



OXFAM RESEARCH REPORT

UNDervalUED AND UNDERPAID IN AMERICA

THE DECK IS STACKED AGAINST MILLIONS OF WORKING WOMEN

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METHODOLOGY

This report is an executive summary of a longer report from Oxfam and the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR). Oxfam commissioned IWPR to research nine indicators of low-wage women’s work in the US: employment and growth; race and ethnicity; wages; poverty; educational attainment; age; parenthood and marital status; part-time scheduling; and social assistance program use.

The research draws on data from the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement dataset, produced by the Census Bureau, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Employment Projections 2014 – 2024 dataset.

For a more detailed methodology, including a complete list of these 22 occupations, their definitions, and examples of job titles within the occupations, see the report and the appendices on the IWPR site.¹

UNDervalUED AND UNDERPAID IN AMERICA

The deck is stacked against millions of working women in the US, as the rapid growth of low-wage, female-dominated jobs casts a shadow on the future of work.

Millions of people in the US work in jobs that offer few rewards and demand a great deal. These jobs pay low wages, provide scant benefits, impose irregular hours, and take a toll on physical and emotional health.

Most of these workers are women. The gender segregation of the workforce (in the US and globally) has meant, in general, that women are concentrated in jobs that pay lower wages.

The bad news is that it's getting worse for women. In the next decade, low-wage women's jobs will increase at one and a half times the rate of all other jobs.² Even more women will be faced with the need to take jobs that undervalue their education and skills, undercompensate their contributions, and exact heavy physical and emotional costs.

This study explores the millions of low-wage jobs where women are concentrated. These "low-wage women's" jobs meet four criteria: most workers are women; the median wage is under \$15 an hour; at least 100,000 women do the job; and the number of jobs will grow in the next 20 years.³

Many of these jobs involve tasks historically considered "women's work." These workers are cooking, cleaning, serving, and caring for people (children, the elderly, and the infirm), and playing support roles in offices and businesses.

We found 22 low-wage women's work jobs; of the 23.5 million workers doing these jobs, 81 percent are women (19 million). And they are a big segment of the larger workforce: they account for over a quarter of all women's employment, and 64 percent of women's low-wage employment.⁴

The gender disparity is clear, and profound. Men with similar skills and education have much higher odds of landing better jobs: jobs that pay more and offer opportunities. Moreover, even when men do take jobs considered "women's work," they earn more money than women on average.⁵

Many women in these jobs enjoy their work, and find fulfillment and dignity in the labor. The satisfactions in many jobs are clear: teaching young children, caring for the elderly, preparing food, styling hair, making a home clean and orderly. But many workers are frustrated by low pay, dangerous conditions, irregular hours, and lack of respect.

Fortunately, we can take steps, now, to make it possible for women in these jobs to find better compensation, better conditions, and better opportunities. There is a clear path to reducing inequality, rewarding hard work, and restoring the ladder of economic mobility for everyone—men and women.

WHY WOMEN'S WORK?

While you can find jobs that pay low wages in any part of the economy, you're more likely to find them in service sector jobs with tasks traditionally considered "women's work."

This division of the economy into gender-based jobs has serious and long-lasting effects on women and their families. The concentration of women in these jobs is a major factor behind the gender wage gap,⁶ and it impoverishes millions of women and their families: 43 percent of women in these jobs (8.2 million) live in or near poverty.⁷

This report examines the workforce in these jobs, explores what it means to be engaged in these jobs, and examines some of the jobs more closely.

Finally, we make some recommendations for ways to improve wages, job quality, and well-being of these women and their families.



Jemaell Lyles tends to children at Jenkins Hill Child Development Center in Washington, DC. *Tom Williams/Roll Call/Getty Images*

PROFILE: LIANNE FLAKES, EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR

For 24 years, LiAnne Flakes has been an early childhood educator, nurturing and guiding young minds. “They’re developing personality, they’re developing temperament, they’re developing all of that at this age. So as preschool [teachers] we are the ones that help to shape them for the future,” she says.

She worked hard to earn her Childhood Development Associate (CDA) credential, and she pays out of her own pocket periodically to renew her credentials.

But after all this time, she earns only \$12.25 an hour. And that’s on the high end of the pay scale, as she works for a Head Start Program. “It’s hard to believe, I have a job that’s so important, to my children and their families, and our society, and after all this time, I bring home about \$25,000 a year. I worry about whether I’ll be able to pay for all my expenses: food, rent, electricity, and so on. \$400 a week doesn’t go very far. And I think about my coworkers who have children—how do they make that money stretch to cover all the food they need to put on the table?”



Photo courtesy Service Employees International Union (SEIU)

She thinks early childhood educators are drastically underpaid. “I think we’re just as important as an elementary school teacher,” she says, “we’re just as important as a high school [teacher] or college professor.”

She says, “I ran into one of my children recently. He’s 18 now, but he remembered me from preschool, and he ran right up to me, so excited to see me. That’s the type of impact you have, children remember preschool; we really have an impact on our children. I know that’s worth a lot. I know my children value teachers. It’s time the economy does, too.”

WOMEN'S WORK PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

Millions of workers are segregated into sectors that pay low wages and employ primarily women. Many of the jobs involve tasks carried over from the household: cooking, cleaning, serving, and caring for people (children, the elderly, and the infirm); others play support roles in offices and businesses.

While the jobs demand great stamina and strength of body and mind, they do not require much training, and there is rarely opportunity for advancement. In addition, workers often find it hard to secure regular schedules, and sometimes to score enough hours to support their families.

The surprising reality is that 23.5 million people are in these jobs, 19 million of them women. Nearly 15 million people (12.3 million women) are earning under \$15 an hour in these jobs.⁸

WHAT IS LOW-WAGE WOMEN'S WORK?

We outlined the following criteria for the jobs:

- the majority of workers are female (60 to 98 percent),
- workers earn low wages (under a median of \$15 an hour),
- the occupations are large (at least 100,000 women workers), and
- the occupations are projected to grow by at least 1 percent in the next 20 years.

We found 22 occupations that match; roughly speaking, they fall into seven sectors:

- office and administrative assistance (5.0 million workers in three occupations, 77.4 percent women),
- healthcare supports (4.5 million workers in five occupations, 87.7 percent women),
- retail/cashiers (3.8 million workers, 71.6 percent women),
- food preparation and serving (3.5 million workers in five occupations, 71.4 percent women),
- early childhood care and education (3.2 million workers in three occupations, 93.3 percent women),
- beauty and personal services (1.7 million workers in four occupations, 82.1 percent women),
- cleaning and housekeeping (1.7 million workers, 88.3 percent women).

