

THE STATE OF WORKING WOMEN

THE 2023
STATE OF
WORKING NORTH
CAROLINA REPORT



WRP

WORKERS' RIGHTS
PROJECT

BY BRANDON CUNNINGHAM AND IVY NICOLE-JONET

NORTH CAROLINA JUSTICE CENTER

See our companion website to this report:
www.StateofWorkingNC.org

NOTE: The report's authors would like to acknowledge the complexity of gender and gender identity and to make clear that our definition of women includes all women-identified people. In this report, we cite numerous sources, among which the consistency of this definition may vary. In many data sources (including the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, which is heavily utilized in this report for analysis of wages and jobs), survey data is collected on binary sex only. These limitations make it hard to provide a detailed analysis of issues affecting trans and non-binary people or to guarantee that their experiences are represented in many of these statistics. This practice is beginning to change—the U.S. Census Bureau collected data on sexual orientation and gender identity for the first time in a major survey in 2021.¹ We hope that this will be more common practice going forward.



NORTH CAROLINA JUSTICE CENTER

www.ncjustice.org ■ contact@ncjustice.org

(919) 856-2570 ■ 224 S. Dawson Street, Raleigh, NC 27601

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INTRODUCTION

In this State of Working North Carolina report, we look at what it means to be a working woman in our state in 2023.

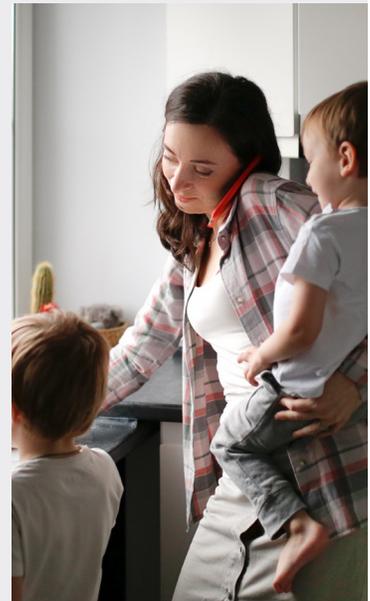
OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES, THE OUTLOOK FOR WOMEN IN THE LABOR FORCE HAS IMPROVED SUBSTANTIALLY.

But improvement over a baseline where women were considered second-class citizens isn't enough, and many disparities still exist today. While many of these disparities are common throughout the U.S., North Carolina is a uniquely difficult environment for women. In their 2023 report, Oxfam ranked North Carolina as America's worst state for working women.²

When we do see equality or near equality between men and women, racial inequality lurks beneath the surface. Black and Brown women face more barriers than their white counterparts, and immigrant women, in particular, experience the worst conditions the labor market has to offer. Barriers like occupational segregation, discrimination, and sexual harassment mean women still face a hostile work

environment. Women face more disruptions throughout their careers, as caregiving responsibilities, pregnancy, and many other issues still burden women disproportionately. These barriers cause women to work longer, for less money, and in more precarious situations.

Throughout this report, you will hear the stories of working women in North Carolina. Their experiences reinforce much of the research cited in this report but also shed light on experiences that are hard to quantify. Beyond the inequality these stories and research identify, there is hope for a better future. Women are organizing in greater numbers, and as women flex their collective power, there is the potential for change from the halls of Congress to the smallest of workplaces.



A SNAPSHOT OF THE WORKFORCE

“My favorite thing about organizing has been organizing with a strong group of young women and seeing them grow and flourish and learn how to use their voice.”

- Ariana Lingerfeldt

STATISTICAL INDICATORS OF THE LABOR FORCE DIFFER FOR MEN AND WOMEN, AND MANY OF THOSE DIFFERENCES ARE DEEPENED BY RACE.

Unemployment is near historic lows, but some groups, particularly Black women, don't fare as well as others when it comes to wages, unemployment, and job quality. Despite changes over the last 70 years, a gap between men and women remains in terms of labor force participation. Women

earn less than men on average, and within the same occupational group, men almost always earn more than women. Men and women often work very different occupations—and wages are lower across the board for jobs worked by women, particularly for Black and Hispanic women.

UNEMPLOYMENT AND LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION

The unemployment rate has hovered near pre-pandemic levels—the lowest of this millennium—for most of 2022 and 2023. In North Carolina, the unemployment rate was 3.3 percent as of June 2023³. Across all months of 2022, the unemployment rate averaged 3.7 percent.

Unemployment rates for women are typically slightly higher than for men. In 2022, the unemployment rate for men was 3.4 percent, compared to 4.0 percent for women.

Over the last two decades, the unemployment rate was usually higher for women than for men, with the notable exception of four years during the Great Recession as well as in 2021.

The unemployment rate varies more by race than by gender. In 2022, the average unemployment rate for Black women was 7.5 percent, and 5.9 percent for Black men.

While the unemployment rate is one of the more popular economic



indicators, it doesn't tell the whole story. The unemployment rate only refers to those unemployed as a percentage of the total workforce, which does not include people not actively seeking work. The labor force participation rate is the percentage of the adult civilian population working or actively looking for work. In 2022, the labor force participation rate was 60.7 percent in North Carolina. This statistic shows a clearer gender divide.

Nationally, women's labor force participation rate increased over the last half of the 20th century. Since the turn of the century, the labor force participation rate of both men and women has fallen, mostly due to the aging of the Baby Boomer generation

Figure 1: Annual Unemployment Rate by Gender

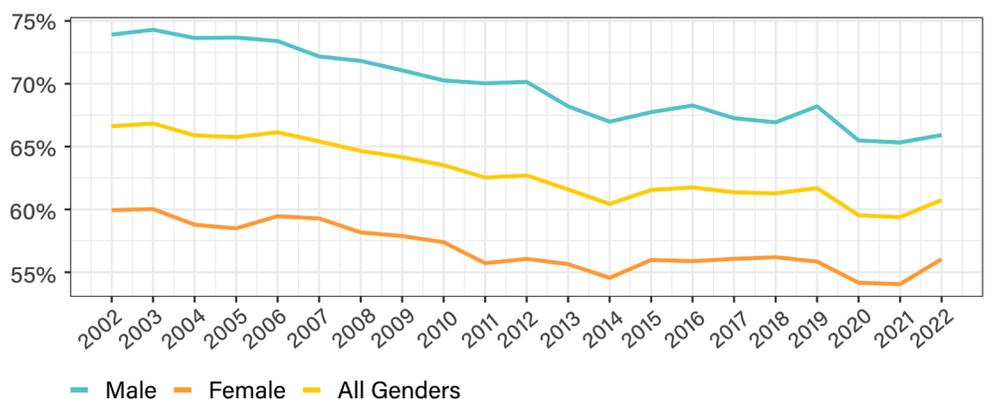
North Carolina, 2002-2022



Data Source: Author's analysis of Economic Policy Institute Current Population Survey Extracts, Version 1.0.42, <https://microdata.epi.org>.

Figure 2: Annual Labor Force Participation Rate by Gender

North Carolina, 2002-2022



Data Source: Author's analysis of Economic Policy Institute Current Population Survey Extracts, Version 1.0.42, <https://microdata.epi.org>.

A SNAPSHOT OF THE WORKFORCE

and other structural and cyclical factors.^{4,5}

North Carolina’s data also reflects this trend. Figure 2 shows the labor force participation rate in North Carolina from 2002 to 2022 falling at similar rates for men

and women. In 2022, the annual average labor force participation rate for men was 65.9 percent, compared to 56 percent for women.

Across gender and race, the labor force participation rate is highest

among Hispanic men (79.1 percent) and lowest among white women (53.9 percent). White, Black, and Hispanic men all have higher labor force participation rates than women of the same race or ethnicity.

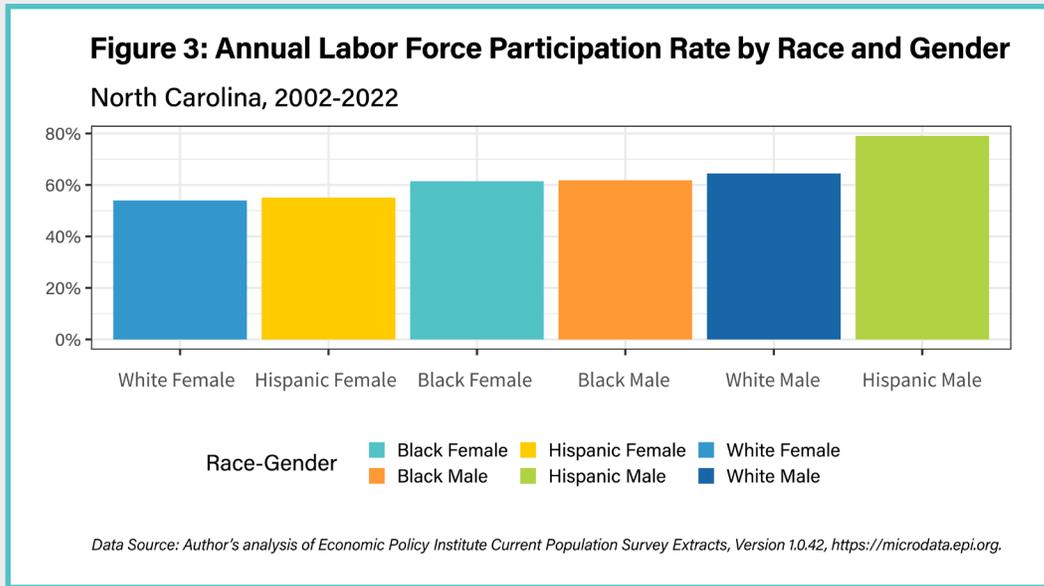


Table 1: Unemployment and Labor Force Participation Rate by Race and Gender in North Carolina

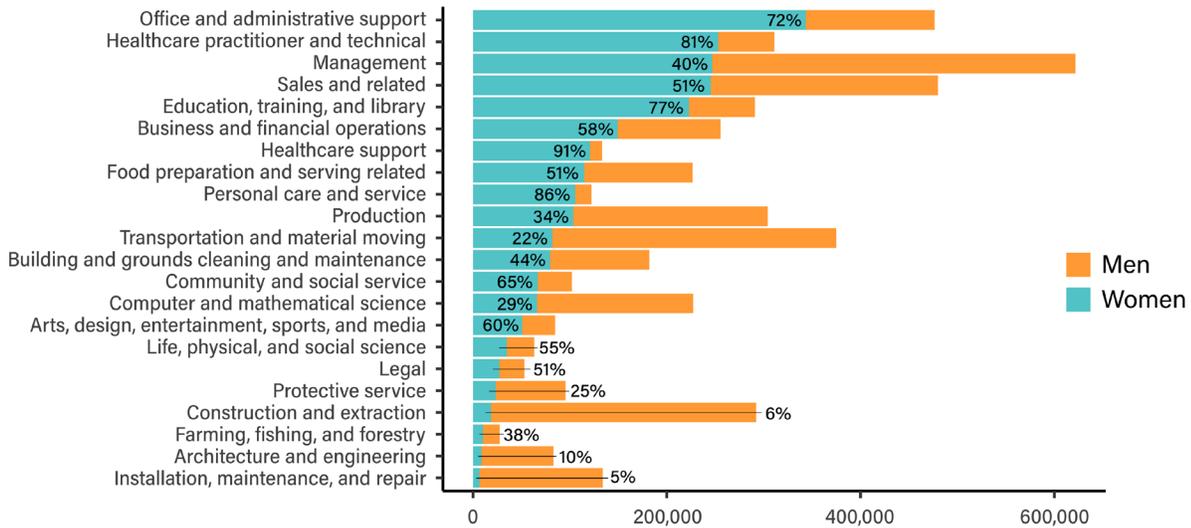
Group	Unemployment Rate	Labor Force Participation Rate
All North Carolina	3.7%	60.7%
Men	3.4%	65.9%
Women	4.0%	56.0%
White	2.8%	59.0%
Black	6.8%	61.6%
Hispanic	3.1%	66.7%
White Men	2.7%	64.4%
Black Men	5.9%	61.8%
Hispanic Men	3.1%	79.1%
White Women	2.8%	53.9%
Black Women	7.5%	61.5%
Hispanic Women	2.9%	55.1%

Source: Author's Analysis of the Economic Policy Institute Current Population Survey Extracts. Data is for 2022.

WHAT WOMEN DO FOR WORK

Figure 4: Employment Levels by Occupation, 2022

Total Women and Men in North Carolina and % Women



Data Source: Author's analysis of Economic Policy Institute Current Population Survey Extracts, Version 1.0.42, <https://microdata.epi.org>.

Across major occupational groups, men and women concentrate in very different jobs. Figure 4 shows 2022 data on the occupation groups employing the greatest number of women in North Carolina, along with the percent of the occupation group made up of women.

Approximately 343,000 North Carolina women worked office and administrative support jobs in 2022, occupying 72 percent of these jobs. Percentage-wise, healthcare support, personal care and service, healthcare practitioner and technical, and education, training, and library occupations were made up of 91 percent, 86 percent, 81 percent, and 77 women workers, respectively. Management occupations had the third highest number of women workers at nearly 247,000; however, men are

overrepresented with 60 percent of the jobs in this group.

