



# WHEN HARD WORK IS NOT ENOUGH: Women in Low-Paid Jobs

## ➤ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

All working people should be able to support themselves and their families. But far too often, employers do not provide the wages, hours, or benefits that people need to achieve economic security and stability.

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This is especially true for women, and for women of color most of all. Although women make up just under half of the workforce in the United States, they represent nearly two-thirds of the workforce in the 40 lowest-paying jobs (referred to generally in this analysis as “low-paid jobs”).<sup>1</sup> Women of every race—especially Latinas, Native American women, and Black women—are overrepresented in low-paid jobs.

Today, as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds, millions of women working in these low-paid jobs are on the front lines of the crisis. Women who have struggled to get by as restaurant servers and bartenders, fast food workers, hotel clerks, housekeeping cleaners, retail salespersons, nail salon workers, staff at theaters and other entertainment venues, and in other service sector positions face a high risk of losing their jobs altogether. And many others—including the personal care and home health aides caring for people managing illness

in their homes, the cashiers staffing grocery stores, and the child care workers caring for the children of health care workers and first responders—find that their work is more essential than ever but no less undervalued, with decent pay and basic benefits still out of reach.

**When Hard Work Is Not Enough: Women in Low-Paid Jobs** examines who women in low-paid jobs are and how they were faring in 2018, the most recent year for which national data on poverty and income are available—and it finds that in a year in which by some measures our economy was booming, millions of women in low-paid jobs were facing severe economic hardship. In 2020, the rapid spread of the new coronavirus has dramatically shifted our economic landscape—and it is these women and their families who are likely to be hit first and hardest by the recession that follows.



## ➤ KEY FINDINGS

### WHO ARE THE WOMEN WORKING IN LOW-PAID JOBS?

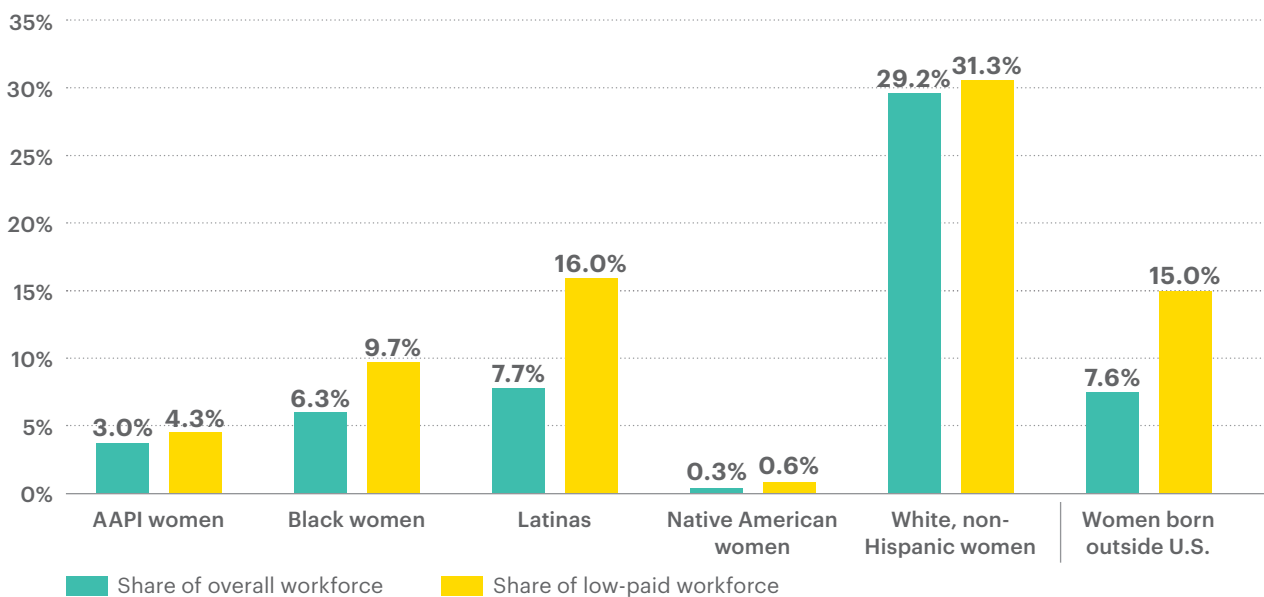
Across the United States, more than 22.2 million people work in the 40 lowest paying jobs—and women make up nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of this workforce.<sup>2</sup> The work they do is vitally important to our economy and our society, but employers typically pay people who hold these jobs less than \$12 per hour. See **Appendix** for median wages, size of the workforce, and share of the workforce who are women in each of the 40 lowest paying jobs.

