that science professors in American universities widely regard female undergraduates as less competent than their male counterparts with the same accomplishments and skills. The report found that professors were less likely to offer women mentoring or employment; and if they were offered a job, the salary was lower.²⁵
 - Women accounted for only 14 percent of all physics professors in the country, which is an example of how the problem becomes compounded, and hold just 20 percent of physics Ph.D.’s in the U.S.²⁶
- More troubling, another study found that male STEM professors are less likely to believe the body of research showing there is systematic biases against women in STEM. Men make up 71 percent of STEM faculty.²⁷

The Gender Wage Gap Persists

The gender wage gap still plagues the American workforce. In 2015, women working full-time wage and salary jobs earned only 81 percent of what men earned.²⁸ The gap has persisted over the years, despite the fact that women are currently earning the majority of college degrees.²⁹ The gender wage gap has high costs for women over the course of their careers. The average college educated woman loses almost \$800,000 in wages over her lifetime.³⁰

- In 2015, men’s median earnings were \$51, 212 while women’s median earnings were \$40,742.³¹

For most minority women, the earnings gap compared to white men was even larger. In 2015:

- African American women earned 67 percent of what white men earned.
- Hispanic women earned 62 percent of what white men earned.

When minority women’s earnings are compared to minority men’s, the gap is not as wide. However minority women reaching parity with minority men is not equality as Black men make 76 percent of what White men make and Hispanic men earn 69 percent of what White men earn.³²

- African American women earned 90 cents for every dollar earned by Black men.
- Hispanic and Latina women earned 90 cents for every dollar Hispanic or Latino men earned.
- Asian American women earned only 78 percent as much as Asian American men.³³

Equal pay remains a problem in every occupational category. In 2014, a number of professions showed a significant gap.

- While women comprised 55 percent of workers in professional and related occupations, they earned 28 percent less than their male counterparts.
- Female elementary and middle school teachers earned 11 percent less than similarly employed men, despite comprising approximately 81 percent of the field.
- Female postsecondary teachers earned about 19 percent less than equivalent men.
- Female physicians and surgeons earned 20 percent less than their male counterparts.
- Female lawyers earned almost 10 percent less than male lawyers.³⁴

Progress has slowed on closing the wage gap.

- In the last 25 years, progress made on closing the wage gap has only amounted to about 10 cents—in 1990 women made 70 cents for every dollar men made and in 2015 women made 80 cents for every dollar men made.³⁵
- In the 1980s, the wage gap narrowed by nine cents.³⁶

Earlier in their career the pay gap is smaller for women than later in their career.

- In 2014, women who were 25 to 34 made 90 percent of what men made, while women 35 to 44 only made 81 percent of what men of their age made.³⁷
- The difference in the pay gap at different points in women’s careers is mainly due to the effects of childbirth and marriage.³⁸

New research suggests that women are paid less because their work is valued less than men’s work.

- A study analyzing Census data from 1950 through 2000 found that when the number of women increase in an occupation, the pay for those jobs decreases—even when controlling for education, work experience, skills, race and geography.³⁹
- The findings suggest that as more women go into historically male-dominated professions, the pay will drop.
 - When more women became biologists, wages fell by 18 percent.⁴⁰
- The study also found that the reverse was true—when an occupation attracted more men, wages went up.⁴¹
 - Computer programming is a great example of this trend. Previously it was a job done by primarily women—now it’s 79 percent men and pays much better.^{42 43}

Women also earn less at every level of education. For full-time workers age 25 and older in 2015:

- Women without a high school diploma earned \$418 in median weekly wages, while men earned \$520.
- Women with a bachelor’s degree or higher earned \$1230, while men with a comparable education earned \$1420.⁴⁴

- A 2011 report by the American Association of University Women found that women who attended highly selective colleges earn less than men from either highly or moderately selective colleges, and about the same as men from minimally selective colleges.⁴⁵

The Gender Wage Gap Costs Working Families

The disparity between the pay of men and women has a negative impact on working families.