Occupational makeup for women has some notable differences by race and ethnicity. Figure 4 shows the nine majority-women occupational groups that employ more than 100,000 workers. Fifty-two percent of healthcare support workers (primarily in Nursing Assistant and Personal Care Aide roles) are Black women, compared to 29 percent of white women. This is by far the highest concentration of Black women in one occupational group, with community care and social service a distant second at 22 percent. On the other hand, Black women occupy 14 percent of healthcare practitioner and technical occupations; white women represent 60 percent of these roles.

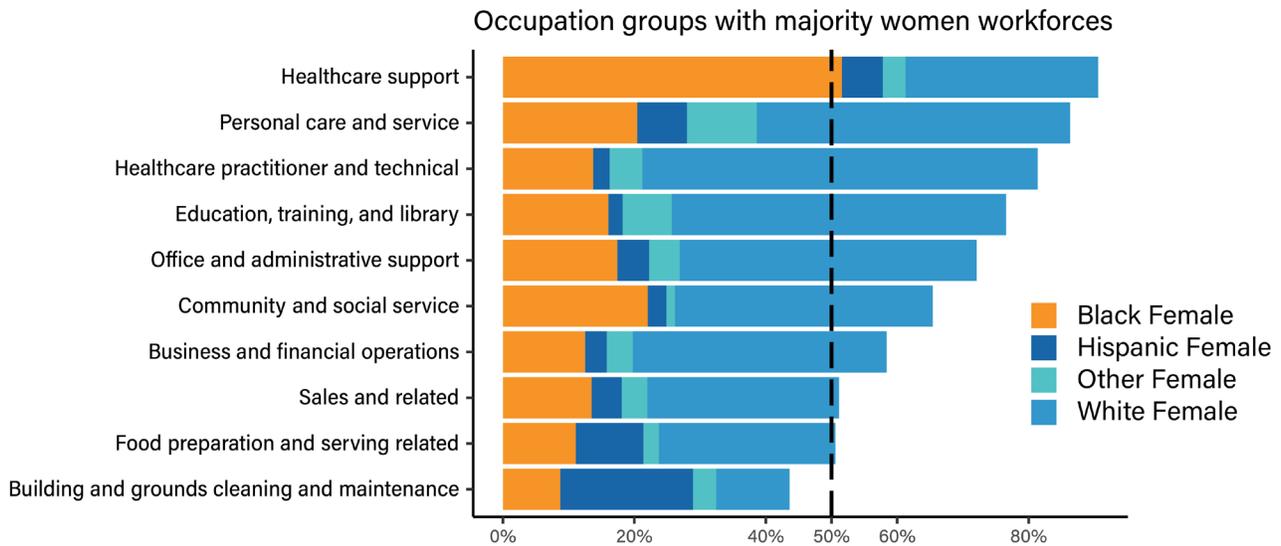
For Hispanic women, job

opportunities do not always follow traditional occupational segregation of women's work. The occupation with the highest representation of Hispanic women in North Carolina is building and grounds cleaning and maintenance. Women make up just 44 percent of the building and grounds cleaning and maintenance workforce, but almost half of those women, and 20 percent of all workers in these occupations, are Hispanic women. The occupations with the next highest representation of Hispanic women are food preparation and serving related (10 percent) and production (eight percent, in an occupational group where nearly two-thirds of workers are men), and personal care and service (eight percent).

A SNAPSHOT OF THE WORKFORCE



Figure 5: Number of Workers in Occupation Groups by Race and Gender, 2022



Data Source: Author's analysis of Economic Policy Institute Current Population Survey Extracts, Version 1.0.42, <https://microdata.epi.org>.

WAGES

The median wage for workers aged 16 and older in North Carolina in 2022 was \$20.39 but varied by race and gender⁶. Median wages for men were about two dollars higher than for women and were higher for men across all major race and ethnicity groupings. Hispanic women in North Carolina had the lowest median wage at \$14.75 per hour, while “other” men (comprised of all race groupings other than white, Black, or Hispanic) had the highest median wage at \$28.41 per hour. Figure 6 (on page 10) looks at two major factors in the pay gaps between men and women: men receiving higher wages within an occupational group and occupational segregation. A few trends stand out. Within jobs that are women-dominated but still employ enough men for a reliable estimate of wages, we typically see higher wages for men in those occupations. In two of the higher-paying occupations where women

Table 2: Median Hourly Wage in North Carolina by Gender and Race/Ethnicity, 2022

	Women	Men
ALL RACES	\$ 19.94	\$ 21.98
White	\$ 21.94	\$ 24.31
Black	\$ 18.53	\$ 19.41
Hispanic	\$ 14.75	\$ 17.75
Other	\$ 19.61	\$ 28.41

are more prevalent, men make noticeably more than women per hour. In healthcare practitioner and technical occupations, men had a median hourly wage of \$32.45, compared to \$28.71 for women. And in education, training, and library jobs, the median wage of \$28.84 for men was more than \$5 per hour higher than the \$23.26 that women received in these occupations. The three lowest-paying occupational groups in Figure 6, food preparation and serving,

sales, and healthcare support, are all jobs with a majority of women workers, and the median wage for women is less than \$15 per hour in all three.

The only occupational groups analyzed in which women receive a higher median wage than men are personal care and service (where men are less than 15 percent of the workforce and the wage difference is less than half a dollar) and computer and mathematical science (where

A SNAPSHOT OF THE WORKFORCE

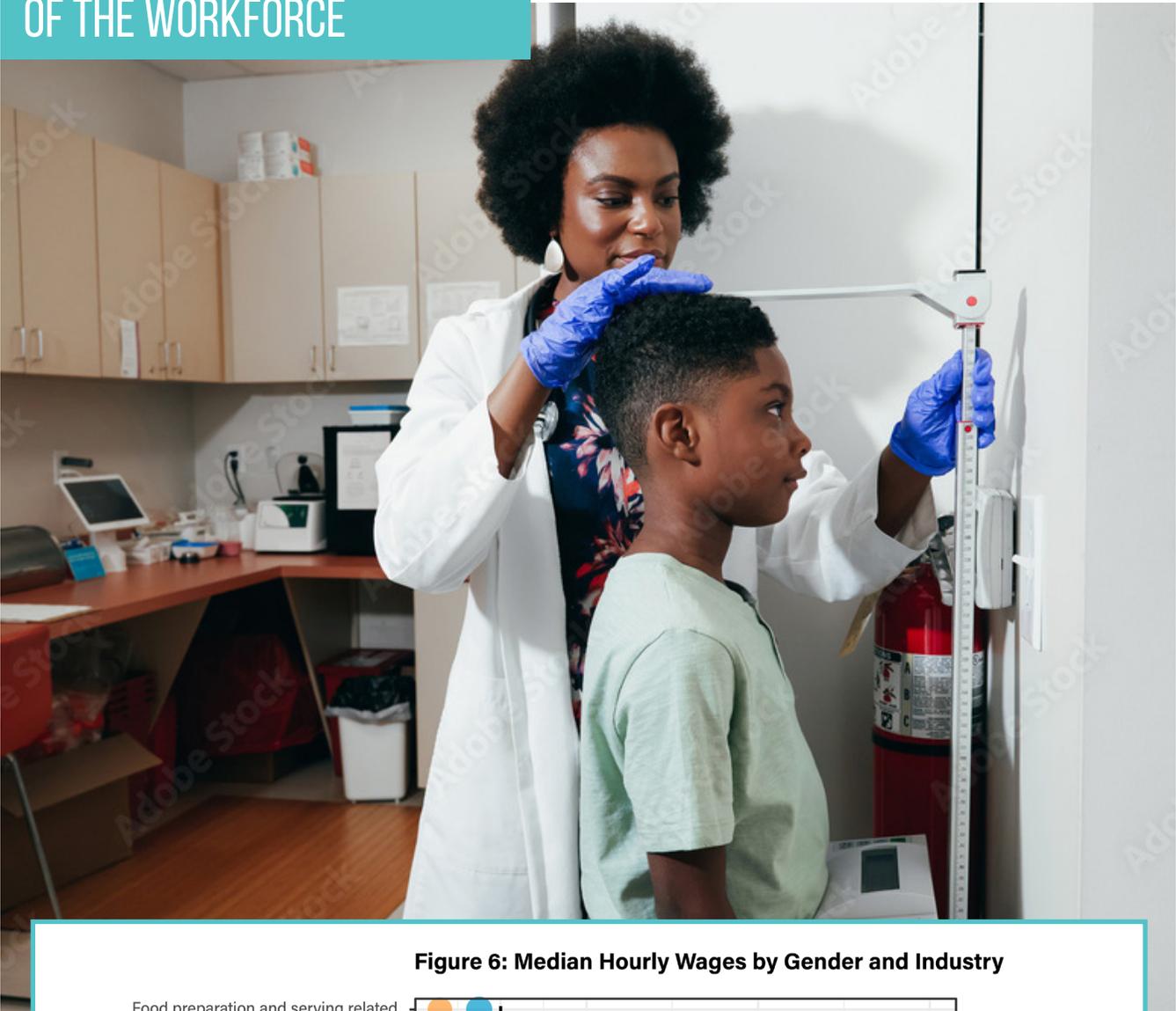
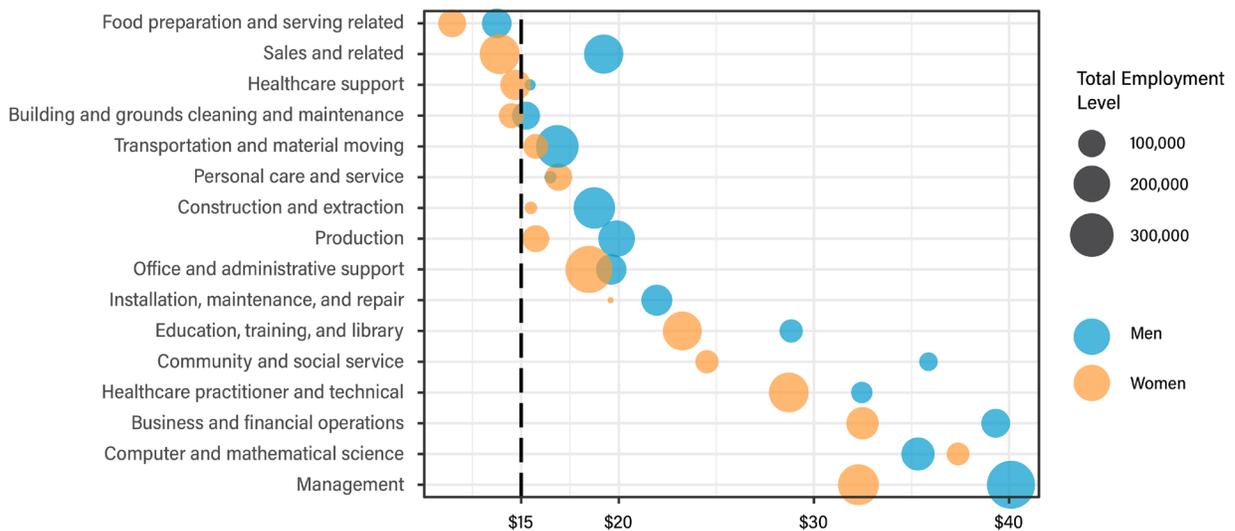


Figure 6: Median Hourly Wages by Gender and Industry



Data Source: Author's analysis of Economic Policy Institute Current Population Survey Extracts, Version 1.0.42, <https://microdata.epi.org>.

women make roughly two dollars more than their male counterparts).

In higher-paying industries that employ majority women, white women occupy higher-paying roles. The division in the healthcare industry noted earlier illustrates this particularly well. In healthcare support occupations, predominately worked by Black women, the median hourly wage is \$14.71 for women. In healthcare

practitioner and technical positions, worked in majority by white women, the hourly wage for women is nearly double that, at \$28.71.

Black women are overrepresented in one higher-paying occupation, community and social service, but this occupation group sees the largest gap between men's and women's median wages at more than ten dollars per hour. In computer and mathematical

science jobs, where women make up less than 30 percent of the workforce but earn more than men, over half of the women employed are white, and only about one in five are Black or Hispanic. All these numbers demonstrate that today, the sorting of men and women into different types of jobs—or “occupational segregation”—is still prevalent today.

PERSPECTIVE: MANAGERS ON POWER TRIPS

Women are vastly over-represented in the lowest-paid jobs. They are underpaid and overworked. Discrimination against women in the workforce is, unfortunately, common.

Bertha Bradley, aka Mama Cookie, is a service worker fighting and organizing to ensure workers know their rights and are supported to resist abusive workforce practices. A Durham, North Carolina resident, Bertha is a labor rights activist and organizer of over 40 years, and a founding member of the Union of Southern Service Workers (USSW).

Bertha has observed the ways in which management exploits low-wage workers' dependence on their jobs to sustain themselves and their families, mistreating workers with little consequence due

to workers' fear of losing their livelihoods.

