

BETTER WORKPLACES

EQUITABLE WORK AND WAGES

Federal Policy Solutions to Advance Gender Equity | February 2025

OVERVIEW

Everyone has the right to feel safe, economically secure, and valued in their jobs. Gender and racial disparities in the workplace worsen when employers fail to provide essential workplace protections that safeguard their employees' economic opportunities. Policy changes, as well as the full implementation of existing protections, can help to improve workplaces for women—and all workers—and promote equity and long-term economic success.

Two critical components of this effort are [unions and collective bargaining](#), which evidence shows [raise women's wages](#) and reduce the gender pay gap. Other key measures for quality jobs include [eliminating unfair scheduling practices](#), [promoting fair and predictable work](#)

[arrangements](#), and establishing strong mechanisms to [tackle workplace harassment](#), violence, and discrimination.

In addition to safe and fair workplaces, policymakers must work to improve pay and ensure access to benefits. This includes policies guaranteeing all workers earn a fair, livable wage (for more on minimum wage, please see [here](#)), as well as promoting policies that reduce [occupational segregation](#) and [promote pathways](#) to well-paying careers. In addition, policymakers should promote access to critical work-family benefits, including through the creation of a national [paid leave](#) program and guaranteed access to paid sick days.

| 19%

In 2023, unionized women working full-time earned 19% more than their non-unionized counterparts.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- **Unions and collective bargaining improve women's pay and access to employer benefits.** According to the [National Women's Law Center](#) (NWLC), in 2023, unionized women working full-time earned 19 percent more than their non-unionized counterparts, and Latinas and Black women who are protected by unions earned 34 percent and 20 percent more, respectively. Additionally, IWPR [research](#) shows that unionized women are 20 percentage points more likely to have sick leave and 15 percentage points more likely to have paid vacation than non-unionized women. Unions can also help ensure workers have schedule stability—NWLC [research](#) finds that 46 percent of non-union workers report having minimal or no control over their work hours, and only 22 percent of union workers face the same issue.
- **Supporting workplace flexibility is good for women, families, and the economy.** According to IWPR [research](#), 61 percent of women value control over their work schedules when considering job opportunities, and a McKinsey [study](#) found that 38 percent of mothers with young children say they would have to reduce their hours or leave their jobs without workplace flexibility. Lack of schedule control, increasingly common in low-wage work, [increases stress](#) for mothers and causes behavioral problems for their young children.
- **Workplace harassment and violence threaten women's economic security and ability to thrive.** Gender-based harassment and violence carry [high costs](#) for women, employers, and the economy. While the US lacks a reliable data source for the full extent of harassment, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) [reports](#) that 78.2 percent of sexual harassment incidents

are filed by women, with Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia having the highest number of sexual harassment charges. When a woman is pushed out of a good job due to harassment and retaliation, lifetime costs can be very substantial. For example, IWPR [research](#) shows that the lifetime costs for a woman who is pushed out of a good trade apprenticeship and ends up working in a different field can be as high as \$1.3 million due to lower earnings in alternative jobs, the costs of addressing physical and mental health consequences, unemployment, and lower pension benefits.

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- **The majority (6 in 10) of part-time workers are women, according to NWLC.** Part-time workers are significantly more likely than full-time workers to have low-paid jobs. Ten percent of part-time workers live in poverty, and they are paid about 20 percent less than full-time workers in the same field, per [research](#) by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI).
- **Companies that ensure workplaces are free of harassment do better than others.** IWPR [research](#) shows that sexual harassment and violence carry high costs for businesses. It also shows that [sexual harassment](#) is less common in more diverse workplaces and that more diverse businesses provide [higher](#) financial returns than others in the same industry.



WHY IT MATTERS

Creating better workplaces is good for workers and families, and safer and fairer workplaces can be a tool for promoting gender equity and the well-being of women. Building better workplaces is also an economic imperative, benefitting businesses and the broader economy.

Evidence clearly shows that union membership and collective bargaining rights are critical for women and workers of color.