CONCENTRATIONS OF WOMEN IN WORKFORCE ACROSS TYPES OF JOBS, 2014

	NUMBER EMPLOYED			PERCENT FEMALE
	ALL	WOMEN	MEN	
Low-wage women's jobs	23,539,845	19,030,524	4,509,321	80.8%
All other low-wage jobs	31,967,876	10,846,733	21,121,143	33.9%
All better-paid jobs	100,810,433	43,796,676	57,013,757	43.4%
Total employment	156,318,154	73,673,933	82,644,221	47.1%

Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research Analysis of Current Population Survey, (2015) Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

Low-wage women's jobs employ mostly women, pay a median wage under \$15, are large enough to employ 100,000 women, and are on the rise. All other low-wage jobs do not employ a majority of women, but do pay a median wage under \$15. All better-paid jobs pay a median wage higher than \$15 an hour.

LOW-WAGE WOMEN’S JOBS IN THE US ECONOMY, BY SECTOR, 2014

JOB TITLE	NUMBER IN OCCUPATION			PERCENT FEMALE	MEDIAN WAGE			PROJECTED JOB GROWTH 2014-2024
	COMBINED	WOMEN	MEN		OVERALL	WOMEN	MEN	
Customer service representatives	2,317,385	1,507,402	809,982	65.0%	\$14.90	\$14.65	\$15.68	9.8%
Receptionists and information clerks	1,423,826	1,304,213	119,613	91.6%	\$13.14	\$13.14	\$13.96	9.5%
Office clerks, general	1,307,900	1,094,624	213,275	83.7%	\$14.90	\$14.90	\$14.90	3.1%
Nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides	2,248,116	2,000,742	247,374	89.0%	\$12.13	\$11.83	\$14.32	24.5%
Personal and home care aides	1,405,018	1,201,405	203,612	85.5%	\$10.25	\$10.16	\$10.74	25.9%
Medical assistants	525,312	498,574	N/A	94.9%	\$13.87	\$13.67	N/A	23.5%
Miscellaneous healthcare support occupations	179,513	123,855	N/A	69.0%	\$12.85	\$12.42	N/A	12.5%
Phlebotomists	121,140	103,840	N/A	85.7%	\$14.43	\$14.18	N/A	24.9%
Cashiers	3,797,870	2,721,034	1,076,837	71.6%	\$9.44	\$9.31	\$ 9.86	1.9%
Waiters and waitresses	2,262,305	1,609,711	652,594	71.2%	\$10.16	\$9.94	\$10.78	2.8%
Food preparation and serving workers, incl. fast food	437,417	281,793	155,624	64.4%	\$8.99	\$9.27	\$8.61	10.9%
Hosts and hostesses (restaurant, lounge, coffee shop)	341,196	293,181	N/A	85.9%	\$8.79	\$8.67	N/A	4.5%
Counter attendants (cafeteria, concession, coffee shop)	277,106	195,807	81,299	70.7%	\$8.42	\$7.95	\$ 9.82	6.0%
Food servers, nonrestaurant	214,407	140,572	73,835	65.6%	\$10.33	\$10.11	\$10.86	13.4%
Child care workers	1,425,315	1,344,310	81,006	94.3%	\$9.77	\$9.77	\$9.86	5.5%
Teacher assistants	1,081,251	964,325	116,926	89.2%	\$11.68	\$11.43	\$12.21	6.4%
Preschool and kindergarten teachers	722,461	705,292	N/A	97.6%	\$13.41	\$13.41	N/A	6.5%
Hairstylists and cosmetologists	756,573	704,108	N/A	93.1%	\$11.37	\$11.12	N/A	9.8%
Personal appearance workers	326,179	282,689	N/A	86.7%	\$10.74	\$10.16	N/A	10.9%
Animal caretakers (nonfarm)	206,068	142,597	63,471	69.2%	\$10.16	\$10.33	\$10.16	10.5%
Recreation and fitness workers	446,480	294,948	151,532	66.1%	\$13.18	\$12.79	\$16.25	9.5%
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	1,717,005	1,515,499	201,506	88.3%	\$9.94	\$9.94	\$11.07	7.7%
TOTAL	23,539,845	19,030,524	4,509,321	80.8%	\$11.30	\$11.18	\$11.96	9.5%

Source: Institute for Women’s Policy Research Analysis of Current Population Survey, (2015) Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

N/A indicates that the sample size is too small to report accurately.

THESE ARE THE JOBS OF THE FUTURE

In general, over the past few decades, the economy has been creating disproportionately more low-wage jobs.⁹ Jobs in low-wage women’s work have been growing especially rapidly; we found that some jobs skyrocketed in the period from 1994 to 2014. For example, the number of waiters and waitresses in the US increased by 37 percent in 20 years, almost double the rate of the overall job increase of 19 percent.

This trend is likely to continue into the next decade; from 2014 to 2024, these jobs are projected to grow at one and a half times the rate of job growth overall (by 9.5 percent, compared to 6.5 percent). Nearly one in four of all new jobs created will be in low-wage women’s work.¹⁰

By 2024, one in six of all jobs (15.5 percent) will be in low-wage women’s work; over 2 million of these jobs will have been newly created.¹¹

In one stunning example, the number of healthcare support jobs will increase dramatically by 2024: 25.9 percent for personal and home care aides, and 24.5 percent for nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides.¹² Personal and home care aides are projected to be the fastest growing occupations in the country, due in large part to a growing elderly population.¹³

GENDER SEGREGATION SPELLS TROUBLE FOR WOMEN

Women in these jobs face two disturbing facts.

First, even if the women’s jobs are very similar to other low-wage jobs—in requirements for education, skills, stamina, and hours—women’s jobs pay less. In some cases, women’s jobs demand higher degrees of education (e.g., teacher assistants), but still offer lower wages.

Second, when men step into women’s work jobs, men generally earn higher wages than women doing the same job.

WOMEN HAVE LOWER HOURLY EARNINGS AND ARE MORE LIKELY THAN MEN TO EARN UNDER \$15, 2014

	MEDIAN WAGE			GENDER EARNINGS RATIO	PERCENT EARNING < \$15		
	COMBINED	WOMEN	MEN		OVERALL	WOMEN	MEN
Low-wage women’s jobs	\$11.30	\$11.18	\$11.96	93.5%	69.9%	71.3%	63.9%
All other low-wage jobs	\$12.21	\$11.36	\$12.69	89.5%	65%	71.8%	61.5%
All better-paid jobs	\$23.18	\$21.23	\$24.84	85.5%	24.2%	27.1%	22%

Source: Institute for Women’s Policy Research Analysis of Current Population Survey, (2015) Annual Social and Economic Supplement.



Jose Motolinia sweeps the trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange. The median wage for janitors (77 percent male) is \$12.13; the median wage for maids (88 percent female) is \$9.94. Don Emmert / AFP via Getty Images

WHAT DOES MEN'S WORK LOOK LIKE?

To determine the extent of “low-wage men’s work” jobs, we used the same criteria: the majority of workers are male and earn low wages, and the occupations are large and projected to grow.

We identified 18 occupations. Most require manual labor and tend to involve tasks traditionally considered “men’s” work, such as construction or butchery. The number of these jobs is substantially lower: 16.6 million vs. 23.5 million in the women’s jobs.