In one instance, Bertha witnessed a manager at Burger King yelling at a young female employee and intervened on the worker's behalf. Bertha stated:

“It’s a power thing with managers. They fail to realize they are also just workers. [The manager] felt he could control them; people are not robots. He thought he could talk to her [abusively] because she was a kid...school was out, and she needed the money. They look at Latino women, Black and Brown women and think: ‘[They] have to work. [They] have to make money. [They]’re poor. [They] have to have this money.’

“And so managers have a tendency to [tell] these kids, you’re going to have to deal with it. You need the money;



Photo by Dripped Out Trade Unionists

your family can’t do something because you have to work. They feel we are beneath them as women. So that’s what kills me. But I have to step back and let them know, ‘No. I’m just as powerful as you are. I know just as much.’ They must get off these power trips and realize who we are as women. They must recognize that we are women and don’t have to tolerate this division between men and women.”

THE ISSUES WORKING WOMEN FACE

“I’m just baffled every single time about how little North Carolina cares about the working person. I am just constantly reminded that you could be the best employee, but when you need assistance, [the employer] can replace you immediately.”

- Blanca Borceguin

WOMEN FACE UNIQUE OBSTACLES IN THE WORKFORCE, AFFECTING THEIR ABILITY TO WORK, EARN WAGES, AND LIVE HEALTHY, FULFILLING LIVES.

Women generally earn less than men, which means more women live in poverty, work into old age, and have less money when they retire. Longstanding attitudes about women’s roles in the workforce and as caregivers mean women continue to face discrimination in hiring and advancement, are pushed into occupations traditionally designated for women, and leave the workforce in greater numbers when

childcare and other family care responsibilities arise. Women face several health and safety concerns which impact their ability to remain and advance in the workforce. Pregnancy, workplace sexual harassment, and intimate partner violence are all obstacles which have disproportionate impacts on women, particularly on women of color and immigrant women.

MORE WOMEN LIVE AND WORK IN POVERTY

Across all age groups, race and ethnicity groups, education levels, and within comparable family and parent statuses, poverty rates are higher for women than for men in North Carolina. A report from the N.C. Poverty Research Fund analyzed what poverty looked like for women in North Carolina from 2014 to 2020.⁷ The report found that Black and Hispanic women are more than twice as likely as white women, and nearly three times as likely as

white men, to live in poverty. While married couples have lower poverty rates than unmarried persons, women as the head of household are nearly twice as likely as men to live in poverty, both in households with and without children.

Poverty rates are much higher for part-time workers. Roughly two-thirds of all part-time workers are women and part-time workers earn less money (over half of women



working part-time earned less than \$15 per hour) and have less access to paid time off, advancement, or benefits. Sixteen percent of women in part-time jobs want more work but cannot get more hours from their employer or find a full-time job. Others are forced into part-time work because women still bear the burden of family care obligations; more than one in five women worked part-time due to childcare and family obligations,

compared to just two percent of men.

The National Women’s Law Center analyzed the composition of low-paying jobs—defined as the 40 lowest-paying jobs nationally—both for part-time and full-time workers.⁸ They found that in North Carolina, women make up 64 percent of workers in these low-paying jobs—more than 400,000 women in total.

Seventeen percent of these women live under the federal poverty line, and 42 percent live under 200 percent of the federal poverty line. These rates are higher than the national average for both metrics.

Many workers find themselves in poverty despite holding down a job, and this is especially true for working women.

“We are subsidizing our entire labor force on the back of underpaid people who lack benefits, and who are disproportionately women of color.” - Beth Messersmith, North Carolina Director of MomsRising

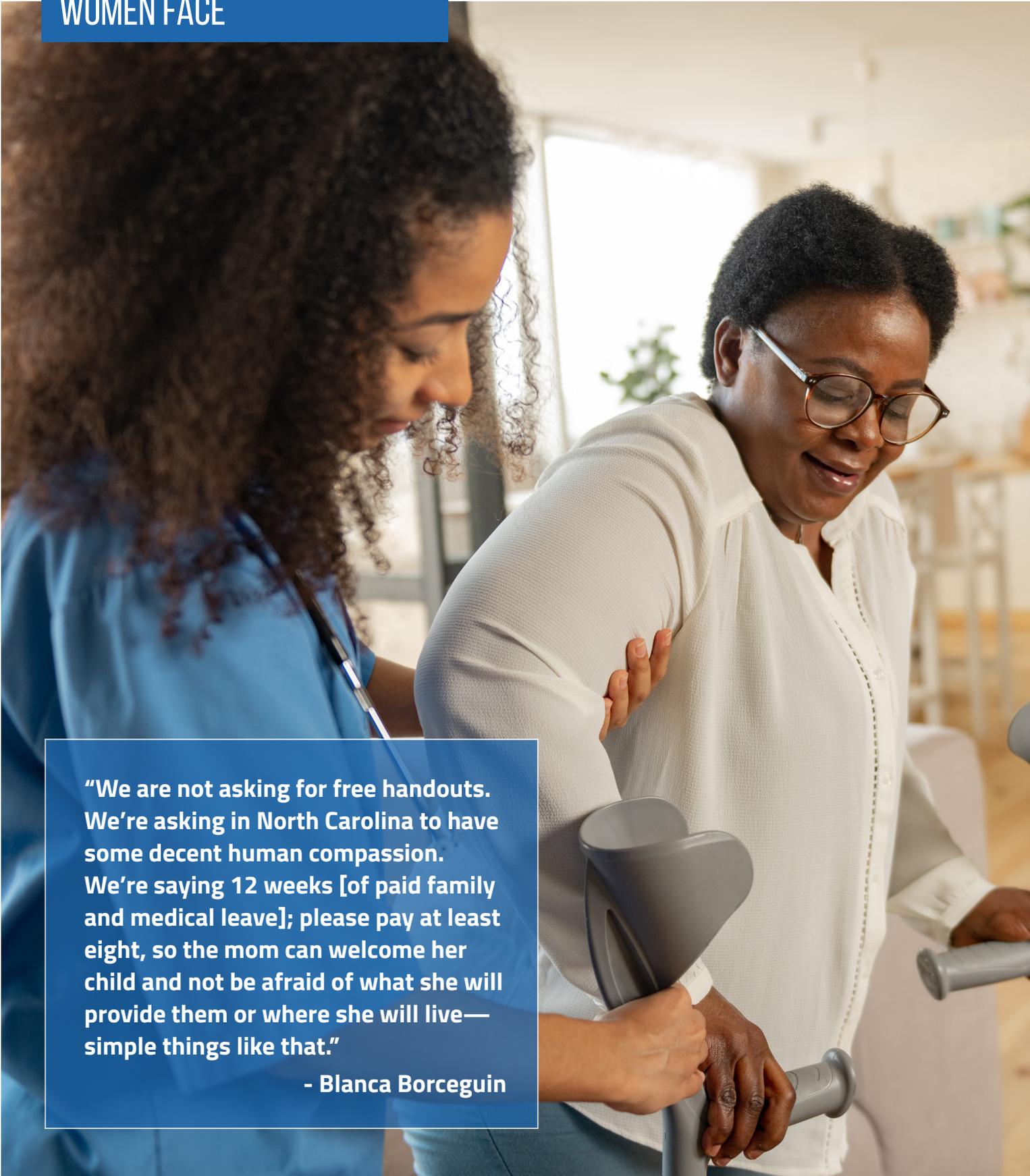
THE CARE ECONOMY AND UNPAID CAREGIVING

The care economy, which consists of a substantial amount of unpaid care work, is one of the most undervalued sources of labor in the United States. Caring for children, elderly, sick, injured, mentally ill, and disabled people is an essential function of any society. Everyone

will need caregiving at some point in their lives, and most people experience needing to care for, or find caregiving options for, a loved one or dependent at one or more points in their lives. When working people cannot find affordable, reliable care for their loved ones, they often must drop out of the

labor force entirely. A strong care economy is essential for a highly functioning economy overall and for equity for all workers, especially women.

THE ISSUES WORKING WOMEN FACE



“We are not asking for free handouts. We’re asking in North Carolina to have some decent human compassion. We’re saying 12 weeks [of paid family and medical leave]; please pay at least eight, so the mom can welcome her child and not be afraid of what she will provide them or where she will live—simple things like that.”

- Blanca Borceguin

UNPAID CAREGIVING

The size of the care economy is hard to assess because much care work is unpaid. One 2022 study estimated the total value of the care economy, both paid and unpaid, at \$6 trillion, or roughly one quarter of the entire U.S. gross domestic product (GDP). This includes \$2.5 to \$3.5 trillion in unpaid care labor, \$2.2 trillion in the formal care economy, and \$400 billion in the “gray economy” (labor that is paid under the table and not counted in most economic statistics).⁹ A 2012 study found a similar value, \$3.2 trillion, for unpaid caregiving work.¹⁰

The American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) examined a subset of this type of care, unpaid eldercare, and found that in 2021, caregivers nationwide provided 36 billion hours of unpaid eldercare. This unpaid eldercare was worth an estimated \$600 billion, including \$16.5 billion in unpaid eldercare labor in North Carolina.¹¹ Almost three-fifths of unpaid caregivers are women, making the value of unpaid eldercare work done by women in North Carolina nearly \$10 billion.¹² The need for eldercare will not be decreasing anytime soon. Nearly 1.8 million people over the age of 65 lived in North Carolina in 2021.¹³ The over-65 population increased by more than 40 percent since 2011, outpacing the total population growth, which was less than ten percent.¹⁴ Nationally, the over-65 population is expected to nearly double between 2016 and 2060.¹⁵ Over their lifetimes, roughly two-thirds of today’s 65 and over population will need long-term care; and six in ten will rely solely on unpaid home care.¹⁶

Unpaid caregiving has become more common, particularly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. But the pandemic only exacerbated a care crisis caused by policy choices and the systematic undervaluing of care work. The Center for American

Progress (CAP) found that in 2018, half of U.S. families reported difficulty finding childcare, and mothers were 40 percent more likely than fathers to feel negative impacts from childcare duties on their participation in the Labor Force.¹⁷ CAP also found that 44

PERSPECTIVE: BLACK WOMEN ARE THE CARE TAKERS

The American care industry and economy have historically rested on the shoulders of Black women. In North Carolina specifically, Black women are often forced to take lower wages and unpaid leave to address care needs within their families. Candice Johnson of Charlotte, North Carolina, said:



“We’re in North Carolina, number one. I’m a Black woman in North Carolina; that’s number two. So I have a double whammy. I’m working in this type of environment...I’m a double minority, fighting to get paid what we’re worth.

“Then we’re fighting for other rights [like] paid maternity leave. Often, people don’t understand that we [Black women] are the caretakers of our families. So when someone gets sick, more than likely, it’s going to be the woman that is going to [take care of them]. Nine times out of ten [we’re] going to take time

off from work, taking care of a loved one.

“And it all boils down to a lack of compassion and knowledge from management. The majority of women, we want to work. We want to contribute to our household and society. But we have to bear the brunt of caring for our family. When our children are sick, we have to take care of them; we have to take them to the doctor; we have to do all those things to make sure that they get healthy or, to make sure that they have what they need.”

THE ISSUES WORKING WOMEN FACE

percent of North Carolina families lived in a “childcare desert”— a ZIP code with at least three times as many children under age five as spaces in childcare centers—and that childcare deserts were more common in rural and suburban areas.^{18,19} When childcare is available, its cost is burdensome to most families. North Carolina families with young children spent approximately 25 percent of their

income on childcare in 2018.²⁰

Scarce affordable caregiving options force families to make sacrifices to care for their own, which typically means women are putting their careers on hold and forgoing income. In a study for the U.S. Department of Labor Women’s Bureau, the Urban Institute found that mothers, on average, lose out on \$295,000 in

earnings and retirement income, roughly 15 percent of their potential lifetime income. These costs are uneven among different groups, and as a share of total lifetime earnings, losses were especially high for less-educated mothers (26 percent of potential lifetime income) and Hispanic mothers (19 percent of potential lifetime income).^{21,22}

THE FORMAL CARE ECONOMY

While care is often unaffordable, it’s certainly not because childcare workers are taking home lots of money. The median hourly wage for childcare workers in North Carolina was just \$12.87 in 2022, and only ten percent of childcare workers made more than \$16.34 per hour.²³ With many childcare centers closing during the pandemic, workers left the industry, and many used

For elder care availability, the crisis is even worse. Most nursing homes did not shut down during the pandemic; they were one of the few institutions deemed essential to stay open, given that residents could not easily move out and needed constant care. The result was significantly worse working conditions for staff at these facilities: increased need for caregiving, a higher risk

first few months of the pandemic, many workers left these jobs, and there hasn’t been a substantial recovery.