- While women of every race are overrepresented in low-paid jobs compared to their share of the overall workforce, this disproportionate representation is especially stark for women of color.<sup>3</sup> Women born outside of the United States are also overrepresented in the low-paid workforce,

at roughly twice their share of the overall workforce. See **Figure 1**.

- More than one in four women in the low-paid workforce (27 percent) have at least one child under 18 at home. And the vast majority of mothers in the 40 lowest-paying jobs are the sole or primary breadwinners for their families—especially Black mothers.
  - More than two-thirds of mothers in the low-paid workforce (69 percent) are the sole or primary breadwinners for their families, bringing home at least half of their household’s total earnings, and another 11 percent are co-breadwinners, earning between 25 and 49 percent of the total.<sup>4</sup>
  - Among Black mothers in the low-paid workforce, 84 percent are sole or primary breadwinners and another 6 percent are co-breadwinners.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1. Women in the Overall and Low-Paid Workforces by Race/Ethnicity and Nativity, 2018**



## WOMEN IN LOW-PAID JOBS STRUGGLE TO MAKE ENDS MEET, EVEN IF THEY ARE ABLE TO WORK FULL-TIME HOURS.

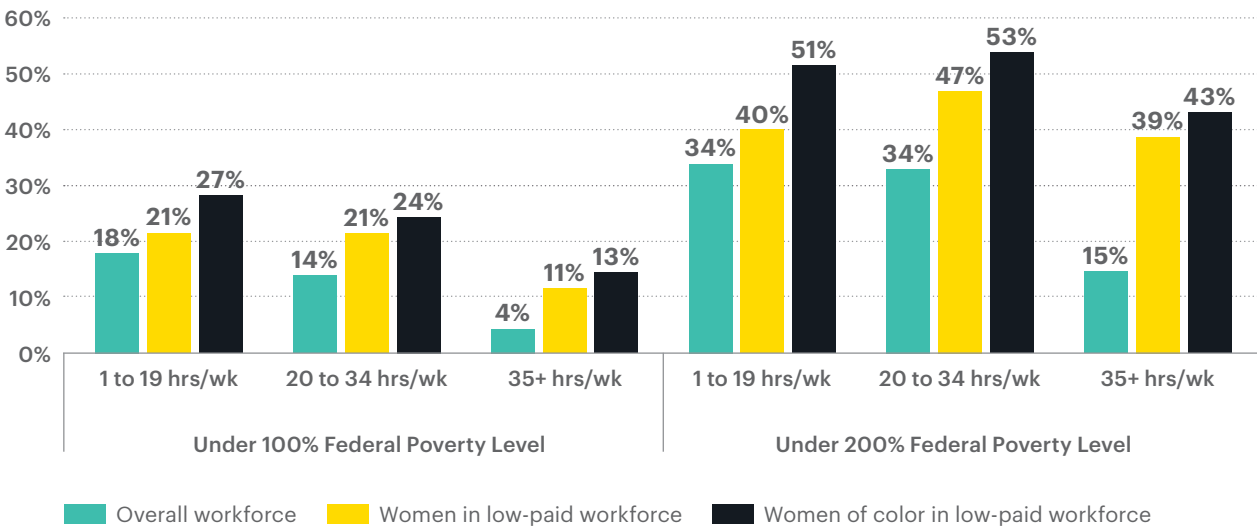
- **Even when working full time, women in low-paid jobs face a high risk of falling below or near the poverty line—and those odds are greatest for women of color.** And women in low-paid jobs who work part time because they can't find full-time work or need to manage other obligations face an even higher risk of poverty and economic insecurity.
  - Close to four in 10 women working full time in low-paid jobs in 2018 had household incomes below twice the poverty line, including 11 percent who lived in poverty. See **Figure 2**.
  - Among all women of color working full time in low-paid jobs, 43 percent lived in or near poverty in 2018, compared to 35 percent of white, non-Hispanic women. Closer to half of Latinas (44 percent), Native American women (46 percent), and Black women (49 percent) working full time in low-paid jobs had household incomes below twice the poverty line. See **Figure 3**.