Not surprisingly, the median hourly wage in the men’s jobs is higher than in women’s jobs (\$12.27 vs. \$11.30). However, wages vary substantially. Interestingly, jobs that involve women’s work tasks pay lower wages than jobs that fall more in line with men’s work. For example, cooks earn a median of \$9.94, while construction workers earn \$14.47.

Ironically, these higher wages are likely not going to workers supporting children on their own; workers in men’s jobs are only half as likely to be single parents (6 percent versus 12.3 percent).

LOW-WAGE MEN'S JOBS IN THE US ECONOMY, 2014

OCCUPATION	TOTAL NUMBER OF WORKERS	PERCENT FEMALE	MEDIAN WAGE
Butchers and other meat, poultry, and fish processing workers	333,317	24.63%	\$13.14
Carpet, floor, and tile installers and finishers	144,667	0.77%	\$14.90
Chefs and head cooks	442,918	20.21%	\$13.67
Cleaners of vehicles and equipment	413,451	15.30%	\$11.92
Construction laborers	1,867,375	3.82%	\$14.47
Cooks	2,261,171	39.57%	\$9.94
Drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers	160,319	3.11%	\$14.35
Grounds maintenance workers	1,436,719	5.63%	\$11.62
Industrial truck and tractor operators	654,472	5.30%	\$14.90
Janitors and building cleaners	2,467,138	33.15%	\$12.13
Laborers and freight, stock, and material movers, hand	2,141,681	18.05%	\$12.86
Miscellaneous vehicle and mobile equipment mechanics, installers, and repairers	106,705	0.19%	\$13.25
Painters, construction and maintenance	595,061	5.60%	\$13.67
Roofers	240,430	1.16%	\$13.85
Security guards and gaming surveillance officers	1,005,681	19.48%	\$13.48
Service station attendants	119,788	9.82%	\$11.62
Stock clerks and order fillers	1,752,771	34.86%	\$12.13
Taxi drivers and chauffeurs	416,790	16.61%	\$12.69
Total	16,560,457	20.8%	\$12.27

Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research Analysis of Current Population Survey, (2015) Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

THE WORKERS IN THESE JOBS

WOMEN OF COLOR DO MORE THAN THEIR FAIR SHARE OF THESE JOBS

While the workforce in these jobs is diverse—across all ages, races and ethnicities, household types, and education levels—one aspect stands out: women of color are disproportionately represented. Roughly 45 percent of the women in these jobs are women of color, compared with just over a third (34.3 percent) in the total workforce.*

Moreover, women of color tend to be concentrated in the jobs that offer the lowest pay and sparsest benefits.

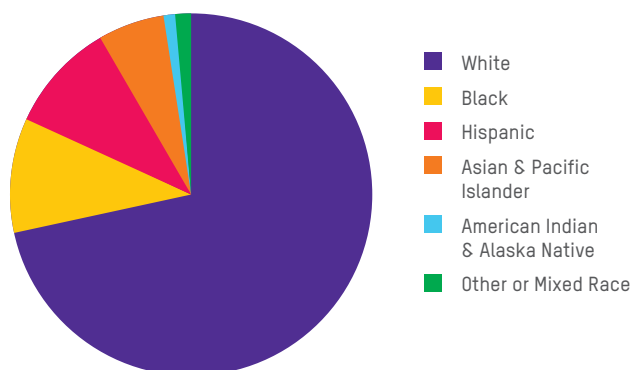
The concentration of women of color varies dramatically across the 22 occupations, from 71 percent of personal appearance workers (twice the national average) to just 11 percent of animal caretakers.

Women of color are more likely than white women to work in the more informal (and lowest paid) segments of care work.¹⁴ The two healthcare support occupations that pay the least and employ the largest number of women have the highest concentrations of women of color (nursing, psychiatric, and home care aides, and personal and home care aides).

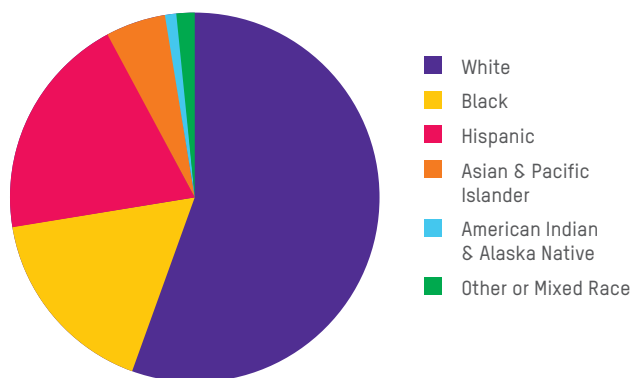
The workforce in child care and early childhood education shows the same disparities; one recent study found black women working full-time as preschool teachers made only 84 cents on the dollar earned by white women.¹⁵

The reasons for these trends are many, and complex. Black and Hispanic women are less likely than white women to have a bachelor's degree or higher, making it more difficult to move out of the low-wage sector.¹⁶ Immigrants may not speak English as a first language; women of color may be segregated in lower income neighborhoods and regions, without good transportation options to better jobs; mothers (especially single mothers) of dependent children are challenged to find affordable care options.¹⁷