In our 2022 report, we noted that the working conditions brought on by the pandemic resulted in significantly lower employment levels in almost every industry within the care economy. In 2021, employment in private skilled

Table 3: Percent Change in Private Sector Annual Average Employment Levels, 2019 to 2021, Select Industries

Industry	% change – 2019-2021	% change – 2021-2022	% change – 2019-2022
Nursing care facilities, skilled nursing	-18.6%	-2.6%	-20.8%
Other residential care facilities	-16.0%	-3.9%	-19.3%
Continuing care, assisted living facilities	-12.0%	1.7%	-10.6%
Vocational rehabilitation services	-11.1%	-3.4%	-14.1%
Child day care services	-9.5%	8.6%	-1.7%
Residential mental health facilities	-7.8%	0.7%	-7.2%
Home health care services	-2.8%	-3.7%	-6.4%

Source: Author’s analysis of the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Quarterly Census on Employment and Wages (QCEW)

the disruption to find other work. Employment levels in the childcare industry have been slow to recover, exacerbating a longstanding crisis.

of contracting COVID-19, and staff shortages when coworkers were out sick, leaving remaining workers with greater numbers of patients to care for. Within the

nursing care facilities in North Carolina was down 18.6 percent from 2019. Employment in continuing care and assisted living facilities was down by 12 percent, while residential mental health facilities were down 11.1 percent and other care facilities down by 16 percent. One year later, there isn’t much evidence of a rebound. Employment in nursing care facilities continued trending



“North Carolina is in a childcare crisis. And because women do tend to be disproportionately the caregivers of young children, lack of access to care, lack of access to affordable, quality childcare, is a huge problem [for women]. We don’t have enough slots in North Carolina, particularly for infants and toddlers.”

- Beth Messersmith, North Carolina Director of MomsRising

downward in 2022, to 20.8 percent below 2019 levels. There were slight increases in continuing care assisted living facilities, residential mental health facilities, and other residential care facilities, but employment levels in those industries are still below 2019 levels by 10.6, 7.2, and 19.3 percent, respectively. Child daycare services saw the most encouraging rebound in 2022, but remain 1.7 percent below 2019 levels.

Most workers in the care economy are women. Nationally, more than 40 percent of workers in the nursing and residential care facilities industry are healthcare support workers.²⁴ As mentioned earlier in this report, 91 percent of healthcare support workers are women, 52 percent are Black women, and the median wage for women working in healthcare support occupations in North Carolina is just \$14.71.

As the demand for caregiving continues to grow, the care economy will only become more strained. Whether working in one of these occupations doing difficult work for low pay, or foregoing work or paying an exorbitant share of her income to care for loved ones, it is women across North Carolina who pay for the state of the care economy.

THE ISSUES WORKING WOMEN FACE

PERSPECTIVE: HIGHER EDUCATION MEANS HIGHER PAY—CASSANDRA BROOKS

Women have historically and continuously been the caregivers of families. What happens when the caregivers cannot afford the necessities to care for a loved one, a sick child, or themselves? Cassandra Brooks, a childcare provider in Charlotte, North Carolina, has seen the impact of low wages for women in the childcare industry.

“I have seen it from both sides. Parents are not able to afford childcare. So they cannot go to work. Providers cannot fully come back into the workforce because they cannot find childcare arrangements for their children because they

cannot afford childcare. Because there’s a shortage of childcare.

“For the childcare industry to remain competitive and bring people in that have a skill set and to [build that skillset], you must be able to pay them accordingly. North Carolina requires a higher skill [set]. Studies have shown that when teachers have higher education, it correlates to the children having greater



outcomes with their learning. So, with that, we are asking that [childcare] teachers have higher education. When people have higher education, they are expected to be paid higher.”

ELDERLY WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE AND RETIREMENT

Every worker aspires to a comfortable retirement one day; an entire federal agency is devoted to administering retirement benefits for elders who worked throughout their lives. Along with salary and healthcare, offering employees retirement benefits is one of the key ways employers try to distinguish themselves in hiring. Unfortunately, retirement is a benefit that is further out of reach for women than for men.

Several factors contribute to women being more likely than men to postpone retirement.

Namely—as we have noted in other sections of this report—women earn less than men annually and over the course of their careers due to more career disruptions such as pregnancy, maternity leave, childcare, and other long-term caregiving duties.²⁵ Social Security payments, which more than half of elderly Americans rely on for at least half their income, are about 20 percent less for women than for men. Social Security benefits are based on the highest 35 years of income for a person, and women with career interruptions may not

reach 35 years of full-time work at all.²⁶ Less income also means less money available to put into retirement savings plans. Of those who do have retirement savings accounts, unmarried women have substantially less on average than unmarried men. The median retirement account balance for unmarried women aged 65 and over is just \$50,000, compared to \$172,000 for unmarried men in the same age group.²⁷

As saving for retirement has become more difficult, the representation of older workers in the workforce has increased,

particularly for women. While men have higher labor force participation rates than women in older age groups, this gap has been closing since about 1980.²⁸ In 1982, 20.3 percent of men and 9.1 percent of women over 65 worked in North Carolina. By 2022, 22 percent of men and 14.5 percent of women in that same age group worked. For the 55-64 age group, the labor force participation rate for men decreased in North Carolina between 1982 and 2022, from 72.2 to 67.9 percent. However, the labor force participation rate for women in that same age group increased from 43.4 to 59.6 percent. These changes in labor force participation of older women are much more notable than in other age groups. For all workers younger than 55, the labor force participation rate of men decreased from 86.8 percent to 80 percent over the last four decades, while there was a slight increase among women—69.1 percent in 1982 compared to 70.9 percent in 2022.²⁹

The labor market isn't an easy place for older workers, and many are trapped in difficult jobs with few options to move elsewhere. Many older workers in the United States experience age discrimination at work, and in one study, more than half of workers over 50 reported losing long-held jobs before they were ready to retire.³⁰ Many older workers, especially those without college degrees, work physically demanding jobs. In the 55-64 age group, men are more likely to work a physically demanding job than women; but for workers aged 65 and over, white women and Hispanic women are more likely than their male counterparts to work a physically demanding job. Black and Hispanic workers are more likely than their white counterparts to work a physically demanding job and more likely to be forced into involuntary retirement.³¹ Nationally, older Black, Hispanic, and Native women work in the service industry at much higher rates than white women, who work in these jobs at a higher rate than white men.³²

“Women...tend to live longer. And we ended up having periods where we weren't paying into Social Security. It makes it much more difficult for women to retire or to retire in any way that feels safe.”

- Beth Messersmith,
North Carolina Director
of MomsRising

DISCRIMINATION, OCCUPATIONAL SEGREGATION, AND THE WAGE GAP

In Section 1, we looked at wages in North Carolina and how women, particularly Black and Hispanic women, earn less than men. The persistent wage gap is not entirely surprising given how societal biases have shaped the labor force for centuries.

The factor that explains the largest portion of today's wage gap is occupational segregation.^{33,34} Occupational segregation—the sorting of women into certain jobs due to ingrained perceptions and unspoken bias—occurs when one demographic group is overrepresented or underrepresented in certain jobs.^{35,36,37}

Occupational segregation has a long history in the United States. After slavery was abolished, most Black workers continued to work in agricultural and domestic settings since persistent racism denied them more lucrative employment options. Once these patterns are established, they are often reinforced over time as the perception of who is “inherently” suited for a job becomes a dominant stereotype.

Between 1890 and 1940, the percentage of Black women who worked as domestic workers rose from 52 percent to 70 percent. That number has since fallen, but Black women, along with immigrant women and Hispanic women, remain

overrepresented in domestic care work.^{38,39} Beyond domestic work, women are overrepresented in jobs based on characteristics that are stereotyped as traditionally “female.” They are overrepresented in positions requiring nurturing or care—teaching, nursing, and childcare occupations—and underrepresented in jobs associated with physical strength like construction or trades, as well as positions of authority like management occupations.⁴⁰ The prevalence of these attitudes makes it harder for women to pursue occupations that are not typically women-dominated but that better fit their individual passions and skills. The continued segregation of women, and of

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Black and Brown women, into specific occupations makes it easy to maintain gender- and race-based discrimination.

One reason that occupational segregation impacts the modern wage gap is that more direct forms of discrimination against women, minorities, and people with disabilities have been made illegal over the last half-century. The Equal Pay Act of 1963, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, and 1990 amendments to the Americans with Disabilities Act all made various forms of employment discrimination illegal.⁴¹ While this legislation improved women's working conditions and access to employment opportunities, women still regularly face discrimination in hiring and the workplace. Roughly four in ten

working women in the U.S. say they have faced gender-based discrimination on the job, according to a 2017 survey by Pew Research.⁴² Roughly one in four women said that they were treated as if they were not competent, and one in six said they experienced “small slights” at work. Gendered discrimination in male-dominated occupations reinforces the perception that women are not as capable as men of doing certain work. One in four women also reported earning less than their male counterparts doing the same job. While fewer women—only about one in fourteen—said employers denied them a promotion due to their gender, several studies indicate this problem is more common. In a 2022 working paper, economists studying a major retail chain found women were fourteen percent less likely to be promoted

than men in the same roles, even though they received higher performance reviews on average, and were less likely to quit than men.⁴³ A study by the consulting firm McKinsey & Company found that women's advancement is particularly held back by the “broken rung” of the ladder; for every 100 men promoted from entry-level to first-level manager, only 87 women, and only 82 women of color, are promoted.⁴⁴ This discrimination in promotion and advancement helps explain why women earn less than men within occupational groups.

It's clear that perceptions and stereotypes about women continue to block the advancement of gender equality in the workplace, and this gap is worse for women of color.

PERSPECTIVE: DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE

Ariana Lingerfeldt is a café manager and co-chair of her staff union in Asheville, North Carolina. When Ariana began her employment and before her workplace unionized, she experienced sexism and discriminatory treatment from male employees and her mostly male managers.

Despite succeeding at her job as a new employee, Ariana was blamed for her male coworker's mistakes and overlooked by male management when voicing her concerns. Ariana details her experience of sexism in the workplace:

“When I started, it was mostly men in management. And unfortunately, there is a big stigma in the restaurant industry in the food industry of women cooks. Currently, at the time of unionization, we are mostly all women.”

“When I started, the men kind of got to make all the decisions. And if even though [my male coworker and I] had the exact same experience, coming into the exact same job, [and] I was succeeding at it better than he was... I was getting blamed for all of his mistakes.”

Ariana continues that before

unionization, there was “a fight [to get] the company to see, internally, there was a bias.”



SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE

Nationwide, an estimated 38 percent of women and 14 percent of men have experienced sexual harassment or assault at their workplace.^{45,46} More than 70 percent of people who experience sexual harassment never report it internally, and more than 85 percent never file a formal legal charge.^{47,48}

Women face sexual harassment throughout many industries and job types. In traditionally male-dominated trade occupations, women face a “locker-room” culture where sexual harassment is common, and women are told by colleagues and managers that they are being too sensitive if they object to comments at their expense. Reporting these incidents can lead to employers labeling a worker as a troublemaker, which can affect that worker's future employment

prospects. When very few women are on a worksite, sexual harassment is a particularly isolating experience—and the resulting hostile culture is one that many women leave, ingraining the problem further.⁴⁹ The precarious immigration status of farmworkers, roughly a quarter of whom are women and most of whom are immigrants, means women in this occupation are unlikely to report incidents of sexual harassment or assault, making them frequent targets of abusive supervisors.

Harassment is not confined to blue-collar workplaces. Sexual harassment still plagues jobs requiring higher education credentials, such as research and legal occupations. A survey of legal workers in different roles and stages of their careers found that roughly three in four women

in the profession had directly experienced sexual harassment or misconduct and that many found that sexual misconduct “...was a part of the culture of their workplace or there were significant parts of the workplace where people got away with these behaviors.”⁵⁰ In academic science, engineering, and medicine settings, more than half of women faculty and staff reported experiencing sexual harassment.⁵¹

Restaurant and service industry jobs have some of the highest rates of sexual harassment in any industry. Women, particularly women of color, are overrepresented in these jobs and already face the wage penalty associated with the undervaluing of women's work. The fact that many of these jobs rely on tipped income reinforces a culture of sexual harassment and ensures

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that a woman who stands up for herself at work will lose wages because of it. While men and women are employed at nearly the same rate in restaurant positions, nearly two in three workers who earn the tipped subminimum wage are women.⁵² Roughly three in four women who work in tipped positions in

restaurants say they have been sexually harassed at work, nearly half say they never reported the harassment, and one in three who did not report their harassment said they avoided doing so for fear of being fired.⁵³ During the COVID-19 pandemic, workers experienced losses in tip income and increased sexual harassment

from customers. More than 40 percent of those surveyed said there had been a notable change in the frequency of sexual harassment by customers during the pandemic—often in response to workers attempting to enforce mask mandates or wearing masks themselves.⁵⁴

“This is happening in the workplace. It is not just the fast food industry. It’s in retail. [Management] feel that we have to take this. Workers are being abused so badly. And people don’t believe workers.”

-Bertha Bradley



DOMESTIC ABUSE, HEALTHCARE ACCESS, AND ABORTION

In addition to barriers to wages and stable employment, disproportionate caregiving burdens, and workplace harassment, women also more frequently face certain health and safety issues that hinder their ability to succeed in the workplace.