- “More than 12 million families with children rely primarily on women’s earnings.”⁴⁶
- Over a third of mothers in working families in every state, except Wyoming and Utah, are the family’s primary breadwinner, either as single working mothers, or by providing at least half of a family’s earnings.⁴⁷
- The gender wage gap took on added importance as men were more likely than women to lose jobs during the last recession. This drop in male employment forced millions of families to rely mainly on a woman’s paycheck to make ends meet. During the economic downturn, the persistent gender pay gap further stressed working families, as it cost U.S. women \$200 billion annually.⁴⁸
- The overall labor force participation rate of mothers with children younger than 18 was 69.9 percent in 2015.⁴⁹ The labor force participation rate of single mothers was 74.8 percent in 2015.⁵⁰
- In 2014, over 27 percent of children lived with only one parent (up from 12 percent in 1970), with about 82.5 percent of these children living with their mothers. The poverty rate of custodial mothers was 31 percent in 2014, while poverty rate for custodial fathers was 17 percent.⁵¹
- In 2015, among Black single mothers, approximately 35.2 percent were below the poverty line, compared to 25.4 percent of White single mothers.⁵²
- A report by the AFL-CIO and the Institute for Women’s Policy Research found that if the wage gap were eliminated, the income of single women would rise 13.4 percent, single mothers would earn 17 percent more, and married women would earn six percent more. These increases would lead to reductions in poverty of 84 percent for single women, 50 percent for single mothers, and 62 percent for married women.⁵³

The Gender Wage Gap Significantly Affects Retirement Benefits

The gender wage gap has important long-term consequences. Although women are the majority of beneficiaries of Social Security and other retirement benefits, in general they receive lower benefits than their male counterparts.

- Women represented 56 percent of all Social Security beneficiaries age 62 and older and approximately 66 percent of beneficiaries age 85 and older in 2014.⁵⁴ While Social Security does not discriminate based on gender, historical lower income affects women’s benefits.
- In 2014, the average annual Social Security income received by women 65 years and older was \$13,150, compared to \$17,106 for men.⁵⁵

- “In 2014, for unmarried women – including widows – age 65 and older, Social Security comprised 47 percent of their total income, while it comprised only 34 percent of unmarried men’s total income.”⁵⁶
- Elderly women are less likely than elderly men to have significant family income from pensions other than Social Security. For 30 percent of women beneficiaries 65 or older Social Security is virtually their only source of income but only 25 percent for men.⁵⁷
- Among people 65 and older, 12.1 percent of women were living in poverty, while only and 7.4 percent of men were living in poverty in 2014.⁵⁸
- The American Association of Retired Persons estimates that unmarried women received approximately \$8,000 less in annual retirement income than their male counterparts. Two-thirds of this disparity is directly attributable to the wage gap and employment segregation.⁵⁹

Pay Secrecy

Over the past fifteen years, several states have adopted pay secrecy legislation that prohibits or discourages employees from any discussion of their pay with colleagues. This legislation helps to perpetuate gender pay disparities.

- Slightly more than half of all workers (51 percent of women and 47 percent of men) report that the discussion of wage and salary information is either discouraged or prohibited and could lead to punishment. This number is highest in the private sector, where 62 percent of women say that their wage and salary information is secret.⁶⁰
- In April 2014, President Barack Obama issued an executive order that prohibits any federal contractor, subcontractor, or federally assisted construction contractors from discharging an employee for discussing pay with another employee. In addition, Section 7 of the NLRA covers non-supervisory employees from employer retaliation when they discuss wages or working conditions with their colleagues as part of a concerted activity to improve working conditions.⁶¹
- In the 1982 and 1985, Michigan and California enacted “anti-pay secrecy laws.” Then, between 2000 and 2015 ten additional states, including Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Louisiana, Maine, Minnesota, Oregon, New Jersey, Vermont, and New Hampshire enacted similar legislation.⁶² Anti-pay secrecy laws prohibit employers from disciplining employees who discuss their pay with colleagues.