## LOW-PAID JOBS MAKE IT ESPECIALLY HARD FOR WOMEN WHO ARE CARING FOR CHILDREN TO SUPPORT THEMSELVES AND THEIR FAMILIES.

- **Nearly six in 10 mothers in low-paid jobs (57 percent) fell near or below the poverty line in 2018**, compared to 48 percent of fathers in the low-paid workforce, 27 percent of mothers in the workforce overall, and 22 percent of fathers in the workforce overall.
- **Mothers who are women of color are even more likely to be poor, or near poor.** Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of mothers of color in the low-paid workforce had incomes near or below the poverty line in 2018. Even when working full time, 58 percent of women of color who are mothers working in low-paid jobs had incomes below twice the poverty line in 2018, including more than one in five (21 percent) who lived in poverty.

When the people who have been most historically marginalized, including women of color, are doing well—when they are paid a living wage, able to invest and build

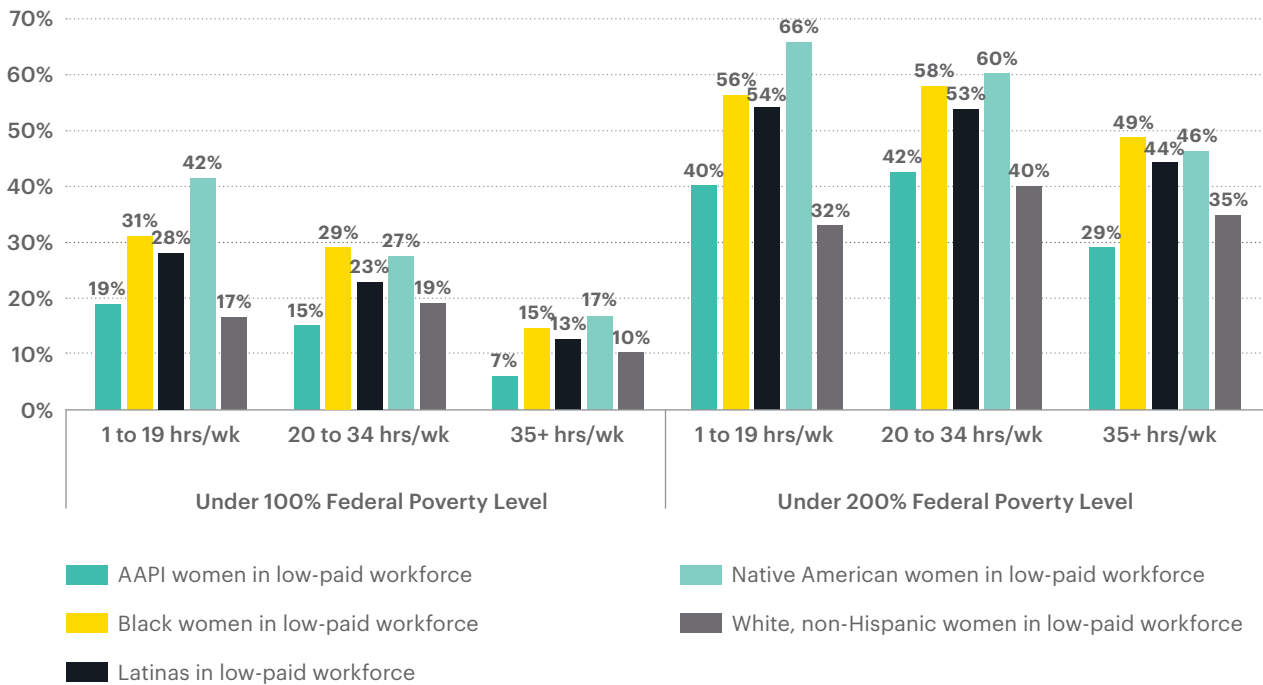
**Figure 2. Poverty and Near-Poverty Rates Among Women in Low-Paid Jobs and Workers Overall, 2018**



Hours refer to number of weekly work hours reported by ACS respondents.