Domestic abuse and intimate partner violence (IPV) plague women at higher rates than men. Four in ten women in the United States have experienced IPV in their lifetimes, and one in eight (roughly 16 million women) missed at least one day of work when dealing with its impacts.⁵⁵ More than half of workers suffering from the effects of IPV are distracted at work, and four in ten victims of domestic violence say their partner has harassed them while they were at work, which creates an unsafe environment for all employees.⁵⁶ Preventing domestic violence can improve outcomes for women in the workplace, but the reverse is true as well—workplace supports and financial security can reduce the risk of domestic violence.

According to Kathleen Lockwood, Policy Director with the North Carolina Coalition Against Domestic Violence: “Workplace policies that are rooted in trying to ensure financial stability for workers can also [...] prevent domestic violence from happening in our communities. Things like ensuring that wages are living wages, ensuring that all workers have access to sick leave and vacation time to really be able to financially provide for themselves and for others, [...] can reduce stress in a family and reduce the likelihood of violence.” Viewed intersectionally, domestic

violence is a workplace issue, and supporting working women and preventing domestic violence are essential, complementary efforts.

Barriers to healthcare access also carry special implications for working women. For women in rural North Carolina, in particular, healthcare access is extremely difficult. These North Carolinians must travel more than twice as far as urban residents for neonatal intensive care, pediatric, cardiac, and cancer treatments. North Carolina has closed eleven rural hospitals since 2005, the third most of any state in the country (behind only Texas and Tennessee).⁵⁷ Prenatal and maternal healthcare is particularly hard to access, and skipping this care can have drastic consequences for women and infants. Between 2019 and 2021, maternal mortality rates doubled in North Carolina.⁵⁸ In 2020, North Carolina’s infant mortality rate was the eighth worst in the country, and Black infants died at a rate of more than two-and-a-half times that of white infants.^{59,60,61} In several rural counties in Western North Carolina counties, there are no hospitals providing obstetric care and no birth centers, OB-GYN practitioners, or certified nurse midwives.⁶² Having to travel long distances for care puts working women in a bind; taking time away from work means lost wages and potentially losing a job, but foregoing or delaying medical care can come with life-threatening consequences.

Abortion care has also become more restrictive in North Carolina, and women face many negative impacts when they don’t have access to this care. Recent research

finds women who were denied abortion care suffered from an increased risk of poverty; were less likely to have enough money to cover basic living expenses; had lower credit scores and increased debt; and were more likely to face

“Workplace policies that are rooted in trying to ensure financial stability for workers can also [...] prevent domestic violence from happening in our communities. Things like ensuring that wages are living wages, ensuring that all workers have access to sick leave and vacation time to really be able to financially provide for themselves and for others, [...] can reduce stress in a family and reduce the likelihood of violence.”

- Kathleen Lockwood,
Policy Director with the
North Carolina Coalition
Against Domestic Violence

bankruptcy or eviction. These effects persisted for years after the denial of care.⁶³ Restrictive abortion laws also increase “job lock,” in which women in states with targeted restrictions on abortion providers—also known as (TRAP) laws—are less likely

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to move into higher-paying occupations.⁶⁴ States with abortion restrictions have lower minimum wages, lower unionization rates, and lower unemployment insurance compensation and eligibility rates.⁶⁵

With the passage of Senate Bill 20 in May 2023, North Carolina joined the list of states with more restrictive abortion laws. The legislation bans most abortions after 12 weeks of pregnancy and requires additional in-person visits before abortion care.⁶⁶ These restrictions are particularly hard on low-wage and rural workers seeking abortion care, who must

travel further for medical care, who have trouble taking time off work for medical appointments, and who struggle to afford basic medical care. The arbitrary provisions of the bill force more women to carry pregnancies to term, and in particular, poor and rural working women are most likely to miss the cutoff for a legal abortion due to these new barriers.

Senate Bill 20 also includes a more surprising provision: expanding the availability of paid parental leave for state employees. The expansion of paid parental leave is part of a newer trend in anti-abortion legislation,

where legislators couple abortion care restrictions with policies to support working parents.⁶⁷ This trend is an acknowledgment that restrictive laws that lead to forced pregnancies create new hurdles for working people, particularly in states lacking a robust safety net for parents and children. There is no reason why pro-working family, anti-poverty measures such as paid leave and investments in childcare and early education cannot be passed on their own, and tying their passage to abortion restrictions establishes a dangerous false dichotomy.

WORKPLACE ISSUES AFFECTING WOMEN ARE EXACERBATED FOR IMMIGRANT WOMEN

Immigrant workers, and immigrant women workers in particular, face issues of low pay, exploitation, discrimination, workplace safety, and sexual violence at an alarming rate. Many of these workers are undocumented or have lapsed work authorizations. An estimated three in five U.S. farmworkers are undocumented immigrants, as well as roughly one in four meat, poultry, and fish processing workers.^{68,69,70}

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), in a 2010 report, took an extensive look at what life is like for immigrant women workers in farmworker and meat processing jobs in the U.S.⁷¹ They interviewed several farmworkers across the United States, including workers in North Carolina. When local police departments have agreements with the federal government to

prioritize enforcing immigration law, workers are afraid to report wage theft, safety violations, and even violent crimes. Despite the existence of options like U and T visas and deferred prosecution that provide lawful status to a small percentage of immigrants involved in labor disputes, they can be deported if authorities discover them, even if they are a victim of these crimes. This puts workers in precarious situations on which some employers capitalize.

Employers take advantage of workers not having documentation and not wanting paper trails. When they hire workers, they ask few questions. If they want to fire workers for any reason, legal or not, they can use the lack of documentation as an excuse.⁷² With such a large portion of the workforce unable to seek recourse, employers can

keep wages low for everyone and rely on a steady stream of workers who have few other employment options whenever they need to fill vacancies.^{73,74}

One study found that after a change to U.S. immigration law in 1986 gave roughly 1.7 million immigrants legal status, wages for previously undocumented workers skyrocketed. These effects were more pronounced for women; previously undocumented men saw their wages increase by roughly 13 percent over the first five years, while women saw an average increase of more than 20 percent.^{75,76}

There are several ways employers engage in wage theft, and the occurrence of these is difficult to measure. Piece-rates—where farmworkers are paid per unit of a crop as opposed to per hour of

work—put pressure on workers to harvest as fast as possible, and while federal and state law require minimum wage to be honored when the piece rate falls below it, many employers violate this and misstate workers' hours on paychecks.

Another practice used specifically when a husband and wife work for the same employer is to pay both workers on the husband's paycheck. An employer can avoid payroll expenses for an additional worker by doing this, to the detriment of the worker who could one day qualify for social security benefits. It also makes it easier to misstate hours and denies women financial freedom, making them dependent on their spouse, partner, or sometimes other male family members. Women also face discrimination and are given less favorable assignments than men, limiting their earning ability. Workplace safety issues are rampant in these jobs and can disproportionately

impact women who are pregnant, nursing, recovering from childbirth, or trying to conceive. Farmworkers spoke to the SPLC of being sickened by pesticides and chemicals, while poultry processing workers shared stories of working long shifts in cold temperatures doing physically demanding work without bathroom breaks.⁷⁷

Farmworkers frequently get sick from pesticide exposure. While not regularly measured, an older study by the EPA estimated between 10,000 and 20,000 farmworkers suffered from pesticide poisonings each year throughout the 1980s.⁷⁸ Work routinely involves heavy lifting and minimal breaks, and pregnant workers are afforded few to no accommodations. In the poultry industry, injuries from repetitive strain are ten times higher than for the average worker, while occupational illnesses are five times higher. Nearly three in four workers experienced a significant

work-related injury or illness.⁷⁹

Sexual violence often plagues these workplaces, and undocumented workers' precarious status discourages many from reporting these crimes against them. A majority of the women interviewed in the SPLC report experienced some form of sexual harassment or sexual assault; multiple interviewees told stories of rape or attempted rape committed against them by supervisors. Few studies exist to quantify the prevalence of sexual violence and harassment among immigrant farmworkers, but one study of California farmworkers found that 80 percent of women had experienced sexual harassment or assault, while a U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) report found that "hundreds, if not thousands, of women" were sexually assaulted by supervisors.^{80,81,82}

PERSPECTIVE: TERROR & ANGUISH

Monica* was an immigrant farmworker in North Carolina who was a victim of human trafficking. After enduring verbal and physical abuse, confinement, lack of food and water, and forced work under the threat of deportation, Monica was able to escape and sue her employer for violating her rights.

In an interview with the Workers' Rights Project, Monica explained how the degrading practices of farmworker employers impacted her and other immigrant women they employ.

"To be truthful, to be a woman that is an immigrant, we go through a lot of struggles, we risk our lives because we come looking for our dreams, for goals, and do not know what we will face when we get here. Women, like men who are immigrants, go through a lot of discrimination, fear; we go without eating, we cry a lot because of the terror and anguish we feel. This is what is happening to those that are immigrants.

"Being away from your country is hard because we do not know anyone, our rights, who to go

to for help, and it is especially hard if we do not know how to speak English.

"It is difficult for us as women in my experience. For example, as an immigrant woman. I came here to work and fight for my children and went through so many difficulties. It is very sad and hard at the same time. I used to believe that I was not going to make it out alive. I went through a very hard time because I did not know my rights."

**Name withheld to protect worker's privacy and safety*

THE SLOW PACE OF CHANGE



“Managers weren’t supporting us in any way. We heard about Starbucks unionizing. We knew about Amazon unionizing. We knew about this movement that was happening all over the country and all over the world. And we decided, why not Green Sage? Why not try?”

-Ariana Lingerfeldt

WOMEN ARE ORGANIZING

Americans’ opinion of labor unions is at its highest since 1965.⁸³ Major organizing campaigns at Starbucks locations around the country and multiple Amazon warehouses, as well as significant strikes in Hollywood and looming strike threats from workers represented by the United Auto Workers (UAW), have captured headlines.

Despite these prominent examples, union membership has continued to dwindle in the United States since it peaked in the 1950s. In 1973, 24 percent of American workers were union members; by 2006, that number had been cut in half to 12 percent. The rate of decline slowed, but that membership rate sits at just over 10 percent in 2022 and has continued to decline slightly in recent years.⁸⁴

Union growth is a slow process hindered by several factors. Federal labor law does little to deter employers from aggressive anti-union campaigns, turnover of businesses and industries

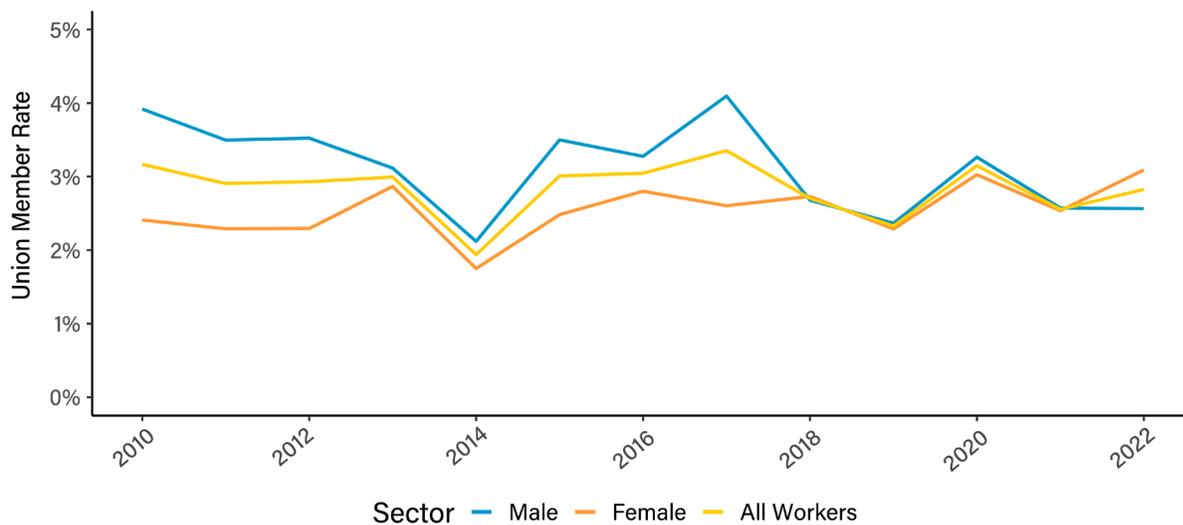
means constantly organizing new workplaces, and many states have become more hostile toward unions over the years. When workers do form a union, it takes an average of more than a year to negotiate a first contract.⁸⁵

Still, even with all the structural barriers to union growth, workers are standing up, organizing, and demanding better working conditions. And many new service industry organizing drives have been led by women, fighting against low pay and unfair treatment in an industry that has long been difficult to unionize.⁸⁶ The Starbucks unionization drives, for example, are frequently led by women and nonbinary workers, many of whom are people of color, identify as LGBTQ+, or otherwise belong to historically marginalized groups.^{87,88}

In 2022, 17,000 Etsy sellers went on strike over increased transaction fees. Many vulnerable workers, including women, LGBTQ+ people, and people with disabilities, have relied on Etsy’s platform as a low-



Figure 7: Union Membership by Gender, NC



Source: Author's analysis of Current Population Survey (IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org)

barrier way to earn income from creating and selling products. While relying on income from a small, solo self-run business lacks certain workplace protections, guaranteed income, or reliable benefits, many find it preferable to the discrimination or barriers they would face in a more traditional employment situation.⁸⁹

As union membership rates have steadily fallen nationally, they remain more stable, although much lower, in North Carolina. While the overall union membership rate dropped in 2021, it increased in North Carolina from 2.6 to 2.8 percent in 2022, close to the 2.9 percent level of ten years ago. Unionized women workers in North Carolina

are driving this trend. The rate of unionization among working men in North Carolina dropped in lockstep with the national trend—from 3.5 percent in 2012 to 2.9 percent a decade later. Meanwhile, union membership for women in North Carolina increased from 2.3 percent to 3.1 percent over that same period, and the union membership rate

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was higher for women than men for only the second time in the last decade.⁹⁰

These are still low rates of union membership and North Carolina has the second lowest membership rate of any state, but seeing more women gain access to unions is undoubtedly

an encouraging sign. Not only do union workers earn higher wages than those with non-union jobs, but the pay gap between men and women shrinks for union workers. Economic Policy Institute found in 2016 that women in the U.S. earned 78 cents on the dollar compared to men in non-union jobs but earned

94 cents on the dollar in union jobs. Wage gaps were less for union workers across race and ethnicity groups, and even after controlling for factors such as race, ethnicity, education, experience, and location, wage gaps among union workers were still less pronounced than for non-union workers.⁹¹

PERSPECTIVE: WHAT'S WORTH FIGHTING FOR?



unsafe for the staff and its customers, and staff struggled under the pressure to maintain safety and keep the store open. The cafe workers voiced their concerns, but management disregarded them and forced the store to open despite obvious safety concerns.