BETTER-PAID OCCUPATIONS: CONCENTRATIONS OF WOMEN BY RACE



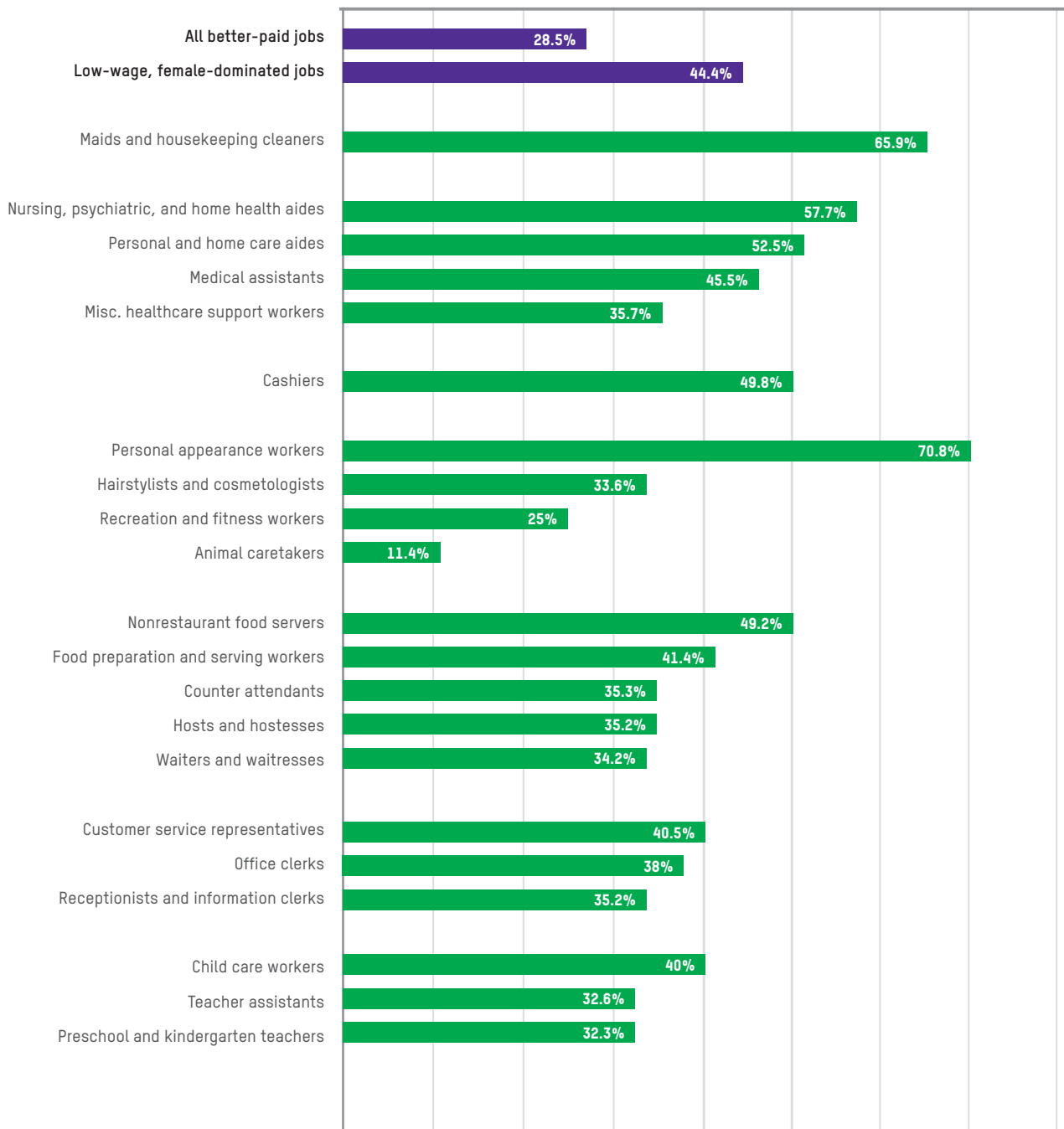
LOW-WAGE WOMEN'S JOBS: CONCENTRATIONS OF WOMEN BY RACE



Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research Analysis of Current Population Survey, (2015) Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

*Women of color include non-Hispanic black, non-Hispanic Asian, non-Hispanic Native American, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic women of two or more races.

CONCENTRATIONS OF WOMEN OF COLOR ACROSS OCCUPATIONS, 2014



Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research Analysis of Current Population Survey 2013–2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.



Thuy Vo, nail salon worker (Los Angeles, CA)
Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

IMMIGRANT WOMEN ARE CONCENTRATED IN PARTICULARLY DIFFICULT JOBS

Foreign-born women account for 18 percent of the low-wage women's workforce.

Immigrant women are particularly concentrated in personal appearance and in housekeeping; more than half of all women working as maids and housekeepers are foreign born, and close to half (43.9 percent) are Hispanic. Immigrants do almost a quarter of the direct care jobs examined in this study; they fill a labor shortage caused by a huge increase in the demand for direct care workers.

In general, immigrant women may face a number of barriers to landing good jobs, among them language, education, and documentation. They often cluster in jobs that are somewhat flexible and informal (and less appealing to people who have other choices), in fields such as agriculture, hospitality, and personal services (such as nail salons). These jobs may take advantage of their vulnerabilities. Many immigrant women choose not to complain about poor working conditions because they're worried about their situation and their families. They stay silent about dangers on the job, sexual harassment, wage theft, and more.¹⁸

PROFILE: NANCY OTAVALO, MANICURIST

Nancy Otavalo, an Ecuadorean immigrant, paid an enormous price working as a technician at a nail salon in Queens, New York. As the *New York Times* reported, she suffered a miscarriage that began in the salon while she was with a customer.

Medical research continues to show that the chemicals in beauty products may be causing health problems for workers in salons. Every day, workers are exposed to highly toxic chemicals in polishes, solvents, hardeners and glues. Many report incidents of miscarriages, and children born with mental disabilities, cancers, rashes and coughs.

"There are so many stories but no one that dares to tell them; no one dares to tell them because they have no one to tell," Otavalo told the *Times*. "There are thousands of women who are working in this, but no one asking: 'What's happening to you? How do you feel?' We just work and work."¹⁹

THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE MOTHERS AND SINGLE MOTHERS

A third of the women working in these jobs are mothers of dependent children; many are single mothers (nearly 15 percent).^{*} While mothers of young children face numerous challenges to balancing work and family life in the best of circumstances, many of these jobs impose conditions that exacerbate the difficulties.

Low pay makes it difficult (if not impossible) to pay for reliable, quality child care. Unpredictable scheduling wreaks havoc with child care arrangements, especially at the last minute. Hours outside the normal business week make it harder for women to attend events at school or in the community. Single mothers face even more daunting challenges, as they may well be the sole wage earner and only adult in the household.

Mothers and single mothers are particularly challenged to care for themselves and their children when illness strikes. One survey found that one in seven low-wage women workers had lost a job as a consequence of taking a sick day.²⁰

THEY ARE ALL AGES, WITH A MEDIAN AGE OF 36

Many of the women in these jobs are doing them for their working lifetimes. The median age is 36; three quarters are older than 25; about one in five (18 percent) is over 55.

Many have families to support and must balance their work and family obligations with little assistance. Yet in all of these occupations, median hourly wages are too low to support a family. And few if any of these jobs offer retirement plans.

THEY MAY BE WELL EDUCATED

Education matters for access to better-paid jobs, but it's not the whole story. Of workers in better-paid jobs, only 26 percent lack credentials beyond high school, compared to 48 percent in women's work low-wage jobs.²¹

However, while educational attainment among women in these jobs has increased substantially over the past decades, their pay has not. Today, more than half of women in these jobs have at least some college, and a quarter have an associate's degree or higher. For example, child care workers are more than twice as likely to have a college degree today than in 1994—but their median pay remains stuck well below \$15 an hour.

In fact, while workers in other low-wage jobs are 15 percentage points more likely to have no credentials beyond high school, median earnings in these jobs are higher than in women's work low-wage jobs. One study found that workers in women's work middle-skill jobs earned only 66 cents for each dollar earned by workers in men's work middle-skill jobs.²²

^{*}For this report, "mothers" refers to women who live with dependent children (under 18), rather than women who have been mothers at any point. "Single mothers" are mothers whose marital status is separated, divorced, widowed, or never married/single.

WHAT IT MEANS TO WORK IN THESE JOBS

MANY WOMEN END UP LIVING IN OR NEAR POVERTY

The median hourly wage for these jobs is \$11.30. Working 40 hours a week, 52 weeks a year, that amounts to under \$24,000 a year.

In most of these jobs (16 of 22), more than 60 percent of workers earn under \$15 an hour. In five jobs, 80 percent earn under \$15 an hour.²³

Altogether, these jobs leave 8.2 million women living in or near poverty: 3.6 million (19 percent) live in poverty, and another 4.6 million (24 percent) in near-poverty. Some of the largest jobs cause the highest levels of poverty and near-poverty: 63 percent of women who work as maids and cleaners, and over half of women working in fast food, as personal, home care, or health aides, or as waitresses.