Additional Barriers for Working Women

Working women also face other barriers that are not strictly related to pay. These obstacles can contribute to inequality in the workplace—including the wage gap—as well as generally disadvantage women.

The Price of Childcare

In the U.S., childcare can be prohibitively expensive. The average cost of childcare at a daycare center or nursery school exceeds 24 percent of the median income for single parents. For a married couple, the average cost is between seven percent and 16 percent of the median income in their state.⁶³ The high cost of childcare tends to take women out of the workforce. For parents who work, breakdowns in childcare cause parents to miss more days of work. Women who leave

the workforce to take care of children miss out on not only the salary they would have earned if they continued working but also wage growth—not to mention lost retirement assets and benefits.⁶⁴

- The availability of affordable childcare can have a large impact on women’s choices regarding work. The annual cost of full-time care can range from \$4,822 to \$17,062 for an infant-based care center, and the annual cost for a four year-old ranges from \$3,997 to \$12,781.
 - Though, the cost of childcare for an infant in Washington, D.C. at a daycare center for a year is \$22,658.⁶⁵
- In the U.S., about 60 percent of childcare is paid for by the parents.⁶⁶
- For households in the Northeast and Midwest, center-based care for two children is the single highest household expense. In the West and the South, child care costs are the biggest expense after housing costs.⁶⁷
- 45 percent of parents were absent from work at least once during a six month period due to child care breakdown—one average they missed 4.3 days.⁶⁸
- It’s estimated that U.S. businesses lose \$4.4 billion annually because of child care breakdowns.⁶⁹
- A 26-year-old woman who was making \$44,000 and took five years off to take care of a child would lose over a half a million dollars in income.⁷⁰
- Investment in childcare support programs would help boost women’s participation in the labor force—as seen in other countries—and, in turn, could boost the GDP of the U.S. by \$600 billion annually.⁷¹
- Increased participation in the labor force by women could help close the gender wage gap.⁷²
- The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) consists of 34 high-income countries and provides an international platform to compare economic and policy experiences, seek answers to common problems, and coordinate international efforts. The U.S. ranks 37th of 40 OECD countries on public expenditures on early childhood education and care.

Inadequate Family Leave, Sick Leave, and Paid Time Off

Inadequate paid leave in the U.S. particularly hurts women, especially lack of paid leave after the birth of a child.

- The U.S. is the only OECD country to not require paid leave for new parents—all other countries require at least around two months of paid leave.⁷³
- A study out of Rutgers University, found that women in New Jersey who used paid family leave were far more likely than those who did not to be working nine months to a year after their child was born.⁷⁴
- A report published by the Human Rights Watch that interviewed 64 parents from across the U.S., found that those with little or no paid leave after having or adopting a child tended to have health problems and often delayed their child’s immunizations. A number

of those who chose to take unpaid leave would go into debt. Some of the women surveyed reported that their career was hurt due to their employer's bias against working mothers.⁷⁵

- Unlike other high-income countries, the U.S. does not guarantee workers paid sick leave.⁷⁶
- About 40 million private-sector employees do not have paid sick time.⁷⁷
- Workers without paid sick time tend to do to work sick, being less productive, which costs both them and their employer.⁷⁸
- Missing three and a half days of work due to being sick is equal to the cost of a month of groceries for an average family.⁷⁹
- Paid sick leave increases workers' ability to keep their jobs. Workers who have paid sick leave are eight percent more likely to stay in their job for five months.⁸⁰
- The U.S. only has 10 federal holidays, which not all employees in the U.S. receive off.⁸¹
- Women are more likely to work part-time—often because they have no other choice—and most part-time positions receive little or no paid vacation or sick days.⁸²

Part II: Crafting Solutions

Women and the Union Advantage

On average, union members have higher pay and better benefits than non-union members. The wage gap between union men and women is narrower than the wage gap among non-union men and women. Joining or forming a union is a step women can take at the individual level to increase wage equality.

