



INCREASING PATHWAYS TO GOOD JOBS

EDUCATION AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Federal Policy Solutions to Advance Gender Equity | February 2025

OVERVIEW

Job training can provide women with the skills and supports needed to access good jobs with family-sustaining wages. It is particularly important for the many women who do not have college-level education and often work in **low-wage jobs** with **limited prospects** for advancement or may be returning to the labor market following a caregiving break. **Automation** is high in many traditionally female-held administrative jobs, and job training is vital for upskilling in the **digital economy**.

However, challenges such as limited access to quality and affordable child care, lack of transportation, and financial instability can create **obstacles to enrolling** in or completing job training. In addition, too

many training programs do not place women into high-earning fields and replicate the **occupational segregation** that underlies women's low earnings and the gender **wage gap**.

Policymakers should invest in pathways to good jobs—including job training, technical education, and apprenticeships—and work to reduce gender and racial gaps within these programs and initiatives. Policymakers should pair this with efforts to ensure that there are good jobs available for women, including initiatives to close the **pay gap**, ensure **safe and fair workplaces**, and promote access to **care** and **paid leave** for all.

Apprenticeships can provide pathways to industry-recognized qualifications for workers in high-paying, in-demand fields. However, women are highly underrepresented, **comprising just 14.4%** of all active apprentices.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- **Access to job training and education is particularly vital for women without college degrees, as it can provide pathways to better-paying jobs.**

According to the [Census Bureau](#), 40 percent of employed women and 59 percent of unemployed women ages 25 and older do not have an associate's or higher-level degree. While college attainment is rising, fewer than 3 in 10 Black women ([Census Bureau](#)) and fewer than 4 in 10 Latinas ([Pew Research Center](#)), Native women, and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander women ([Postsecondary National Policy Institute](#)) have at least a bachelor's degree.

- **Analysis by the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that many high-demand jobs in fast-growing occupations do not require a four-year college degree but can offer family-sustaining wages.** These include fields such as the construction trades, the newly emerging clean energy sector, and technical maintenance.
- **Women are underrepresented in career and technical education and training for jobs that pay family-sustaining wages and overrepresented in those that do not**, whether in [community colleges](#) or [apprenticeships](#), according to IWPR research. [Analysis](#) by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia also found this to be true across publicly funded training programs. As a result, career and technical education and training often replicate occupational segregation by gender and gender [wage gaps](#).

63%

In FY 2024, the median hourly wage for women who completed registered apprenticeships was **\$22** compared to **\$34.68** for men, a gender earnings ratio of just 63%.

- **Registered apprenticeships can provide pathways to industry-recognized qualifications for workers in high-paying, in-demand fields. However, women are highly underrepresented in apprenticeships.** In 2024, women made up only [14.4 percent](#) of all active apprentices. Apprenticeships can benefit women by providing a college-debt-free path to qualifications and benefit employers by offering [high returns](#) on investment.
- **While women's numbers in apprenticeships have grown, according to IWPR research, they remain overrepresented in the lowest-paying fields.** In [FY 2024](#), the median hourly wage for women who completed registered apprenticeships was \$22.00 compared to \$34.68 for men, a gender earnings ratio of just 63.4 percent. Black women who completed apprenticeships have the lowest median hourly earnings.



WHY IT MATTERS

Fields like health care, IT, trades, and manufacturing need workers with high levels of skill but do not necessarily require a four-year degree. The National Skills Coalition [reports](#) that 52 percent of jobs in these fields require skills training beyond high school, while only 16 percent can be filled by workers with a high school equivalency. Too few workers have access to the skills training and education that they need to fill these jobs, which creates gaps in the workforce for employers and missed opportunities for workers.

Many existing programs, policies, and mechanisms provide the backbone for building a skilled workforce, but federal investments have not lived up to the promise of many of these initiatives. For example, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) provides legislative authorization for workforce development programs across the nation, including occupational skill training and on-the-job training, to increase economic self-sufficiency, meet employers' skill requirements, and enhance the nation's productivity and competitiveness. However, it has never been fully funded.

In addition, IWPR has [long documented](#) how, under US workforce investment programs, men and women have received very different types of training, with lower payoffs for women than for men. Apart from harming women workers, such occupational segregation is also bad for employers because it reduces the pool of skilled potential workers in shortage occupations. The current workforce development system also perpetuates [racial divides](#).