THEY ENJOY SCANT BENEFITS

These jobs often come with threadbare benefits, poor working conditions, and few opportunities to advance.

In general, workers in low-wage jobs are much less likely than other workers to have access to basic benefits such as paid vacation, sick days or paid family leave. Over 80 percent of low-wage workers in the private sector have not even a single day of sick time.²⁴ Ironically, employers are more likely to offer flexible arrangements and benefits (such as sick days) to higher-paid employees.²⁵

It is also rare for low-wage workers to be covered by temporary disability insurance; even fewer have access to long-term disability insurance.²⁶

Access to such benefits varies across sectors but is particularly low for workers in hospitality and food preparation.²⁷ One survey found that over half of food preparation and serving workers always or frequently went to work while ill, despite health risks to customers and fellow workers.²⁸

The lack of paid leave and temporary disability insurance or access to workers' compensation is especially difficult, as many of these jobs are arduous and carry considerable health risks.²⁹ When workers are injured, they may have little support or recourse. One survey of domestic workers found that nearly 40 percent reported a work-related injury in the preceding 12 months, yet 68 percent of them had no access to health insurance.³⁰

THEY NEED TO TAP SOCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Millions of women in these jobs are compelled to turn to social assistance programs just to get by and sustain their families. Sixty percent of mothers depend on subsidized lunch programs for their children. Over a quarter use SNAP benefits (food stamps), and nearly a quarter rely on Medicaid.

Women in certain jobs rely even more on these programs: half of the mothers in food preparation and serving use food stamps, and 80 percent count on subsidized or free lunch to feed their children. Almost half of counter attendants use food stamps and 68 percent use subsidized or free lunch.

THEY ARE MORE LIKELY TO WORK PART-TIME

More than 40 percent of people in these jobs work part-time. This is about one and a half times higher than the rate for workers in other low-wage jobs, and more than three times as high as in better paid jobs. The reasons for working part-time range from needing to do so because of other obligations, to being locked out of full-time work by the employer. In either case, it's very difficult to get by on wages that are low and hours that are scarce; and it's nearly impossible to thrive.

Of the 8 million women who work part-time in these jobs, more than nine percent (1.9 million) say they do so because they cannot find full-time work. Women are almost five times more likely than men to say that they work part-time because they have child care or family obligations. While care-related reasons are not officially classified as involuntary, given the high costs of care (and the unequal division of unpaid care work between women and men), it clearly reflects a constraint on women's access to full-time work. By comparison, men in these jobs are almost twice as likely as women to work part-time because they are pursuing training and education.

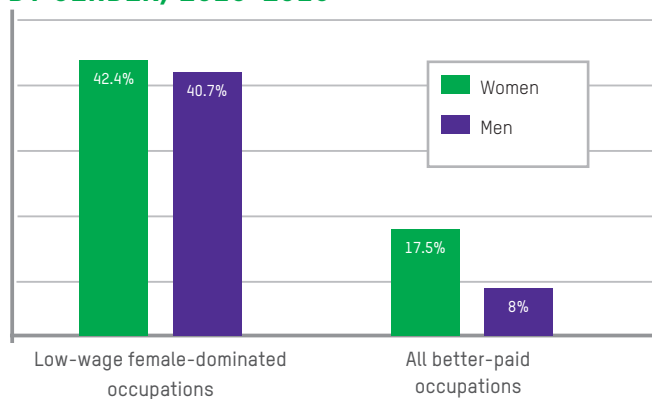
The extent of part-time work varies dramatically among these jobs. Part-time employment is particularly high in the two largest occupations: cashiers (61.2 percent) and waitresses and waiters (63.7 percent).

THEY MAY BE CHALLENGED BY UNPREDICTABLE AND IRREGULAR HOURS

Balancing work and life is difficult for workers who don't know either the number of hours they will be working each week; or the exact hours they will be called into work. Yet many workers in low-wage women's jobs find their schedules erratic and unpredictable, especially in industries that run around the clock, seven days a week (such as retail, food service, and hotels).³¹

Many employers use "just-in-time" scheduling, where workers are informed of their schedules as little as two hours before shifts.³² This schedule irregularity can make it difficult (if not impossible) to find family care. In one recent survey of mothers working in restaurants, 39 percent reported that their shifts changed weekly; almost a third reported having incurred fines from child care providers because working hours changed on short notice.³³

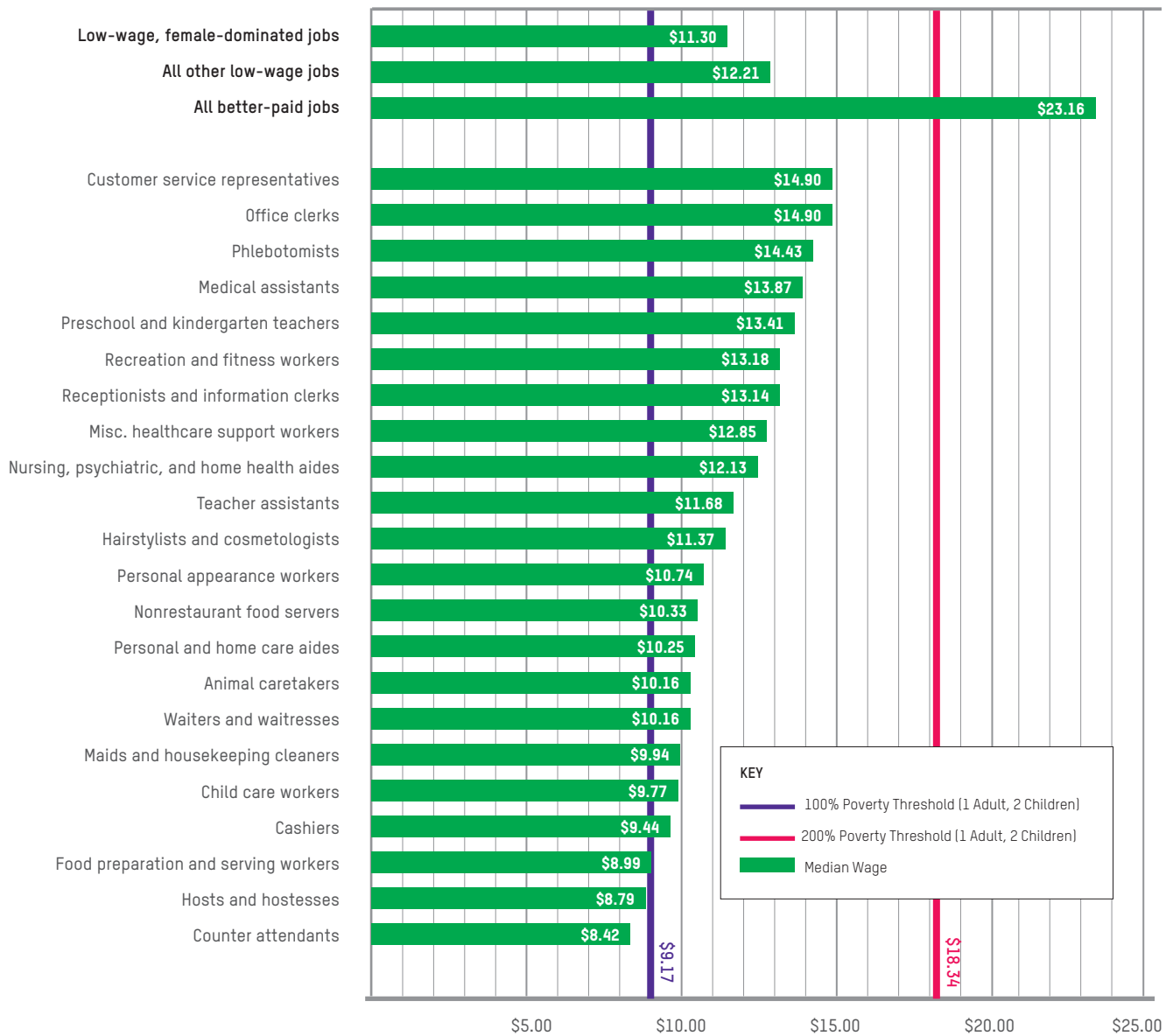
RATES OF PART-TIME EMPLOYMENT BY GENDER, 2013-2015



Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research Analysis of Current Population Survey, 2013-2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

Note: Part-time work is defined as work for less than 35 hours per week.

MEDIAN WAGES IN LOW-WAGE FEMALE-DOMINATED OCCUPATIONS BY POVERTY THRESHOLDS, 2014



Note: Poverty markers are calculated using Census Bureau poverty threshold and assume full-time, year-round work (of 2,080 hours per year). "In poverty" refers to living below the poverty line; "near poverty" refers to living below 200 percent of the poverty line. Poverty in 2014 for a family of three was \$19,073 per year; near poverty (200 percent) was \$38,146; these levels translate into hourly wages of \$9.17 and \$18.34, respectively, for full-time, full-year work.

THE JOBS/THE SECTORS

SEVEN SECTORS, 22 OCCUPATIONS, MILLIONS OF WORKERS

OFFICE AND ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANCE

Historically, “administrative” and “assistant” jobs have been overwhelmingly filled by women. While some office jobs pay moderate wages (e.g., secretaries), nearly 4 million women work in jobs that pay median wages under \$15 an hour.³⁴

This is the largest sector, and it is growing rapidly, projected to add more than 400,000 new jobs in the next decade.

Compared to other low-wage women’s jobs, these occupations usually offer better conditions and compensation. Wages are somewhat higher: female customer-service representatives earn a median of \$14.65, female office clerks, \$14.90. Many of the jobs occur during standard workweek hours, in office situations.

The vast majority of the women in these jobs are at least 25 years old. Over half are white women. About one third of women in these jobs have dependent children; 10 to 15 percent are single mothers.

Workers in this sector tend to have more education than in other sectors. Roughly 21 percent have at least a bachelor’s degree; another 13 percent have an associate’s degree.

The office and administration sector accounts for three of the occupations considered low-wage women’s work. See the table on the next page.

HEALTHCARE SUPPORT

The healthcare system in the US is enormous, accounting for \$1.7 trillion in annual revenue, 17 million employees, and 17 percent of the US Gross Domestic Product.³⁵ It is also enormously lucrative for many, especially CEOs of large corporations.³⁶

However, the industry also has a large workforce that earns low wages. Of the 18 million healthcare and “social assistance” workers, many—especially women—are paid near-poverty wages.³⁷

The five occupations in this sector are predicted to add more than 1.3 million jobs in the next ten years.³⁸ The growth rate far exceeds other low-wage women’s jobs, and the overall labor force.

Support positions in this industry pose many challenges: few workers receive benefits or have labor protections; most work unpredictable hours; and many suffer injuries as a result of the physical demands.³⁹

Working as an aide is physically and emotionally demanding, and absolutely vital to the individuals in care. The tasks include bathing, feeding, dressing, grooming, and moving elderly, disabled, and mentally impaired people in homes and residential-care facilities.

Yet these workers, who tend to be middle-aged and disproportionately women of color (over half), earn paltry wages (and rarely enough respect).⁴⁰ Well over half the women working as personal and home care aides live in or near poverty.

The healthcare support sector accounts for five of the occupations considered low-wage women’s work. See the table on the next page.

JOB TITLE	NUMBER IN OCCUPATION			PERCENT FEMALE	MEDIAN WAGE		
	COMBINED	WOMEN	MEN		OVERALL	WOMEN	MEN
OFFICE AND ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANCE							
Customer service representatives	2,317,385	1,507,402	809,982	65.0%	\$14.90	\$14.65	\$15.68
Receptionists and information clerks	1,423,826	1,304,213	119,613	91.6%	\$13.14	\$13.14	\$13.96
Office clerks, general	1,307,900	1,094,624	213,275	83.7%	\$14.90	\$14.90	\$14.90
HEALTHCARE SUPPORT							
Nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides	2,248,116	2,000,742	247,374	89.0%	\$12.13	\$11.83	\$14.32
Personal and home care aides	1,405,018	1,201,405	203,612	85.5%	\$10.25	\$10.16	\$10.74
Medical assistants	525,312	498,574	N/A	94.9%	\$13.87	\$13.67	N/A
Miscellaneous healthcare support occupations	179,513	123,855	N/A	69.0%	\$12.85	\$12.42	N/A
Phlebotomists	121,140	103,840	N/A	85.7%	\$14.43	\$14.18	N/A

Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research Analysis of Current Population Survey, (2015) Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

PROFILE: PATRICIA EVANS, HOME CARE AIDE

As a home care aide in Chicago, Patricia Evans finds great satisfaction in her job—and great frustration at the low pay and irregular hours. “It’s very emotionally satisfying to care for people this way—we’re helping them stay in their homes and not have to move to nursing homes,” she says. She notes that delaying the move into a rest home saves the system a lot of money.

However, after years on the job, she earns only \$10.55 an hour, slightly above the city minimum wage. And she says it’s hardly enough.

“I worry about finances all the time. I live on a bare bones budget—I rarely eat out, can’t afford to go to the movies,” she says. “The main thing that takes a hit would be my food budget... there are a couple of food banks I go to every month.”⁴¹

She sees coworkers applying for help from social assistance programs (such as food stamps), and she notes, “When people are willing to work full-time, they should be able to make it on their own. It’s not fair that people are working so hard and can’t support their families.”



RETAIL

The largest single occupation in this study is cashier. More than 2.7 million women work as cashiers, earning a median wage of \$9.31 an hour—under \$20,000 a year.⁴²

The jobs are largely unskilled and dead-end; they do not require a high school diploma and they offer no path to mobility.