“They weren’t supporting us in any way. And so we all decided that going through our workplace management was not working in order to get any of our issues handled or even heard or considered. We heard about Starbucks unionizing. We knew about Amazon unionizing. We knew about this movement that was happening all over the country and all over the world. And we decided, why not Green Sage? Why not try?”

The pandemic’s effects have increased the pressures placed on food and beverage workers. As a result, many service workers are unionizing to protect themselves from employers’ abusive labor practices.

When coworkers needed to take leave from work due to

COVID, workers such as Ariana Lingerfeldt, a café manager in Asheville, North Carolina, and co-chair of her union, took on many positions to fill those roles. Ariana was thrown into her work with little training when she started the job. Soon after, she experienced working conditions that made the café

“What’s worth fighting for right now? What change can we make? And so, we all sat down; we talked with [Teamsters] reps about what it would look like, what are the qualifications, what we need to do, what are our workers’ rights.”

CLOSING THE WAGE GAP: SLOW AND UNEVEN PROGRESS

Women’s wages have improved over time, but they continue to face a persistent wage gap compared to men.

Nationally, most of the progress in the wage gap between men and women happened in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1982, women earned, on average, about 65 cents on the dollar compared to men; by 2002, they earned closer to 80 cents on the dollar. But between 2002 and 2022, women’s earnings relative to men’s increased very little, to 82 cents on the dollar.⁹²

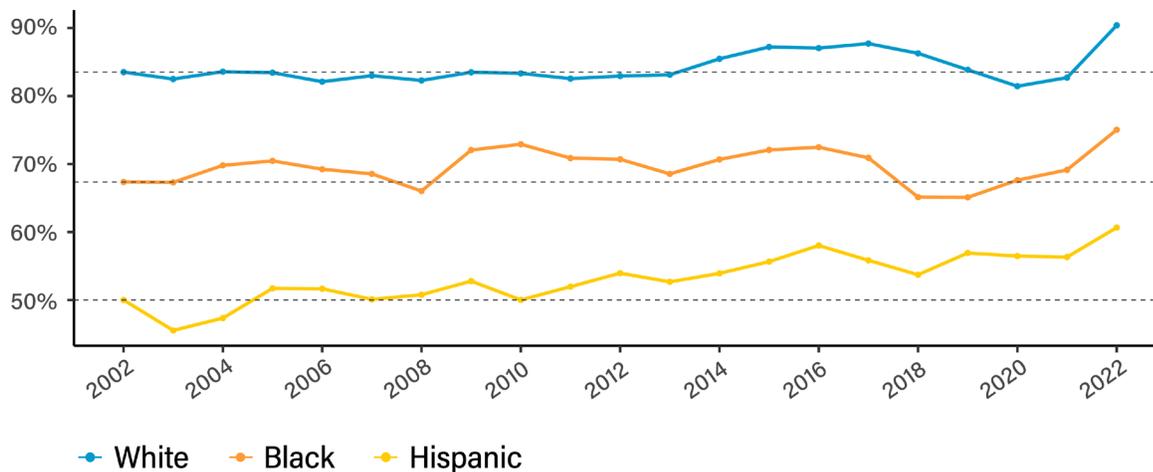
For the past two decades, North Carolina women have fared a little better than women nationally. In particular, the wage gap for Black and Hispanic women improved more, although the overall wage gap is still worse than it is for white women. Figure 8 shows the wage gaps between white, Black,

and Hispanic women compared to white men over the last two decades. Twenty years ago, white women earned about 84 cents for every dollar white men earned in North Carolina, while Black women earned 67 cents and Hispanic women earned just 50 cents. A decade later, in 2012, white women faced roughly the same wage gap, while Black women’s earnings had increased to 71 cents on the dollar and Hispanic women’s to 54 cents. In 2022, white women earned 90 cents for every dollar earned by white men, while Black women earned 75 cents and Hispanic women earned 61 cents. Over those two decades, each group saw an improvement of between seven and 11 cents on the dollar. There is still a substantial wage gap, and women of color in particular are still a long way from pay equity.

Recent research by EPI found an additional area of concern: gender-based wage gaps widened across the U.S. between 2019 and 2022. Continued progress toward closing the wage gap is not guaranteed, but smart policy choices can chip away at pay disparities. For example, requiring federal reporting of pay by gender, race, and ethnicity; prohibiting employers from asking about pay history; requiring employers to post pay bands when hiring; and adequately staffing and funding the EEOC and other agencies charged with enforcement of nondiscrimination laws can help to close the wage gap.⁹³ And since women are overrepresented in low-wage work, policies that lift wages for all workers—such as raising the minimum wage and strengthening the right to collectively bargain—can also help bridge this gap.

Figure 8: Gender Wage Gap by Race in North Carolina

Average Wages Compared with White Men, 2001-2002, 2011-2012, and 2021-2022



Source: Author’s analysis of Current Population Survey (IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org)

THE SLOW PACE OF CHANGE

NEW FEDERAL LAWS PROTECT PREGNANT AND NURSING WORKERS

Workers who are pregnant and nursing will see improved protections at work thanks to two recent pieces of federal legislation.

The PUMP Act (Providing Urgent Maternal Protections for Nursing Mothers Act) strengthened protections for those nursing in the workplace. In 2010, the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) was amended to include break time and space requirements for lactation.⁹⁴ However, the FLSA exempts many workers from those protections, including farmworkers, teachers, and some

nurses.⁹⁵ The PUMP Act extends protections to nearly all workers and also gives employees the ability to enforce their rights by filing a lawsuit against an employer who violates the law.

The Pregnant Worker Fairness Act (PWFA) clarifies that workers have the right to reasonable accommodations for pregnancy and childbirth recovery and related conditions unless it would create an undue hardship on an employer.⁹⁶ A few examples of reasonable accommodations include light-duty work or help with manual labor; temporary

transfer to a less physically demanding position; additional, longer, or more flexible breaks; changing a worker's schedule or remote work accessibility; providing a stool to sit on; and changes to work rules around food, drink, and dress code. Prior to the passage of the PWFA, pregnant workers had some protections under the Pregnancy Discrimination Act and Americans with Disabilities Act but were only entitled to reasonable accommodations in narrow circumstances.

CHANGES TO DEFERRED ACTION PROTECT IMMIGRANT WORKERS

In early 2023, the Department of Homeland Security made changes in how noncitizen workers are treated when their labor rights are violated.⁹⁷ Workers who are impacted by or witness a violation of labor rights can access an expedited deferred action process during a labor dispute. Deferred action is a kind of temporary immigrant protection that may be available when a noncitizen has worked for an employer where there is or was a labor dispute. Deferred action grants the noncitizen protection from deportation for a specific period of time while a labor agency investigates the labor dispute. As discussed in earlier sections of this report, fear of deportation is a threat that

prevents many immigrant women from reporting not only labor violations but also sexual harassment and violence at work. Protecting immigrants from retaliation in labor disputes can empower these workers to stand up when their rights are violated and push back against the culture of exploitation in jobs where immigrant workers are overrepresented.





PERSPECTIVE: BEFORE PWFA AND PUMP ACTS

The federal Pregnant Workers Fairness Act (PWFA) became law on June 27, 2023. New protections and expanded accommodations for pregnant and birthing individuals require employers to provide reasonable accommodations to workers with limitations due to pregnancy, childbirth, and miscarriage. Prior to the passage of the PWFA, Candice Johnson of Charlotte, NC, witnessed her employer's biased treatment of her and other Black women employees with children. During her time working in a corporate job, Candice found unsupportive attitudes toward working parents were the norm. While on parental leave, Candice experienced harassment from

members of management who urged her to return to work:

“I’m on maternity leave, and I’m getting phone calls from management and upper management, not asking me how I am doing or [if I’m] okay, but wanting to know if I’m returning to work, and when.

“When upper management called talking to me, I said, ‘I do not think you are supposed to be calling me asking me when I am coming back to work while I am on maternity leave. You should be referring those questions to human resources.’

“Many times, people don’t know that’s against the law. When I am on maternity leave, you should not be calling me. And I do not think she knew

that I knew my rights. Don’t call and harass me, don’t call me anymore.

“It was senior management. If you want to know anything about what is happening with me, you must direct those phone calls to human resources. And I was not scared of [management] retaliating or anything. I’m not scared of you trying to fire me or whatever the case is.

“[It’s] fortunate that the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act and PUMP Act was recently implemented to ensure those protections, but not many people know their rights in terms of [...] advocating for themselves.”

IN THEIR WORDS

Three women from diverse backgrounds and occupations across the state spoke in-depth with our team about their workplace experiences. Interviews edited for clarity and brevity.



BLANCA BORCEGUIN

Blanca Borgeguin is an administrative manager and mother of two from Knightdale, NC. She advocates for paid family and medical leave for caregivers and new parents, and leads a small nonprofit providing education and direct aid for new moms struggling to make ends meet without paid maternity leave. In an interview with Workers' Rights Project (WRP) staff, Blanca detailed her experience leaving the corporate world due to lack of paid leave when she needed to care for her young daughters.

WRP: Do you mind telling us about your experiences as a working mom who needed paid leave? What challenges have you seen in your work?

Blanca: I worked for a law firm for eight years, and we were very profitable. I was a case manager for a lot of departments. I struggled with infertility for 15 years. So when I finally got pregnant, I was over the moon; I was excited. Then my employer, at 35 weeks of pregnancy, told me, "Well, we don't cover maternity leave. So all these appointments you've been taking are discounted from your paid time off. So you might want to be careful with those."

I said I don't think I have a choice to attend the OBGYN in my last weeks of pregnancy. At least, that's what I've been told. My daughter was born, and I had

to return to work at 12 weeks. She became malnourished at the daycare because we were nursing, and she was refusing formulas. My employer would frown when I would have to breastfeed, so they counted it as personal time. I was told that other employees were getting a little upset because I was getting too much personal time. So just the flexibility at work and how uncomfortable it is knowing that everyone knows if my doors close because I'm pumping is embarrassing. It's like "shame on you for taking that time to pump."

A lot of those things new moms don't know about. It's shocking that you

must return to work and put your newborn baby in a daycare. And it has to be whatever daycare is available because I didn't know there were such long waitlists for a decent daycare and so expensive. And you know how little these daycare providers get paid. You're basically forced to return to work. I was able to have that flexibility, but many moms don't because they're either service workers or have manual jobs.

I informed myself better, and I got another job. "[I thought] if I work at a clinic, being that there are all these nurses, there'll be more care for these types of things." So I resigned from my job at the law firm and started working at another place where we were health promoters. We ensured that during COVID, families were staying safe, being tended to, and having their basic needs met. Once it was time for me to go on maternity leave, they said, "Oh, by the way, we were given the choice to pay maternity leave or not. And we're choosing not to."

It shocked me because I said, "Well, we know my coworker just gave birth months before me, so why does she get her maternity leave covered and not mine?" They said the law gives them the right to pick and choose who gets maternity leave. I asked how could it be legal for you guys to disclose at such a late time in my pregnancy. My finances, my budget, everything changes. It became challenging for me; I became very frustrated. I said I can either cry and feel bad for myself or I can help other moms inform them. "Hey, this is coming. Can you ask your employer these questions?"

I've repeatedly said that if the wage law is disclosed in a lunchroom, why isn't the pregnancy maternity leave disclosed to us? Employers should not have the right to choose when they want to tell you; they should have to tell their employees if they do or do not cover this maternity leave. That gives a pregnant person a choice to say, I better start looking for a better

place or prepare better for this. Help has been extremely difficult. And that's one of the biggest challenges because even if you have health [insurance], employers have the right to pick the cheapest coverage. So even though I gave birth and had natural labor, I was stuck with financial debt.

