



WOMEN WORK!

The National Network for Women's Employment

Public Policy Priorities

2009

As the nation works its way out of an economic crisis, public policies become all the more important for steering us toward recovery and growth. Policies that strengthen the American workforce, encourage innovation, and support struggling families are an investment that we must make in our future. Given women's vital role in the workforce, their economic security figures prominently into the economic success of our country and must be supported. In 2009, Women Work! will fight for policies that bolster the economic security of women and their families.

ECONOMIC RECOVERY THAT INCLUDES WOMEN

A broad economic recovery effort is needed to end the ongoing recession, but it must benefit all Americans. Women are a vital part of today's economy, and in many cases are the sole providers for their families. **Federally-funded economic recovery projects present a unique opportunity to end women's near-exclusion from high-paying, traditionally "male" fields – a condition that contributes to women's disproportionately high levels of poverty – by ensuring women's access to jobs created in these fields.** To achieve this, strong enforcement of nondiscrimination laws and the advancement of other gender equity provisions are needed.

Another essential component of economic recovery is Unemployment Insurance modernization, which Congress should fund to help states expand coverage to low-wage and part-time workers – most of whom are women. Federal aid should also be used to bolster safety net programs that provide vital services to disadvantaged populations, including female-headed families. Dollars spent on Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF), nutrition and energy assistance, and child care, to name a few examples, will support women at work and be quickly channeled back into the economy.

60 percent of working women earn half or more of their families' incomes.

- U.S. Census Bureau

AN INNOVATIVE, EQUITABLE WORKFORCE INVESTMENT SYSTEM

America's workforce is facing serious challenges: unemployment is on the rise, while employers report a lack of skilled workers. The national workforce investment system should be better utilized to connect workers and employers while promoting innovation and equity.

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) has not met its commitment to prepare women for today's workforce. In recent years, the share of low-income individuals and single parents participating in the workforce investment system has declined steadily. WIA reauthorization should prioritize services for those most in need of assistance and include accountability for moving women and families toward economic self-sufficiency. In addition, Congress should:

- **Actively provide opportunities for women to train for traditionally "male" occupations** that typically offer wages that are 20 to 30 percent higher than traditionally "female" jobs.
- **Ensure that all job seekers have access to child care, transportation, and other support services** that help workers complete training and obtain and retain jobs.

Nearly 15 million women in the U.S. earn less than \$25,000 a year despite working in full-time, year-round jobs.

- U.S. Census Bureau

Women Work! supports demand-driven sectoral initiatives and other innovative collaborative partnerships, which have had success in preparing low-income individuals for careers in high-paying fields that offer benefits and career ladders. But the implementation of such strategies must be gender-responsive to ensure that women have fair access to the resulting opportunities. To date, sector strategies have focused largely on male-dominated industries that have built-in barriers to the participation of women.

(cont'd) For this reason, a gender-responsive approach is needed to allow women, particularly low-income women, to share in the gains created by these programs. **Federally-funded sector initiatives should actively promote gender equity by educating employers, actively recruiting and training women for high-paying jobs – such as those in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) and green fields – and requiring performance measures that disaggregate gender so achievements in equity can be evaluated.**

COMPREHENSIVE PAY EQUITY LEGISLATION

Women earned 78 cents to the man's dollar in 2007; much of this wage gap can be traced to gender discrimination. Women Work! applauds Congress for passing the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act and urges them to follow with the Paycheck Fairness Act in order to strengthen women's remedies for pay discrimination.

SUPPORTS FOR WORKING FAMILIES

No one should be forced to choose between caring for their family and keeping their job. Women in particular are likely to juggle the dual roles of worker and primary caretaker. To ensure that individuals can balance work and family without jeopardizing economic security, Women Work! advocates for:

- **Access to quality child care.** Lack of quality child care is a serious barrier to employment for millions of women. With the cost of care for one child reaching up to \$13,000 a year, federal funding must be increased for child care assistance, campus-based child care, and Head Start.
- **Expanded Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA).** Working parents rely on FMLA to care for themselves and their families without losing their jobs – but the current law is too limited and should be expanded to cover all workers.
- **Paid sick days for all workers.** Women Work! urges Congress to pass the Healthy Families Act to provide at least seven days of paid sick leave per year.

84 percent of service providers in the Women Work! network said that the lack of quality child care “very often” or “often” prevents their clients from finding and retaining family-supporting employment.

ACCESS TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Higher education typically leads to increased earnings and employment stability, but for many women this road to economic self-sufficiency is out of reach because of high tuition and attendance costs. We urge Congress to aid low-income students by fully funding the following critical programs:

- **Increased maximum Pell Grants and expanded access for year-round students**, as authorized by the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA).
- **Also authorized by HEOA, innovative pilot programs that promote access to and success in higher education** will allow more nontraditional students (such as part-time and parenting students) to complete their programs of study.
- **The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act** is an essential funding stream for the nation's community colleges and high schools to prepare students for high-skill, high-demand technical and vocational careers.

Finally, Women Work! calls for expanded education and training opportunities for TANF recipients, including the removal of restrictive time limits on education.

Women Work! The National Network for Women's Employment is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that advances economic justice and equality for women. Since 1978, the Network has assisted millions of women to successfully enter, re-enter and advance in the workforce. By supporting, advocating, and increasing women's economic self-sufficiency, Women Work! members strengthen families and communities.