Women of color account for half of all women cashiers. More than 25 percent of all cashiers are mothers and 15 percent are single mothers. Half of women working as cashiers live in or near poverty. 75 percent of mothers rely on free or subsidized lunches for their children.

Cashiers face considerable risks to their safety on the job, including burglaries and violence.⁴³ They are also at risk for workplace injuries due to prolonged standing, repeated and forceful motions, long hours with few breaks, and a high-stress work environment with little employee control.⁴⁴ OSHA found that 22 percent of cashiers and salespeople think that they are likely to be threatened, and 10 percent think that they may be assaulted.⁴⁵

FOOD PREPARATION AND SERVING

The restaurant industry is thriving in the US. With annual sales over \$782 billion, it employs 10 percent of the national workforce (14.4 million workers). The industry predicts that by 2026, it will have created 1.7 million new jobs.⁴⁶

Unfortunately, most of these workers earn low wages or depend on tips, and enjoy few benefits. More than 2.3 million women earn median wages below \$10 an hour in this industry.

This sector pays some of the lowest wages in the study. Counter attendants earn the least, at a median of \$8.42 an hour (\$7.95 for women). And the conditions are demanding: from hot kitchens to crowded dining rooms, most workers are on their feet constantly, with little chance to take a break.

Women in these occupations tend to be younger than women in other sectors; the median age ranges from 20 (hostesses) to 39 (food servers).

Half of mothers in this sector report unpredictable and erratic schedules; two in five report last-minute shift changes, which scramble child care arrangements.⁴⁷

The food preparation and serving sector accounts for five of the occupations considered low-wage women's work. See table below.

JOB TITLE	NUMBER IN OCCUPATION			PERCENT FEMALE	MEDIAN WAGE		
	COMBINED	WOMEN	MEN		OVERALL	WOMEN	MEN
RETAIL							
Cashiers	3,797,870	2,721,034	1,076,837	71.6%	\$9.44	\$9.31	\$ 9.86
FOOD PREPARATION AND SERVING							
Waiters and waitresses	2,262,305	1,609,711	652,594	71.2%	\$10.16	\$9.94	\$10.78
Food preparation and serving workers, incl. fast food	437,417	281,793	155,624	64.4%	\$8.99	\$9.27	\$8.61
Hosts and hostesses (restaurant, lounge, coffee shop)	341,196	293,181	N/A	85.9%	\$8.79	\$8.67	N/A
Counter attendants (cafeteria, concession, coffee shop)	277,106	195,807	81,299	70.7%	\$8.42	\$7.95	\$ 9.82
Food servers, nonrestaurant	214,407	140,572	73,835	65.6%	\$10.33	\$10.11	\$10.86

Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research Analysis of Current Population Survey, (2015) Annual Social and Economic Supplement.



Sheila Abramson, waitress (Los Angeles, CA)
Kevork Djansezian / Getty Images

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND THE TIPPED WAGE

Since 1991, the federal tipped sub-minimum wage has been set at \$2.13 per hour. While employers are supposed to ensure that tipped workers see enough traffic to take home the minimum wage in their state, this does not always happen.

Sexual harassment is a huge problem for women in the restaurant industry; they experience it at five times the rate of the overall female workforce. In 2011, 37 percent of formal sexual harassment complaints came from female restaurant workers, even though they make up less than 7 percent of the female workforce.⁴⁸

Living off tips makes an industry already rife with sexual harassment even more dangerous. Tipped women workers in states with a \$2.13 minimum wage reported that they were three times more likely to be told by management to alter their appearance and to wear “sexier,” more revealing clothing than they were in states where the same minimum wage was paid to all workers.⁴⁹

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION

Caring for young children has long been the responsibility of women; to this day, these occupations are populated by over 90 percent women. More than 3 million women work in these jobs. Close to 200,000 new jobs are projected to be added by 2024.

Child care workers may work at child care centers, their own home, or the child's home. They feed, bathe, clean, and play with children at all hours of the day and night.

Teacher assistants—89 percent women—help teachers with lessons from preschools to high schools. Whereas jobs in child care centers generally have no educational requirements, assistant teaching usually requires an associate's degree.⁵⁰ Over a quarter (26.8 percent) of women teacher assistants hold a bachelor's or master's degree; this is a dramatic increase from 10.8 percent of women doing this job holding a BA or MA in 1994.⁵¹

The early childhood care and education sector accounts for three of the occupations considered low-wage women's work. See table below.

BEAUTY AND PERSONAL SERVICES

This sector, which includes occupations in hairstyling, skin care, cosmetics, manicures/pedicures, and pet care, is overwhelmingly dominated by women. It is also characterized by low wages, health risks, and exploitation of vulnerable workers.

Projected job growth in this sector is well above general workforce growth.

The racial and ethnic breakdown of the workers in this sector varies greatly by occupation. Women of color make up the majority of personal appearance workers; over half are immigrants, and more than half are Asian and Pacific Islanders. By contrast, most female recreation and fitness workers and animal caretakers are white.

Some of the jobs in this sector have an unusual concentration of workers who are foreign-born. Many lack legal immigration status, which can lead to numerous problems (including being paid less than minimum wage).⁵²

The beauty and personal services sector accounts for four of the occupations considered low-wage women's work. See table below.

JOB TITLE	NUMBER IN OCCUPATION			PERCENT FEMALE	MEDIAN WAGE		
	COMBINED	WOMEN	MEN		OVERALL	WOMEN	MEN
EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION							
Child care workers	1,425,315	1,344,310	81,006	94.3%	\$9.77	\$9.77	\$9.86
Teacher assistants	1,081,251	964,325	116,926	89.2%	\$11.68	\$11.43	\$12.21
Preschool and kindergarten teachers	722,461	705,292	N/A	97.6%	\$13.41	\$13.41	N/A
BEAUTY AND PERSONAL SERVICES							
Hairstylists and cosmetologists	756,573	704,108	N/A	93.1%	\$11.37	\$11.12	N/A
Personal appearance workers	326,179	282,689	N/A	86.7%	\$10.74	\$10.16	N/A
Animal caretakers (nonfarm)	206,068	142,597	63,471	69.2%	\$10.16	\$10.33	\$10.16
Recreation and fitness workers	446,480	294,948	151,532	66.1%	\$13.18	\$12.79	\$16.25

Source: Institute for Women's Policy Research Analysis of Current Population Survey, (2015) Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

Women in beauty-related occupations are subject to significant health risks, largely due to exposure to chemicals and solvents. This puts them at higher risk for asthma, allergies, and dermatitis; pregnant women have high risks for miscarriages, pre-term delivery, low birth weight, birth defects, and perinatal death.⁵³

While female recreation and fitness workers have the highest median hourly wage in this sector (\$12.79), they have to face the fact that men doing the same job earn \$3.46 more per hour.