My daughter was born, and we were denied Medicaid three times because they said I had to wait three months of unemployment since I worked the three months before applying for me to qualify. I said, "That's absurd. How am I supposed to make my mortgage payment and my car payments?" So unfortunately, I returned to work when [my second daughter] was 40 days old. On December 30th, we were informed we were all getting laid off. They were starting a new program. The new program involved me dealing with substance abuse and going to people's homes. I tried it the first time; I didn't feel safe. So I said I think this is not for me; I don't want to put myself in a situation where I'm in danger or bring that danger to my family. I decided not to get the training for the new program. So therefore, I was unemployed.

I'm just baffled every single time about how little North Carolina cares about the working person. I am just constantly reminded that you could be the best employee, but when you need assistance, [the employer] can replace you immediately.

WRP: The lack of supportive workplace policy intersects with the challenges of the basic needs of caring for ourselves and our families. You spoke earlier about running a nonprofit where you help people understand their rights under the FMLA and provide baby supplies and clothes support new moms. Can you talk about that?

Blanca: Like many people, I went to Catholic Charities for their food pantry [when I got laid off]. I took my nanny with me because, at the time, I could still afford to pay her. I'd have

her work two days a week versus the five days a week she used to help me. She said, "Well, how am I supposed to pay for my food or anything?" I said, "Let's both go to the pantry because they would also help me get food."

So we went, and they asked us so many questions. It was just so uncomfortable. We just felt so judged. And with her, they refused to give her food because she didn't have a valid driver's license. I just felt so bad. I said this is what they make you go through to assist you. No wonder a lot of people don't ask for help. All these organizations keep getting so many funds, but they're not distributing because there's no need. But the need is there; people feel uncomfortable disclosing their whole life history to get a box of food. So I said you know what, let me reach out to people in a way where they know they will get assistance without me asking them uncomfortable things.

I went on Facebook and posted some things my daughter had outgrown. I met a mom who was working from seven to seven. She thanked me for that. I said, "Is there anything else you need?" And she told me, this is what I'm going through. I remember an organization that offered the type of assistance she needed. So I referred her there. I remember there was a list of food pantries that give donations without asking you a million questions. I gave her [the list]. She needed the resources. I wondered if there were more moms. So then I started giving out my daughter's shoes, and I met another mom; I helped her with her needs. A family gave me some baby formula; I offered it. I said I'm not a doctor or a clinic. This is the baby formula. It's sealed. If you want it, it's here.

WRP: Employers use exploitative systems and create loopholes by not disclosing to employees their rights during their pregnancy. How does the lack of supportive workplace policy intersect or amplify the challenges that women and families are experiencing?

Blanca: When I was at the clinic, I became the program manager. And that did involve interviewing people for the team. Many of these women were afraid to disclose that they were pregnant because they thought they would not get hired. And if they did get hired, later on, they would ask me, do you guys cover any maternity leave? Or will I lose my job since I'm now pregnant? And I would tell them, unfortunately, this clinic does not cover maternity leave, or maybe they will if they like you a lot.

What was sad is that most of us were either Latino or African American, and most were women. How could a clinic, a nonprofit clinic, helping low-income minorities deny that to their employees and put them in the predicament of the people that we are supporting?

We are not asking for free handouts. We're asking in North Carolina to have some decent human compassion. We're saying 12 weeks [of paid family and medical leave]; please pay at least eight, so the mom can welcome her child and not be afraid of what she will provide them or where she will live—simple things like that.

It's not expensive. The employee will pay into this insurance. And when someone needs it, it will be given to them. I'm frustrated because it's not something difficult. They need to put things in place for employees to know their employer will support them when needed. And [paid family and medical leave insurance] is one of those things that will make a huge difference for many families: thirty years and no changes to [the FMLA]. Oh, come on. ■

IN THEIR WORDS



BERTHA BRADLEY (MAMA COOKIE)

Women are vastly over-represented in the lowest-paid jobs, facing exploitation, low wages, and poor treatment on the job. Bertha Bradley, aka Mama Cookie, is a service worker fighting and organizing to ensure workers know their rights in resisting abusive workforce practices. A Durham, North Carolina resident, Bertha is a labor rights activist, organizer of over 40 years, and a founding member of the Union of Southern Service Workers (USSW).

WRP: Based on your experience with frontline organizing, what challenges do you see facing women in the workplace?

Bertha Bradley: Fair wages are one of them; we don't get paid equally like [...] male workers. Black and brown women, we face discrimination, we face a lot of problems. The pay is not good, and the hours are long. We don't get proper health care.

I saw it the other day at Burger King. A young lady was working, and I went in to have lunch that day. She was the only one in the front, and they wanted her to run the drive-thru and front

counter. She could not be more than about 17. She started crying because she told her boss, "I can't do both. I can't do drive-thru and front counter."

She looked at me, he looked at her, and he yelled at her. He told her, "I'm your boss." He wasn't doing anything. All he did was walk around, and he wouldn't help her. He yelled at her and said, "Well, if you can't do what I tell you to do, you can go home."

Immediately my antennas went up. I went right to him and said, "Let me tell you something. She has rights. You cannot talk to her like that. You are violating her rights. First of all, she's a minor child. She is only 17. And you cannot do this to her."

"Who are you to tell me?" he said.

I said, "My name is Mama Cookie of the USSW Union of Southern Service Workers. I will report you right now for abusing this young lady." This is not fair. She's standing there crying.

I said, "Baby go home; I got your back." And this child was so hysterical. She called her mom. Her mom came. She was a young Latina worker. When her mom got there, her mom did not understand English. So, [the worker] went to [explain] to her mother that I stood up for her. They called me yesterday after I gave her my number. And she told me, "Mama Cookie, guess what? That manager got fired."

I said, "He got fired?" She'd say "Yes, because the other workers there heard when you stood up for me, and they told the other General Manager about it."

And [she] told me he would be terminated because [the manager] didn't want me and the union to protest his door. And so he fired the manager to keep me away from there.

It was just so unbelievable. To see young people now, they face many challenges as well. Her name is Jessica. Jess is on her way to being a happy camper and still has a job. It was a victory with just one person speaking out. One person heard what this person said to somebody, a woman. That young woman didn't know she had a right to stand up for herself. But now she does. And that's great. So now she can tell somebody the story.

WRP: What role do you think gender plays in the dynamics between managers and women workers?

Bertha Bradley: It's a power thing with managers. They fail to realize they are also just workers. They might be managers, but they are just workers. [The manager] felt he could control them like people are robots. He thought he could talk to her [abusively] because she was a kid. School was out, and she needed the money. They look at Latino women, Black and Brown women and think:

"[They] have to work. [They] have to make money. [They're] poor. [They] have to have this money." And so managers tend to [tell] these kids, "You're going to have to deal with

it. You need the money; your family can't do something because you have to work." That's how [management] looks at many [workers]. He was on a power trip because she was Latina, also.

He was walking around with a clipboard in his hands. He was not helping her. A worker was making sandwiches, and another was on the grill, both trying to help her. He was walking around on a power trip.

Sometimes, men in these positions, no matter their age, feel that women are beneath them. They think we are beneath them as women. So that's what kills me. But I must step back and tell them, "No. I'm just as powerful as you are. I know just as much." I don't care what age [the manager is]; it could be from zero to 100. They must recognize that we are women and don't have to tolerate this.

WRP: Sexual harassment is not something that affects only women. I remember you speaking at a rally in Durham about sexual harassment in the workplace for fast food workers. How widespread is it in the industry?

Bertha Bradley: As a matter of fact, when I was working at Wendy's, we ended up getting a new manager. And she started [focusing in] on one of the employees. We noticed in the store [the new manager] beginning to buy the employee gifts. The [worker] came to me; she told me she was uncomfortable with it. I went to the manager and told her you have to stop doing this. She's uncomfortable with you buying gifts for her and her children. You rub her back. I said, don't you notice this is sexual harassment?

[The manager responded], "It cannot be that." The manager said, "I'm just being friendly." I said no, that was not being friendly. That's intimidation. You are using your power to make her tolerate you touching her. You're using your power, and that's wrong.

Are you [making] her schedule? She doesn't do what you say, and you're taking hours from her schedule. That's harassment.

The young lady was crying. She would say, "Ms. Bertha, I cannot do this. Whenever I turn around, [the manager] calls my phone. She's touching me, and I don't like it. I don't want to be touched."

So [I kept] telling this manager, "You have to stop." Eventually, I [ended up] calling HR to report it. The manager was so angry. She fired the girl, but we rallied around her and told them no, she, the manager, was the one that was abusive to the employee.

This is happening in the workplace. It is not just the fast food industry. It's in retail. [Management] feel that we have to take this. Workers are being abused so badly. And people don't believe workers. They feel like they are asking to be put into these situations. "When you want to keep your job, you better let me do this. You better let me do that." And workers don't realize they don't have to. It's happening every which way. Transgender people can't even get a job now without [...] being harassed.

My son worked at a McDonald's. His manager was a white guy. The manager approached my son and several other guys working there; they were young gay men. They were telling me about how he was saying sexual remarks to them. So I told them to say something to the other manager about it. She thought they were lying. I told him to record the manager. My son and the other guys got together, went to his manager, and told him what he was doing. The manager said "Maybe you should not get too close to him." How can you work in a McDonald's and not be close to somebody? It pissed me off. I went up there, and I told him, "Let me tell you something. I'm not going to tolerate my son being abused by nobody."

"Oh, who are you? Who are you?"

said the manager. I said, "Don't worry about it. When you see me again, I will be standing outside your store."

And trust me, that's what happened when they saw me again. I was standing outside the McDonald's door with about 100 people. They finally fired [the abusive manager]. They transferred him to another McDonald's. And when he got to the other McDonald's, he did the same thing. He did the same thing to a young Latino gay man. That just put the fuel on the fire. They ended up firing him, and they charged him with harassment.

It's not about me no more. I'm 64. My fight is not about me no more. It's about you guys. It's about you guys that I stand up to fight for now. I love my young people. They are what keeps me going. That's how I can keep moving in these bones so my bones do not get stiff. If I don't stand up and fight, the youth do not see that somebody cares; they may not fight. "Oh well, we just have to tolerate it." But they need to know we need to stand up and fight. ■

IN THEIR WORDS



ARIANA LINGERFELDT

Ariana Lingerfeldt is a food service worker and union chair at Green Sage Café in Asheville, NC. Lingerfeldt shared with Workers' Rights Project staff about her experience organizing and unionizing her workplace under Teamsters Local 61.

WRP: Can you tell us how Green Sage got organized and how you got involved?

Ariana Lingerfeldt: I started at Green Sage Cafe in December of 2021. When I started, it was my first cooking job ever. I had been a manager at a market and a manager at a deli. So, I was familiar with customer service in the food service industry and knew how that would work. But I got a job at Green Sage and immediately saw their training was terrible. It fell on the

staff to be responsible for training. There was never a person to train me. There was never a designated time for it. I was just thrown in, and I had to teach myself for the most part.

In December 2021, all my coworkers got COVID, so they all had to be quarantined. It was me and one other person in the workplace. I was brand new. And now, I have to fulfill the role of all my coworkers and do not know the job. My main issue was that my other coworker was a male coworker, and [...] whatever he said would [be believed]. So everyone blamed me if anything happened. They would blame me because I was new. I was trying to cover for both of us,

[...] and step in and fill the role. That comes back around later.

So, about a year after that, we had the water crisis in December. Typically, we get a whole new set of staff after the summer. We had a bunch of people that were undertrained. And we have the water crisis happen in Asheville where it was a mixture of frozen pipes and contaminated city water. Green Sage was having us go in regardless. So, we would open the restaurant irrespective of this. Green Sage Cafe has these purifiers. They told us we would have these good water filters, which should not affect our water. However, at the time, we did not have any clarification. And we did not have any evidence of that. That was all we knew about it.

So, they are having us go in and say we can cook with this water and clean with it. And we are not sure of that. The health inspectors at the

time weren't saying much against it. They were letting us open regardless. Our General Manager called them and asked if it is safe to open a restaurant right now. We are located on South Hendersonville roads. So, that part of town was being asked to conserve water as much as possible. And we did not feel morally right to open a restaurant with possibly contaminated water and take away the ability of other people living in South Hendersonville to have water. We voiced all these concerns to the owner, who was the only one who could get permission to shut the store down at the time. And he denied that permission continuously. That went on for either three or four days. So we would go in, and we would try to open. We had no water, or we had just a drip of water. We could not wash dishes or clean if we did get to cook anything. Very quickly, the water would turn sour, and they would have us close. We would try to clean to the best of our ability, and then pretty much have to pile up all these dirty dishes, scrape all the food off them, and just leave them sitting for three or four days until we could get water again.

This upset all of us. We directly told our owner and our management that all of us were suffering because we did not have water in our homes; it is difficult to cook, eat, shower, or do any of these things to be able to show up for work. Many of us have pets; I have a 100-pound dog. He needs a lot of water and [it was challenging] trying to get that water when all the stores are out of water. Home life was a nightmare, let alone trying to go to work and figure that situation out. And they were not supporting us in any way for it.