**Figure 3. Poverty and Near-Poverty Rates Among Women in Low-Paid Jobs, by Race/Ethnicity, 2018**



Hours refer to number of weekly work hours reported by ACS respondents.

wealth, and able to provide a healthy and quality life for themselves, their families, and their communities—it’s a sign that the economy is working well for everyone. But in 2018, with low unemployment nationwide, millions of women in low-paying jobs—especially women of color and women supporting children—were struggling to make ends meet, even when working full-time.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the deep gaps in our economic and social infrastructure that have resulted from decades of undervaluing the work that women and people of color do and underinvesting in the supports that families with low and moderate incomes need. To mitigate the vast impact of this public health crisis and stabilize our economy writ large, it is critically important for policy makers

to deliver relief for women and their families now while making comprehensive public investments that remedy underlying flaws in our programs and systems. When we center the Black and brown women most likely to be in low-paid jobs in driving a policy agenda to correct these inequities, all of us will benefit from an economy that works for *all* of us—not just the wealthy few.

*For more information on women in the low-paid workforce, including demographic data and detailed tables comparing rates of poverty and near-poverty rates for women, men, and parents in low-paid jobs and in the workforce overall, see NWLC’s full report, **When Hard Work Is Not Enough: Women in Low-Paid Jobs.***



## APPENDIX: The 40 Lowest Paying Jobs

	Occupation	Median Hourly Wage in 2018	Number of Workers, 2019	Share of Workers Who Are Women, 2019
1	Gaming Dealers ***	\$9.68	—	—
2	Combined Food Preparation and Serving Workers, Including Fast Food	\$10.22	372,000	62%
3	Shampooers *	\$10.40	409,000	86%
4	Waiters and Waitresses	\$10.47	1,038,000	71%
5	Hosts and Hostesses, Restaurant, Lounge, and Coffee Shop	\$10.65	322,000	82%
6	Ushers, Lobby Attendants, and Ticket Takers	\$10.70	38,000	—
7	Amusement and Recreation Attendants ***	\$10.70	—	—
8	Dining Room and Cafeteria Attendants and Bartender Helpers	\$10.71	338,000	41%
9	Cooks, Fast Food **	\$10.74	2,031,000	42%
10	Counter Attendants, Cafeteria, Food Concession, and Coffee Shop	\$10.74	200,000	59%
11	Lifeguards, Ski Patrol, and Other Recreational Protective Service Workers	\$10.77	139,000	49%
12	Cashiers	\$10.78	3,164,000	71%
13	Bartenders	\$10.84	464,000	53%
14	Dishwashers	\$10.93	264,000	21%
15	Motion Picture Projectionists	\$10.94	1,000	—
16	Laundry and Dry-Cleaning Workers	\$11.16	134,000	75%
17	Child Care Workers	\$11.17	1,193,000	93%
18	Food Servers, Nonrestaurant	\$11.20	191,000	66%
19	Pressers, Textile, Garment, and Related Materials	\$11.23	28,000	—
20	Hotel, Motel, and Resort Desk Clerks	\$11.39	116,000	75%
21	Food Preparation Workers	\$11.41	1,079,000	59%
22	Nonfarm Animal Caretakers	\$11.42	296,000	75%
23	Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners	\$11.43	1,475,000	89%
24	Models *****	\$11.43	62,000	73%
25	Cooks, Short Order **	\$11.44	2,031,000	42%
26	Food Preparation and Serving Related Workers, All Other	\$11.47	7,000	—