CLEANING AND HOUSEKEEPING

Working as a maid or housekeeper is one of the most physically demanding and least remunerative jobs in this study. Over 1.5 million women earn a median wage of under \$10 an hour to perform back-breaking, often hazardous work. This occupation is projected to add over 100,000 new jobs over the next ten years.⁵⁴

Most work on their feet all day, vacuuming, sweeping, lifting, and scouring, which results in high injury rates. They are exposed to dust, germs, human waste, and chemicals. They work in hotels, motels, private homes, and office buildings.

Over 60 percent of women in this sector live in or near poverty, the highest percentage in this study.

Approximately 60 percent of these women are Hispanic or black, and 47 percent are foreign born. Maids are likely to be older: 90 percent are over 25, while 21 percent are over 54. Four in ten are mothers of dependent children; 18 percent are single mothers.

While most are not “live-ins,” some housekeepers are among the 2 million US workers who live in other people’s homes. These workers rarely receive benefits and protections guaranteed by the Fair Labor Standards Act, the National Labor Relations Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, and the Civil Rights Act.

JOB TITLE	NUMBER IN OCCUPATION			PERCENT FEMALE	MEDIAN WAGE		
	COMBINED	WOMEN	MEN		OVERALL	WOMEN	MEN
CLEANING AND HOUSEKEEPING							
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	1,717,005	1,515,499	201,506	88.3%	\$9.94	\$9.94	\$11.07

Source: Institute for Women’s Policy Research Analysis of Current Population Survey, (2015) Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Low-wage workers, especially women, face numerous challenges every day as they try to balance their financial and family obligations. The policy changes outlined here would give workers, and their families, a better chance to thrive.

In order to ensure that all workers have opportunities for economic security, we need a two-pronged approach: improving compensation and conditions in low-wage women's jobs, while also building pathways to higher paying jobs.

MAKE WORK PAY FAIRLY

Raise the federal minimum wage. As the federal minimum wage has remained stuck at \$7.25 over the past seven years, millions of workers have seen their wages decline in real value.

In most states, the minimum wage is perilously (and historically) low by every relevant benchmark.⁵⁵ Today the value of the wage is about 25 percent lower than its peak in 1968 (adjusted for inflation), despite continued increases in worker productivity.⁵⁶

Raising the wage would reduce poverty for millions of workers, fuel economic growth, and reduce use of social assistance programs (and save taxpayers money).

Eliminate the tipped minimum wage. The federal tipped minimum wage, which applies to workers who rely predominantly on tips for their income, has not risen from \$2.13 an hour since 1991. Abolishing the tipped minimum wage would not only help bring economic security to tipped employees, it could also help reduce sexual harassment.

Enforce laws related to minimum wage and working time. Increasing the number of staff at regulatory agencies is vital for addressing high levels of wage theft experienced by many workers in low-wage occupations.⁵⁷

Guarantee paid sick days and paid family leave. Enacting paid family and medical leave laws at both the federal and state levels would enable low-income workers (especially women who are pregnant, parents, or caregivers) to care for themselves and their families without worrying about lost wages.

Ensure fair scheduling for workers. "Reporting pay" legislation would specify that employees get paid for a minimum number of hours per shift even if sent home early. Guaranteed minimum hour legislation would require employers to schedule workers at or above an agreed-upon minimum number of hours each week. Policies to require employers to offer hours to existing part-time employees (before hiring additional part-time workers) would help workers gain more hours.

Provide safe working environments in high-risk sectors. Federal and state occupational health and safety agencies should marshal resources to target high-risk, low-wage sectors.

Strengthen equal pay laws and enforcement. It's possible to strengthen existing equal pay laws by offering protection to employees who discuss their pay, increasing data collection on earnings, and developing new enforcement plans to leverage the data. In addition, the Equal Pay Act should be updated to strengthen legal remedies for working women, in line with those available under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.



Ambre Davidson works the register in Portland, Maine.
Whitney Hayward / Portland Herald Press via Getty Images

INVEST IN THE WORK-FAMILY INFRASTRUCTURE

Improve access to affordable, quality child care. Greater public investments are needed to ensure that child care is within reach of all workers. Increased federal and state funding for child care assistance, and policies that incentivize employer subsidies for child care, would improve job retention and reduce work-family stress, especially for women.⁵⁸

Improve investment in elder care and care of dependent adults. Investing in elder care facilities, increasing Medicaid disbursement rates, and ensuring access to paid family leave for those who need to care for an elderly relative would improve working conditions for workers in elder care, and increase job retention and employment.

Improve conditions for part-time workers. “Right to request” laws would make it easier for workers to stay in the same job even if they need to reduce their hours to care for family members. Employers should provide part-time workers with prorated benefits, and should pay part-time workers the same hourly wage as full-time workers.

BUILD LADDERS TO HIGHER PAYING OCCUPATIONS

Improve access to education and training for well-paid careers. Women need advice and guidance on careers that come with higher earnings in middle-skilled occupations. Those who provide career and technical education need to be held accountable for greater gender equity in their programs.

Encourage transparent promotion pathways. Policies that encourage employers to hire and train low-skill, low-wage workers would reduce discrimination and segregation, and enable workers to access career ladders.⁵⁹

Strengthen protection for immigrant workers. Increasing the number of visas available to immigrants in fast-growing occupations, and allowing for workers to have flexible work visas (so they are not tied to one employer), would decrease abuse of immigrant and undocumented workers.

Restore collective bargaining rights. Many policies that could improve low-wage workers’ economic stability and well-being are only realistically accessible to workers represented by unions and other worker organizations.⁶⁰ Unions can protect internal promotion pathways and advocate for specific worker-needs such as child care.

NOTES

This report is based on research by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research (IWPR). IWPR has published a report containing the full results of their research, including a number of spreadsheets with full data.

The report is on their website: www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/undervalued-and-underpaid-in-america-women-in-low-wage-female-dominated-jobs/

- 1 The full report from IWPR is available at www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/undervalued-and-underpaid-in-america-women-in-low-wage-female-dominated-jobs/.
- 2 IWPR research for this report indicates these jobs will increase by 9.5 percent vs. 6.5 percent for all other jobs, 2014–2024.
- 3 Since the criteria to determine this group of jobs includes the specification that they be growing (by at least 1 percent), it is to be expected that the trend for the jobs is one of growth. However, overall, these jobs are growing faster than other, similar jobs; and the growth rate varies from slow to extremely rapid (for example, 1.9 percent for cashiers to 25.9 percent for personal and home care aides).
- 4 IWPR research for this report (for more information, see the note about methodology on the inside front cover).
- 5 IWPR research indicates that the median hourly wage in the low-wage predominantly male jobs is higher than in low-wage, predominantly female jobs (\$12.27 vs. \$11.30). Interestingly, male-dominated jobs that involve women’s work tasks pay lower wages than jobs that fall more in line with men’s work.
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COVER: Mayra Dittman (R) helps Juanita Gilbert walk to the restroom at an Adult Day Health Care Center in Novato, California. The mean hourly wage of personal care aides is slightly over \$10; the occupation is 85 percent female, and is projected to be one of the fastest growing occupations in the next ten years. *Justin Sullivan / Getty Images*



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