Women, who make up **almost half of all union members** (46.8 percent) and those covered by a union contract (47.1 percent), greatly benefit from union representation. Research from EPI, IWPR, and others consistently shows that union membership helps **reduce pay discrepancies** by gender and race and plays a significant role in **improving workers' access to better benefits**, including health care, retirement benefits, and paid time off. Unions are also crucial in providing **retirement security** for women workers, which is especially important as women face a **retirement income gap that exceeds the wage gap** due to lower lifetime earnings and career interruptions from caregiving responsibilities.

Unions further play a crucial role in **improving work schedule stability** and, through collective bargaining, help create **more predictable work environments**, according to NWLC, which are especially beneficial for women balancing caregiving and work. EPI **research** shows that collective bargaining agreements offer vital protections, providing stronger mechanisms to address employer misconduct and safeguard against retaliation.

Across many industries and job categories, workers also face unfair or unpredictable scheduling practices; these are particularly common in low-paying jobs, with "just-in-time" or "on-call" shifts imposing **significant inflexibility**, offering little advance notice, and often disregarding workers' need for rest,

caregiving, or schooling. These precarious schedules have widespread negative effects, as **reported** by A Better Balance, such as greater household economic insecurity, income volatility, and poorer health, while reinforcing gender and racial inequities. There is evidence that Black and Latino/a workers are **particularly vulnerable** to work schedule instability; these workers are overrepresented in sectors where schedule instability is prevalent and may experience inequality in scheduling compared to their peers.

In contrast, McKinsey **research** demonstrates that fair scheduling supports women in balancing work and caregiving responsibilities, reduces burnout, increases job satisfaction, and allows women to stay in their positions. The Center for American Progress **reports** how the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the importance of workplace flexibility to workplace gender equity, as women—who shouldered most caregiving responsibilities—faced greater wage and hour losses than men.

Finally, across industries, women are exposed to **sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and discrimination**, which can have severe long-term consequences on their economic security and career advancement. Experiences of **sexual harassment and violence** hinder economic outcomes by causing women to lose paid workdays, incur higher health care costs, and face difficulty participating in education and employment, all of which contribute to their lower economic status. In the workplace, gender-based discrimination often compounds these challenges, with women of color being especially vulnerable to both harassment and unequal treatment, deepening the racial and gender **wage gaps**.





POLICY SOLUTIONS

Policymakers can enact policies that empower workers, promote safe and equitable workplaces, and improve working conditions overall. **This includes:**

Enact policies that protect and strengthen the right of workers to unionize and to collectively bargain for better pay and working conditions. This includes safeguarding the right to strike, ensuring workers' right to collective bargaining, protecting and expanding the right of public sector employees to unionize, limiting employer interference in unionization efforts, and providing better avenues for employees facing retaliation for union-related activities to seek justice. Policymakers should oppose any efforts to undermine existing statutes and policies that support the formation of unions and the ability of workers to engage in collective bargaining.

Work to prevent unfair scheduling practices by promoting policies to ensure workers have access to predictable schedules and require compensation for workers who must take on onerous or fluctuating hours. Legislation should create opportunities for employees to provide input on and request changes to

their schedules without fear of retaliation, mandate a minimum number of hours between shifts for adequate rest time, and ensure that employees receive a minimum of two weeks advance notice of their shifts and schedules. Federal policymakers should also explore new and innovative ways to promote flexible work schedules, remote work options, and other opportunities that allow employees to choose scheduling that works for them and their families and ensure that workers who need flexibility because of **care responsibilities** should not experience discrimination or retaliation.

Pursue policy changes that improve pay and critical benefits for workers.

This includes raising the minimum wage and ending the subminimum wage (discussed [here](#)), guaranteeing access to paid leave and paid sick leave (discussed [here](#)), and promoting access to affordable child care (discussed [here](#)).



Work to promote safer workplaces and enact new mechanisms to address workplace harassment and violence. This includes new legislation targeting sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Policymakers should look to both expanding existing protections and improving outreach, education, and research around workplace harassment. Further, policymakers should work to improve the ability of workers who experience these issues to seek justice and recompense, including by enacting prohibitions on forced arbitration and other policies that prevent workers from reporting harassment.

