MOTHERS, CHILDREN AND LOW-WAGE WORK:
THE ABILITY TO EARN A FAMILY WAGE

A study by IWPR, examining the premise that low wages and structural conditions in the workplace play a role in the disproportionate number of women and children living in poverty, investigates the ability of working women, especially working mothers, to earn a wage adequate to support themselves and their families. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which that ability differs by race and ethnicity. In addition, the effectiveness of strategies such as marriage and income support programs in drawing families out of poverty is evaluated.

What is an adequate wage?

- Wage levels are calculated as multiples of the poverty line for a family of four; which was $12,675 annually in 1989 dollars or an hourly wage of $6.33 earned full-time for the entire year. A less than adequate wage is anything below $6.33 per hour, a minimally adequate wage ranges from $6.34-$12.66, a higher than adequate wage is $12.67 per hour and above. Although the average household maintained by a single parent has three members (usually a mother and two children), a fourth person is added to account for the services a single parent must purchase on the market in the absence of a stay-at-home person (i.e., child care and household services).

Who needs a family wage?: The myth of the male breadwinner

The traditional concept of the "family wage" assumes that women have access through marriage to a higher wage earner and, therefore, do not need to earn enough income to support a family. The breadwinning father, stay-at-home mother model, however, no longer accurately reflects the workplace or the home:

- 67% of single mothers are in the labor force; 65% of mothers in dual parent families are in the labor force; and 53% of mothers of children under 3 years of age are in the labor force;

- 2/3 of all women with children will spend at least part of their lifetimes as single mothers.

Many current policy recommendations reflect a lack of knowledge regarding women's needs as workers and heads or co-heads of households. IWPR's study shows:

- 45% of all women workers earn less than adequate wages (less than $6.33/hour), 45% earn a minimally adequate wage ($6.37-$12.66/hour), and only 10% of all women workers earn a higher than adequate wage ($12.67 or more/hour); 43% of white women workers earn a less than adequate wage, compared to 53% of both Black and Hispanic women workers;

- 25% of all working women earning less than an adequate wage are their family's main breadwinner;

- 55% of women earning below adequate wages have children to support as compared to 49% of all women workers;

- Generalizing from the study sample, 10 million women with reasonably permanent attachment to the workforce do not earn enough to support themselves and their children at an adequate level. Almost half are the main breadwinner in their families.

The Institute for Women's Policy Research is an independent non-profit institute dedicated to conducting and disseminating research that informs public policy debates affecting women. This fact sheet is based on the IWPR paper Mothers, Children, and Low-Wage Work: The Ability to Earn a Family Wage, by Roberta M. Spalter-Roth, Heidi I. Hartmann, and Linda M. Andrews, presented at the 85th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Session on Women and Public Policy, August 13, 1990.

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Women's ability to earn a family wage varies by race, ethnicity, and union status:

- Three out of ten white women workers with children are their families' main breadwinner; more than half earn a less than adequate wage. Approximately six out of ten black women workers with children are their families' primary income source, more than 60% earn less than adequate wages. Four out of ten Hispanic women with children are the primary breadwinner; more than 60% earn a less than adequate wage. Black women are the group least likely to be living in dual-earner households, and are the most likely to be the main breadwinner for their children;

- Union participation substantially increased the likelihood of earning an adequate wage for all women. Women covered by union contracts have at least twice the odds of earning adequate wages, controlling for other factors such as education and industry. Women of color benefit most from union status.

Children of low-wage earners are at risk of poverty:

- 40% of children living with one low-wage earner are in poverty, the same proportion as children living in families with no working parent; 18% of children living in families with two low-wage earners are in poverty, compared to only 5% of children in families with at least one adequate-wage earner;

- Although marriage, even to another low-wage earner, substantially decreases the likelihood of a child living in poverty, the child is at great risk of falling into poverty if the marriage breaks up or if one parent loses her or his job.

Means-tested benefits often supplement the incomes of low-wage workers:

- 15% of all female low-wage workers live in families receiving assistance from at least one of the means-tested programs (AFDC, WIC, General Assistance, Medicaid, Food Stamps and other welfare) or social security;

- 40% of all single mothers earning a less than adequate wage receive some form of assistance. Slightly more than 20% of low-wage mothers who are the sole earner in a married-couple household live in a family receiving some form of support.

Conclusions and policy suggestions:

- Marriage is an inadequate policy solution as it assumes that women have access to higher earning partners and will be economically dependent on them; this is not a viable option for many women;

- Income support programs help reduce poverty, but only if treated as a complement to rather than mutually exclusive from low wage work;

- To raise wages in low-wage jobs, the minimum wage should be raised and labor law legislation should be reformed to increase the ability of women workers to organize and bargain collectively;

- Sex equity in training and education, especially improved training in non-traditional fields, as well as improved enforcement of equal opportunity laws, would facilitate women's movement into higher-wage, male dominated occupations and ensure non-discrimination in hiring, pay, promotion, and benefits in all occupations;

- Policies that improve the supply, quality and affordability of child care as well as new labor standards that recognize the responsibilities of workers aside from paid work, such as the proposed Family Medical Leave Act, should be adopted.

About this study: The research on which the full paper is based uses data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census' Survey of Income and Program Participation. The study included women who had worked during at least seven months and 500 hours in the survey year; teenagers living with a parent were excluded. Much of the research was originally conducted for the Displaced Homemakers' Network, under contract from the U.S. Department of Labor, and the Committee on Women's Employment and Related Social Issues of the National Research Council/National Academy of Sciences. All views expressed here are the authors' and do not reflect the views or policies of the Department of Labor or the National Academy of Sciences.