After we got through that, we all decided that going through our workplace management was not working to get any of our issues handled, heard, or considered. We heard about Starbucks unionizing. We knew about Amazon unionizing. We learned about this movement that was happening all over the country,

all over the world. And we decided, why not Green Sage? Why not try? That was the very beginning of it in January.

We [watched] very basic YouTube videos on how do you start the [unionizing] process. We knew that we needed to start coming together and focusing on our specific issues. What things [...] would [we] like to tackle? We made a list of what would be easiest to get first. What would be the longest? What's [...] worth fighting for right now? What change can we make right now? What changes will be long-term? We started sorting all that out. And at the same time started learning about organizers around town. And who could we get in contact with?

We contacted FBU (Food and Beverage Workers United), Jen Hampton, and some other people from FBU, [and] Tommy from our Teamsters union. We ended up going with the Teamsters Union. We had three or four meetings with everyone interested, which was pretty much everyone eligible. Everyone was very interested in this idea. We all sat down; we talked with the union reps about what it would look like, the qualifications, what we needed to do, what are our workers' rights, and things like that. At that point, we had 60 percent confirmed that they would sign a card.

And so, we started talking for another two weeks, working on getting all the cards signed and working on everyone's issues with it. Like, is there a stigma, which is mostly what it was. It was just misinformation, or people didn't know how the process worked and were scared of it. And so, ironing out all those details. At the point of all of us signing cards, we had 90 percent. Only one person doesn't want to join all of us. With the business model that Green Sage Cafe has, they're for their workers in a public way. They act like we're [...] a family. Green Sage is very much like that. And in their company policies, the workers always first.

With all that in mind, the Teamsters representative wanted us to sign a

letter and tell the owner that these are our wishes or we're going to unionize. And either he can accept us, or we will continue further. And so he denied it immediately. And we went further. We applied for an election at that point. We had to do it twice. The first time we did it was in February. And that was because when our GM supported us, she found out about our union, and she fully supported us and wasn't going to get in our way. She wasn't going to try to stop it. She told her upper management that she would support us and wouldn't participate in union-busting tactics or anything of the sort. They fired her for that. They put her on paid leave and hired a private investigator to see if she had any prior union experience or if she had come to the store purposely to organize us. And then, when they found out that she had, of course, not had any experience and just supported what we were doing, they just fired her entirely.

Because she supported us, the company fought hard that she was trying to use her role as GM to force us to unionize in some way, or she was holding leverage over us as a GM and [...] tried to say that it was her whole idea, and none of us wanted it. So, our first election was thrown out because of that. We had to refile cards again. And they accepted it the second time. We then had our election on March 31st. And we won with a 100 percent vote towards the union. Now we're in contract negotiations. That was astounding to have 100 percent. That was awesome.

WRP: That is incredible. And things went almost as well as they could have gone.

Ariana Lingerfeldt: Yeah, we were fortunate. All the stars aligned to get it through for us. But we were also incredibly dedicated to it. My co-chair and I were working every day, talking [...] about what we needed to do, the issues, etc. We were dedicated.

WRP: How were you able to gain the respect of your coworkers? Can you talk about that process?

Ariana Lingerfeldt: When I started, it was primarily men in management. And unfortunately, there is a huge stigma in the restaurant industry—in the food industry—of women cooks. And I don't know why. So now, [after] unionization, we are mostly all women. We have two men on staff full-time. And it felt when I started that the men got to make all the decisions. At the time, that coworker and I had the same experience and were coming into the same job. And I was succeeding at it better than he was. And I was getting blamed for all of his mistakes, just because he had been there a little bit longer, but I was picking up the job faster. So they credited all my work to him and I don't know why that happened.

But slowly, over time, we got more women in our kitchen. And so now, my kitchen manager, who was my co-chair, got promoted to the kitchen manager. We had all female GMs after that point. I think just having women, they saw what I did in the workplace and trusted in my word. And I think having that [shared awareness] of sexism in the workplace [meant that] they didn't just take whatever some other cook would say about me to heart and treat me like that was that.

So that had been a fight this entire time through the company of getting the company to see there was a [sexist] bias internally. There's a big stigma about young workers, too, that we don't have the amount of experience that other workers do. I've seen people come in at a starting level and excel. Having people willing to have these big conversations and getting to know each other in the workplace helps iron out all those false ideas that are going around. Because Green Sage wants to have a very competitive environment, that's toxic.

That's how I got the respect that I did finally. They saw after about a year between when I started and when we unionized. They saw what I did, how I worked, and realized like none of those things [stigmas] were true.

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ARIANA LINGERFELDT

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WRP: You mentioned that it was primarily men working there, particularly in management positions, and that there's been a shift toward more women. What do you think caused that?

Ariana Lingerfeldt: Honestly, in my opinion, the move to hire women managers was formed in a sexist [manner]. They thought that women managers would follow them more blindly. And then they quickly learned that my manager at the time, in particular, let us unionize under her. But they just noticed a better [environment]; additionally, to what you said, they also noticed that it was less hostile.

WRP: In terms of organizing, what are some trends that you have seen within workplace organizing in Asheville, specifically within the food and beverage service industry?

Ariana Lingerfeldt: The most significant trend I've seen are people catching on to having those tight-knit groups. You're not making it very far if you don't trust each other because the biggest thing that employers will try to do when you're unionizing is break you apart. They'll play on any hierarchy that they already put in place, such as managers and shift leads and stuff like that. They will start targeting people. For us, having that tight-knit group and knowing that all that [union-busting] stuff was going to happen beforehand, and

just saying we're just going to stick together and make ourselves a safe place for anything and everything that's going to happen like during this process really, really helped. It helped with not feeling alone in it and not letting everything the employers are doing to try to break us apart [succeed]. We would hash it out and have conversations and split up what were the lies and what was mismanagement. And whatever was happening, we sorted it out within ourselves instead of trying to go through management to tell us as well.

As a woman, I had a nice conversation with one of my coworkers where, after we submitted our letter, our employer immediately rejected it. And he came to South, which is what we call ourselves because we're South Hendersonville Road, South Green Sage. He went to the South for two different days; it was a Thursday and Friday. And the first day, all my coworkers met with him. And in the second day, it was just me, and one of the cafe leads was calling the store and just listening to me have this conversation with the owner for context.

And so, after we had that conversation, she came to me. And she said that it felt empowering to hear how we were having this conversation and that I could take control of that conversation in a productive way, in a way that we actually needed. And she said, as a woman, she felt like she had to await her turn to speak, or she had to gain favor to give her opinion or something like that, or that she just wasn't old enough even to be able to say her opinion in the workplace. And I told her that that shouldn't be the case at all. Like she's a worker, and her voice matters. And she's a person just as much as anyone else. And she's out there. She was doing it every day. She's out there making the food and the drinks, and she knows what the business needs to run more so than the owner does, who doesn't set foot in the store. And so, she should speak

out about it. And alongside that, my favorite thing about organizing has been organizing with a strong group of young women and seeing them grow and flourish and learn how to use their voice and that they don't have to be anything that anyone tells them to be. They can be exactly who they are in their workplace, and they don't have to be apologetic about it or anything at all.

WRP: What would you say to other people out there for folks working traditionally low-wage jobs in sectors that are hard to organize, to folks currently trying to figure out how to address what's happening and feeling unsure about their power?

Ariana Lingerfeldt: The biggest tool we had was [...] [organizing] within ourselves and becoming a [unified] workplace. But even more than that, taking our concerns to the public. And having the public see almost an insider view of Green Sage helped us the most. Because our customers are brand specific, they go there for a reason. They go there for the brand; they want healthy food, a living wage, and all those things to happen for us [workers], for the most part. Bringing these things to them and saying that stuff isn't being composted like you think. And the whole reason you come here isn't happening. They were upset about that. Public pressure being put on the employer is what helped the most. That also helps hold them accountable for their actions. If you're willing to speak out in any way publicly.

Sticking together, staying informed, and just keeping up with it and learning new things about different ways to organize and [approach] it. People think it has to be a lot more of a process than it has to be. The central part that we focused on that helped us a lot was the idea that a union is us, is us together, making our workplace better. ■

POLICY CHOICES FOR GENDER EQUITY IN THE WORKPLACE

“It’s not about me no more. I’m 64. It’s about you guys that I stand up to fight for now. If I don’t stand up and fight, the youth do not see that somebody cares; they may not fight. They need to know we need to stand up and fight.”

- Bertha Bradley

THE INEQUALITY WORKING WOMEN FACE IN NORTH CAROLINA IS NOT A PROBLEM WITHOUT A SOLUTION.

Policies that support working people and their families, promote public health, protect workers from discrimination and violence, and give them power and financial security will improve the lives of all working North Carolinians—especially women.

While this report has explored issues of worker safety and harassment, the benefits of unionized workplaces, the unique challenges facing women of color

and immigrant women at work, the impacts of new restrictive abortion legislation, and the unpaid care economy’s disproportionate burden on women, there are many workplace issues impacting gender equity and accompanying policy solutions.

Following is a list of some of the policy solutions aimed at mitigating the harm and inequities women face in the workplace.

Improve wages and benefits for workers so that they can meet the needs of their families.

- Raise the North Carolina **minimum wage**. Women make up a higher percentage of low-paying jobs. Raising the wages in these jobs will give the tens of thousands of women working while living below the federal poverty line a much-needed boost in their wages.
- Ensure everyone in North Carolina has access to **paid family and medical leave** and a minimum number of **paid sick days** to care for themselves, sick children, and other loved ones. Women provide significantly more of this care than men, and paid family medical



leave and paid sick leave would ensure that they could do so without threatening their financial security.

- Adopt a **kin care** policy clarifying that workers can use existing paid or unpaid sick time for preventative healthcare and for family caregiving needs.
- Pass a **safe time** policy allowing workers who are survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, and stalking to use their existing paid or unpaid sick time to seek necessary services and support. Women make up a large majority of those who survive these acts of violence.
- Establish an **inclusive family definition** in any paid leave, paid sick days, kin care, and safe time legislation.
- Adopt **fair scheduling requirements** to ensure workers receive timely, clear information regarding their working hours.
- Ensure **equal pay** for workers doing substantially similar work regardless of gender or race.
- Establish **pay transparency** by requiring employers to disclose salary ranges for publicly posted job openings.

- Adopt **salary history bans** prohibiting employers from requiring information about candidates' pay in prior jobs.

Increase public investment in direct care services.

- Increase funding for **childcare subsidies** to reduce the waitlist for working parents seeking childcare financial assistance, raise the wages of childcare providers, and ensure market rates reflect the true cost of care.
- Raise the **reimbursement rate** for direct care services provided through Medicaid.
- Require a portion of the increased childcare funding to be used to **improve worker pay** and benefits.

Make work safe.

- Ensure appropriate funding for agencies tasked with implementation and enforcement of new federal laws that require pregnant workers to be offered **reasonable accommodations** in order to continue working safely throughout pregnancy, childbirth, miscarriage, and lactation.
- Adopt regulations requiring employers to take

POLICY CHOICES FOR GENDER EQUITY IN THE WORKPLACE

basic steps to **protect employees from airborne infectious disease and heat stress**, including having a safety plan training and reporting requirements.

- Implement additional **protections for farmworkers** living in shared migrant housing to have doors that lock from the inside, a telephone and/or highspeed internet connection, and posters clearly identifying the address of the housing to share with first responders in case of emergency.

Ensure that workers have the ability to impact their working conditions through collective bargaining and the freedom to move between jobs.

- Increase job mobility by limiting the use of **restrictive employment agreements**.
- Ensure the rights of all private employees to engage in **collective bargaining** to improve their workplaces.
- Establish collective bargaining rights for **public employees**.

Remove other barriers that prevent women's workplace mobility.

- Repeal **abortion restrictions**.
- Reform **immigration policy** to allow working immigrants to be employed legally.

CONCLUSION



Women face myriad challenges in North Carolina’s workplaces. Making work safer, better compensated, more flexible, and more just is critical to improving outcomes for women workers in our state. Given that women make up half the population and carry an undue burden of caregiving and domestic work, an equitable workplace for women means

a better, healthier and more resilient state for all North Carolinians and their families.

We have outlined a number of policy solutions to advance equity for working women in our state, but for change to happen quickly, women—and all working North Carolinians—must continue to organize and fight for their rights. The women whose stories are

included in this report, as well as many other women in our state, have shown what standing up for themselves and other women in the workforce can do. We hope that many more women leaders will rise up in workplaces across the state in the coming years.

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THE STATE OF WORKING WOMEN

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CAROLINA REPORT



By BRANDON CUNNINGHAM, *Labor Policy Analyst*
brandon@ncjustice.org

and

IVY NICOLE-JONET, *Digital Communications
Coordinator*
ivy@ncjustice.org

See our companion website to this report:
www.SOWNC.org



224 S. Dawson Street | Raleigh, NC 27601
(919) 856-2570 | www.ncjustice.org

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