- Women who are members of a union make 91 percent of what men in unions make, while non-union female workers only make 80 percent of what non-union male workers make.⁸³
- In 2015, union women earned weekly wages that were 33 percent more than non-union women.
- The union difference is apparent in the median hourly wages of predominantly female occupations. Union preschool and kindergarten teachers earned 96 percent more than their non-union counterparts, while for elementary and middle school teachers, the union members earned 39 percent more. For registered nurses, union members earned 21 percent more than non-union nurses.
- Union women and men are more likely than non-union workers to have health and pension benefits, and to receive paid holidays and vacations, and life and disability insurance.
- In 2015, 10.6 percent of working women were union members.⁸⁴
- In 2015, 46 percent of all union members were women, up from 19 percent in 1962.⁸⁵ The union membership gap between men and women has narrowed considerably since 1986, when the union membership rate for men was about 32 percentage points higher than the rate for women.⁸⁶ Women are projected to surpass men and become the majority of union members by 2025.⁸⁷

- Among professional and related occupations, 16.8 percent were union members. Women made up 66 percent of union members in professional and related occupations.^{88 89}
- Education professions, most of which are majority female, consistently have some of the highest unionization rates.⁹⁰ In 2015, among elementary and middle school teachers, 48.5 percent were union members and 78 percent of those members were women. In union organizing elections, majority-female occupations have consistently shown much higher win rates than organizing drives in industries with fewer women members.^{91 92}

African American and Hispanic and Latina women also benefit from union membership:

- The median weekly earnings of African American union women were 31 percent more than their non-union counterparts.⁹³
- Hispanic and Latina women who were union members had median weekly earnings that were 44 percent higher than their non-union counterparts.⁹⁴

Public Policy

Legislation should be part of the conversation when considering ways to achieve equality for working women. A variety of issues that contribute to the wage gap by preventing women from staying in the workforce and having equal opportunities at work could be solved with legislation.

Guaranteeing Paid Sick Leave

- In 2007, San Francisco implemented a law that allows all workers to earn and use paid sick days. The Institute for Women’s Policy Research surveyed workers in San Francisco after the law went into effect and found that half of all workers reported some sort of benefit from the policy. Parents surveyed were less likely to send a sick child to school and 86 percent of employers said there was not a negative effect on profitability due to the policy.⁹⁵
- Paid sick days can prevent workers from putting their families’ health and financial security at risk every time someone in the family is sick, reduce the spread of sicknesses, and decrease health care costs by reducing emergency room visits.⁹⁶
- The vast majority of voters support paid sick days for workers.⁹⁷
- Four states—Connecticut, California, Massachusetts, and Oregon—have statewide paid sick leave laws currently in effect. In 2016, Washington, Arizona, and Vermont passed sick days laws. A number of cities, including New York City, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia also have paid sick leave laws.⁹⁸
- Studies of the effects of paid sick leave laws in New York City, Connecticut, and Washington, D.C. have found positive results. In New York City, the unemployment rate was down, private sector business grew, and prices for consumers fell. In Connecticut, employment increased in sectors most affected by the law. In Washington, D.C., an audit of the law showed it did not harm business.⁹⁹
- A 2010 report on federal legislation (Healthy Families Act) that would have expanded paid sick leave found that 13.3 million women workers would have benefited from the bill by being able to accrue paid sick leave.¹⁰⁰

Mandating Paid Family Leave

- California, New Jersey, and Rhode Island have paid family leave laws in place. New York passed paid family leave in 2016, but the law does not go into effect until 2018. Washington, D.C. has also passed paid family leave.¹⁰¹
- According to economists, paid family leave allows more workers to take time off—specifically benefiting poor parents. Mothers who might have dropped out of the workforce after having a child are more likely to come back to work if they have paid family leave.¹⁰²
- A study of California’s paid leave law found mothers who took leave were six percent more likely to be employed a year later than those who did not take leave.¹⁰³
- A study of New Jersey’s paid leave law found that, in the year after having a child, mothers who took paid leave were less likely to be on food stamps or to receive public aid.¹⁰⁴
- Women who took paid leave worked more hours two years after their child was born and had higher hourly wages.¹⁰⁵
- A 2012 poll found that 75 percent of respondents viewed New Jersey’s paid leave law favorably.¹⁰⁶