Promote equity for part-time workers. Not only are part-time workers often paid significantly less per hour than full-time employees, but they also face specific **challenges**, including underemployment (the inability to access the number of hours they need), unpredictable work schedules, and an inability to access benefits, including the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) leave.

Invest in the fight against workplace discrimination through both considering new policy initiatives and resourcing the entities responsible for preventing and responding to discrimination in the workplace. President Trump's January 2025 decision to roll back federal antidiscrimination policies, including a civil rights-era **executive order** intended to prevent discrimination in government hiring, represents a massive step backward. Policymakers should further ensure that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the agency responsible for enforcing federal employment antidiscrimination laws, continues to fully enforce these laws, including for women of color.

Seek opportunities to oppose discrimination, including by promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) initiatives aimed at creating more inclusive and equitable workplaces. Policymakers should oppose any effort to undermine or restrict these initiatives. Employer policies targeted at remedying past discrimination and eliminating exclusionary and discriminatory practices have been challenged and restricted by policymakers at both state and federal levels. However, workplace protection policies play a critical role in promoting equitable and safe workplaces and leveling the playing field for all workers. Policymakers should oppose efforts to limit or restrict workplace DEIA initiatives.





KEY LEGISLATION

Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO)

Act: Bipartisan legislation to protect the rights of workers to bargain collectively. Specifically, the PRO Act includes provisions to improve the ability of workers to act collectively through strikes, boycotts, and other acts of solidarity; allow unions to override so-called right-to-work laws in states; minimize employer interference and influence in union elections; and improve the ability of workers who suffer retaliation for exercising their rights to seek justice.

Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act:

Legislation to protect the right of public employees to join unions and engage in collective bargaining. This bill requires that states, territories, and localities provide public employees with a range of labor protections, including the right to form and join a union and to bargain collectively, and the right to have their union recognized by their public employer.

Schedules that Work Act: A bill to establish the right for workers to request a schedule that meets their needs, ensuring they have input in their work schedules without fear of retaliation. It also provides additional protections for workers in industries with well-documented abusive scheduling practices and mandates extra compensation for employees who face

specific types of scheduling challenges or unpredictability, such as being placed "on call" without guarantee of hours.

BE HEARD in the Workplace Act:

Legislation to improve efforts to prevent and respond to workplace harassment through a range of initiatives, such as 1) ending mandatory arbitration and pre-employment non-disclosure agreements to ensure accountability and transparency, 2) expanding civil rights protections for workers and clarifying that the Civil Rights Act protects workers from workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, 3) supporting the ability of workers to come forward and pursue justice, and 4) investing in research and improved reporting to better understand the full impacts of workplace harassment. The BE HEARD Act also ends the tipped minimum wage, recognizing that tipped workers are particularly vulnerable to workplace abuse.

Part-Time Worker Bill of Rights Act:

Legislation to address several of the major challenges facing part-time workers, including underemployment and fair hours, unpredictable work schedules, and discrimination, and expand access to FMLA to include part-time workers.





EXECUTIVE PRIORITIES

Fully implement all existing policies and guidance on preventing and responding to workplace harassment and discrimination, including the April 2024 EEOC **Enforcement Guidance on Harassment in the Workplace** and the **National Plan to End Gender-Based Violence**. By outlining legal standards and obligations for employers around harassment under federal antidiscrimination statutes, these guidelines outline protections for employees based on criteria including race, disability, and sex (including sexual orientation and gender identity).

Work to establish the federal government as the gold standard in the 21st-century workplace by promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in the federal workforce.

Since taking office, President Trump has overturned critical federal workforce protections and has begun dismantling the federal diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives designed to ensure that the federal workforce and the workforces of firms receiving federal tax dollars truly reflect the diversity of the American population. Instead, future administrations should look to build on the 2021 Executive Order 14035 on "Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in the Federal Workforce" to improve the ability of the federal government to recruit and retain a talented and diverse workforce.