In 2018, Congress reauthorized the Perkins Act—the federal legislation that funds career and technical education (CTE) for both secondary and postsecondary students. This legislative update, known

as Perkins V, included a requirement that states set performance targets on measures of nontraditional enrollment and completion by gender—a provision aimed at boosting women's participation in training programs for traditionally male-dominated fields. Further, Perkins V highlighted the particular needs of special populations, including learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, individuals with disabilities, and single parents/single pregnant women.

In addition, recent US policy has invested in and expanded apprenticeships, with an eye toward ensuring that these opportunities lead to good-paying jobs that are accessible to workers of all backgrounds, including women and workers from underserved communities. Since 2015, the federal government has invested over \$1 billion to expand apprenticeships to new occupations and sectors, modernize the apprenticeship system, and improve the gender and racial diversity of apprentices. IWPR's [analysis](#) has found that these investments have translated into a growing number of women apprentices. However, women remain the minority of apprentices, and the expansion has reinforced rather than tackled women's concentration in lower-paying fields, which results in a large wage gap between men and women who complete an apprenticeship.





POLICY SOLUTIONS

In addition to promoting access to education and advanced degrees, policymakers should also invest in workforce development initiatives that create pathways to good jobs—and provide employers with the high-demand, highly skilled workforce needed in today's economy—without requiring completion of a four-year degree. In doing so, policymakers should focus attention on addressing the reasons that women are underrepresented in existing initiatives, apprenticeships, and training programs. Employers will not be able to address their needs for a skilled workforce, including for federal infrastructure and manufacturing contracts, unless they can attract and train more women to these fields.

Policymakers should work to:

Enforce, expand, and invest in existing workforce development policies aimed at promoting access to skills training, apprenticeships, and similar pathways to well-paying jobs. This includes the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) and the Perkins Act. Workforce development programs must be adequately resourced: WIOA has been consistently underfunded (in fact, WIOA funding has declined in real terms since its passage in 2014), and Perkins Act funding has **not kept pace** with inflation. Policymakers should strive to ensure equitable access to workforce development and skills training programs for all, lowering financial barriers and other obstacles to participation. In addition, policymakers should utilize these programs as tools to dismantle systems of racism and occupational segregation based on gender, explicitly prioritizing gender and racial equity in partnerships and programming. Policymakers could also look to improve

implementation and accountability, including expanded disaggregated, publicly available data collection and outcome measures. The National Skills Coalition has developed a comprehensive set of **proposals** for how to improve WIOA to support a more inclusive economy, and to ensure the program promotes racial equity and pathways to quality jobs.

Invest in the Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations (WANTO) grant. As the name suggests, this program specifically creates opportunities for women and helps to recruit, train, and retain them in quality pre-apprenticeship and registered apprenticeship programs. WANTO can be a critical tool in bringing more women into well-paying, skilled occupations that are traditionally male-dominated. Policymakers should increase funding for WANTO, ideally to at least \$5 million per state.





Pair federally funded workforce development policies with access to supportive services, as well as other efforts to address the factors that keep women out of the workforce, improve workplaces, and ensure living wages. IWPR's **research** has indicated that many individuals who pursue skills and job training programs do not complete them due to life circumstances, including lack of access to child care or transportation. Coupling these programs with initiatives to improve access to supportive services can help participants successfully complete their training and move into good jobs. Similarly, policymakers should work to ensure that the jobs that workers enter upon completing their training are good jobs by pursuing a range of policies that improve workplaces. These include ensuring access to **child care** and **paid leave**, **improved wages and benefits**, protections for the **right to organize**

and bargain collectively, and policies to prevent and respond to sexual harassment.

Prioritize gender and racial equity in apprenticeship initiatives. While apprenticeships can offer a debt-free pathway to industry-recognized qualifications and skills in high-demand occupations, women—particularly women of color—are less likely than men to be in the highest-paying apprenticeships. Policymakers should seek to use apprenticeships as a tool to break down, rather than perpetuate, systemic barriers, pay inequities, and occupational segregation by supporting continued investments in technical assistance and oversight of employers and unions in their efforts to create welcoming worksites for all workers and implement inclusive recruitment and retention practices.

KEY LEGISLATION

The Jumpstart Our Businesses by Supporting Students (JOBS) Act: Expands eligibility for federal Pell Grant programs to individuals interested in pursuing short-term, high-quality education and training programs to address the worker shortage by closing the skills gap.

Reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA): Any WIOA reauthorization should prioritize ensuring that it is adequately resourced and seek to tackle historical racial and gender inequities within the workforce.