Making Child Care Affordable

- Using subsidies to cut the cost of child care down to 10 percent of family income increases overall family income. Doing this has the potential to increase GDP by around \$210 billion due to an increase in women’s participation in the workforce.¹⁰⁷
- A study looking at child care in Quebec found that every one percent increase in subsidies increased the percent of mothers in the workforce by .24 percent.¹⁰⁸
- Decreasing the cost of childcare by 10 percent would increase the employment rate for single women by two percent and married women by 10 percent.¹⁰⁹
- The employment rate among mothers would increase by up to 10 percent if early-childhood education was funded entirely by the government.¹¹⁰

Strengthening Equal Pay Laws

- Research has found that part of the wage gap can be explained by factors such as men and women working in different occupations and women working fewer hours, but there is a portion of the wage gap that cannot be explained. One conclusion is that this unexplained portion is due to wage discrimination.^{111 112}
- Since the Equal Pay Act was signed in 1963—requiring men and women be paid equally for equal work—the wage gap has narrowed by 22 cents.¹¹³
- Overtime, the Equal Pay Act’s protections have been weakened. One example of this is broad interpretation by the courts of employers’ defenses outlined in law, which has made it easier for employers to claim that employees received different pay for a reason other than sex, allowing them to avoid liability for sex discrimination. Also, the Equal Pay Act does not specifically address pay transparency or pay secrecy.¹¹⁴

- The Paycheck Fairness Act, or similar legislation, would strengthen the Equal Pay Act.¹¹⁵
 - The act would allow those who are discriminated against to sue for full compensatory and punitive damages. This would impose a real consequence on employers who discriminated based on sex.
 - It would let class actions be brought under the current federal rule, where those who were damaged are automatically considered as part of the class.
 - The Paycheck Fairness Act also has an anti-pay secrecy component, preventing employers from retaliating against employees for sharing salary information.
 - It would close a loophole to ensure that employers demonstrate that a difference in pay between men and women is actually caused by something other than sex.
 - The act would also clarify what salary comparisons can be made when examining whether an employer is paying employees different salaries for the same work.
 - Another component of the act is to strengthen the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) by improving how it collects compensation data.
 - Additionally, it would require employment data to be collected and analyzed to detect wage discrimination.

Conclusion

Although women make up almost half the labor force they still do not receive the same treatment and opportunities as men. The wage gap—despite seeming small to some—has a large ripple effect, which impacts almost every aspect of women’s lives. The work of labor unions, fighting for better wages and benefits, makes a huge difference for working women and should be part of the solution to close the wage gap and achieve equality in the workplace. Additionally, government policies that allow women who want to participate in the labor force work and pursue the careers that interest them, is another key component of a comprehensive solution. Although the Equal Pay Act of 1963 made gains at curbing pay discrimination it still remains a problem in the U.S. and contributes to the wage gap. Legislation building on the Equal Pay Act should also be considered a necessity in solving the gender wage gap and achieving equality for women in the workplace.

For more information on professional and technical workers, check DPE’s website:
www.dpeaflcio.org.

The Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO (DPE) comprises 22 AFL-CIO unions representing over four million people working in professional and technical occupations. DPE-affiliated unions represent: teachers, college professors, and school administrators; library workers; nurses, doctors, and other health care professionals; engineers, scientists, and IT workers; journalists and writers, broadcast technicians and communications specialists; performing and visual artists; professional athletes; professional firefighters; psychologists, social workers, and many others. DPE was chartered by the AFL-CIO in 1977 in recognition of the rapidly growing professional and technical occupations.

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