



CSW 68 Gender and Poverty Brief

Women's Employment and Poverty

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Women remain globally marginalized in the labor market, and as a result, experience heightened risks of poverty. In 2018, out of the 38.1 million people living in poverty in the US, 56% or 21.4 million were women.¹ This condition has a strong correlation to women's unequal access to earning opportunities. In the US, the gender wage gap has not significantly decreased over the last two decades. Similar to their peers in some of the poorest countries, women in the US face cultural barriers to their education and pre-market skill development that heighten the risks of their underemployment, unemployment and poverty.

Most women in the US—like in other parts of the world—remain excluded from high-paying jobs. Harmful stereotypes about women's perceived lack of skills result in their disproportionate hiring in low-wage and service-oriented positions. These jobs offer no support for health and childcare and force women to quit their jobs and assume care work responsibilities at home, especially during a crisis. Quite unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened women's access to the labor market—even in the US. More women than men have faced layoffs during the health crisis, and fewer women have returned to stable jobs after the pandemic. Other conditions like race and ethnicity, age and disability exacerbate women's exclusion from employment opportunities in the US.

Fast Facts

- Women's global labor force participation rate is under 47%, which is 25% lower than men's labor force participation. In the US, although the gender gap in employment is only 11.2%,² there is no room for complacency. For the last two decades, women in the US have earned between 80% to 82% as much as men.³ This gender wage gap worsens for Black and Hispanic women,⁴ at 64% and 57% respectively.⁵
- Occupational gender segregation has decreased in the US over the last 40 years, with more women joining male-dominated sectors. But women in the US are still disproportionately hired in low-wage service-based work. Even in 'women's' jobs such as nursing, customer service, elementary and middle school teaching, the wage gap hovers between 8-26%.⁶ Consequently, the increase in women's employment has not necessarily reduced their poverty in the US.⁷
- Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 46% of US women in the labor market had a median earning of only \$10.93 per hour.⁸ In 2020, restrictions on jobs that involved face-to-face services and interaction (the ones where women are disproportionately hired) led to an increased rate of unemployment for women—12% compared to 10% for men.
- Compared to 870,000 fathers with children aged 12 years and below in the US, 2.2 million mothers⁹ reported job losses during the pandemic due to childcare responsibilities.

Recommendations

- 1) Strictly **enforce current equal pay legislation** and ensure that regular offenders are penalized.
- 2) Develop mandatory and effective **gender sensitization programs for all employees** across sectors. With sex-disaggregated data, measure and monitor the impact of these programs at regular intervals, and modify their structure as needed.
- 3) Offer **skill development and retraining opportunities** to women, especially women of color, poor women, disabled women, elderly women, immigrant women and those facing other forms of intersectional marginality, to facilitate their access to secure jobs *even in technical and managerial sectors*.
- 4) Provide **care-work support** to women workers, so that they are not forced to quit their jobs to take care of their children and other family members.
- 5) Promote **women's leadership in labor unions** and other employee organizations, so that gendered discrimination in the workplace receives adequate attention in collective bargaining.

Resources

Center for American Progress. 2021. [Women of Color and the Wage Gap](#).

US Department of Labor. 2023. [Readout: US Department of Labor Report Finds Stark Gender, Age-Based Pay Inequalities for Older Women Whose Share of the Labor Force has Increased](#).

US Department of Labor. [Women's Bureau: Data and Statistics](#)

International Labor Organization. [ILO and Gender Equality](#).

Gaëlle Ferrant et al. OECD Development Center. 2014. [Unpaid Care Work: The Missing Link in the Analysis of Gender Gaps in Labor Outcomes](#).

¹ American Progress. 2020. [The Basic Facts about Women in Poverty](#).

² International Labor Organization. 2022. [The Gender Gap in Employment: What's Holding Women Back?](#)

³ Pew Research Center. 2023. [Gender Pay Gap in US Hasn't Changed Much in Two Decades](#).

⁴ US Department of Labor. 2023. [5 Fast Fact: The Gender Wage Gap](#).

⁵ American Progress. 2021. [Women of Color and the Wage Gap](#).

⁶ AAUW. 2018. [The Simple Truth about the Gender Pay Gap](#).

⁷ Nieuwenhuis, Rense et al. 2019. [Trends in Women's Employment and Poverty Rates in OECD Countries](#).

⁸ Brookings. 2020. [Why Has Covid-19 Been Especially Harmful for Working Women?](#)

⁹ Ibid.