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	Occupation	Median Hourly Wage in 2018	Number of Workers, 2018	Share of Workers Who Are Women, 2018
27	Parking Lot Attendants	\$11.47	83,000	15%
28	Locker Room, Coatroom, and Dressing Room Attendants ***	\$11.55	—	—
29	Personal Care Aides	\$11.55	1,458,000	86%
30	Home Health Aides ****	\$11.63	2,086,000	88%
31	Retail Salespersons	\$11.63	3,105,000	49%
32	Baggage Porters and Bellhops	\$11.64	92,000	24%
33	Automotive and Watercraft Service Attendants	\$11.64	88,000	18%
34	Entertainment Attendants and Related Workers, All Other	\$11.68	210,000	39%
35	Farmworkers and Laborers, Crop, Nursery, and Greenhouse ***	\$11.69	—	—
36	Manicurists and Pedicurists *	\$11.70	409,000	86%
37	Gaming and Sports Book Writers and Runners ***	\$11.74	—	—
38	Graders and Sorters, Agricultural Products	\$11.75	88,000	65%
39	Cleaners of Vehicles and Equipment	\$11.79	344,000	16%
40	Packers and Packagers, Hand	\$11.82	628,000	55%

Sources: Occupations and median hourly wages are from U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), May 2018 National Occupational Employment & Wage Estimates, [https://www.bls.gov/oes/2018/may/oes\\_nat.htm](https://www.bls.gov/oes/2018/may/oes_nat.htm). Number of workers and share of workers who are women are from U.S. Department of Labor, BLS, Current Population Survey, Household Data, 2019 Annual Averages, Table 11, <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>. Dashes indicate data is unavailable. In a few instances, the two BLS sources required for this table define occupations in slightly different ways; see additional notes below for details.

\* Shampooers, manicurists, and pedicurists fall into one “Miscellaneous personal appearance worker” occupation in the Current Population Survey; figures on number of workers and share of workers who are women in both rows reflect that of “Miscellaneous personal appearance worker.”

\*\* Fast food cooks and short order cooks fall into one “Cooks” detailed occupation in the Current Population Survey; figures on number of workers and share of workers who are women in both rows reflect that of “Cooks.”

\*\*\* There were neither exact nor similar matches in the Current Population Survey for the following occupations identified in the National Occupational Employment & Wage Estimates: Gaming Dealers; Amusement and Recreation Attendants; Locker Room, Coatroom, and Dressing Attendants; Farmworkers and Laborers, Crop, Nursery, and Greenhouse; Gaming and Sports Book Writers and Runners.

\*\*\*\* Home health aides are not separated out as detailed occupation in the Current Population Survey; figures on number of workers and share of workers who are women reflect that of “Nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides.”

\*\*\*\*\* Models are not separated out as detailed occupation in the Current Population Survey; figures on number of workers and share of workers who are women in both rows reflect that of “Models, demonstrators, and product promoters.”

- 1 Women are 47 percent of the overall workforce in the U.S. and 64 percent of the low-paid workforce. NWLC calculations based on U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey (ACS) using Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Ronald Goeken, Josia Grover, Erin Meyer, Jose Pacas, and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 10.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2020, available at <https://usa.ipums.org>. Unless otherwise noted, all data points in this analysis regarding women’s representation in the low-paid workforce (i.e., in the 40 lowest-paying jobs) and rates of poverty/near poverty are calculated from the 2018 ACS using IPUMS. Definitions of “low-wage” or “low-paid” jobs vary; NWLC focuses this analysis on the 40 lowest-paying jobs because these jobs particularly illuminate women’s overrepresentation at the low end of the pay spectrum.
- 2 Respondents self-identified their sex as either male or female in the 2018 ACS. For more information, see the full questionnaire: <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/methodology/questionnaires/2018/quest18.pdf>.
- 3 Respondents self-identified their race in the 2018 ACS. AAPI women self-identified as Asian American or Other Pacific Islander. Black women self-identified as Black or African American. Native American women self-identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native. Latinas are those who self-identified that they are of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin and may be of any race. White, non-Hispanic women self-identified as white but who indicated they are not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.
- 4 Center for American Progress (CAP) analysis of Current Population Survey data (on file with authors). Figures are for 2017. In CAP’s analysis, “sole or primary breadwinners” (or “breadwinners” or “breadwinning mothers”) refer to unmarried working mothers—which includes those who have never married, as well as those who are divorced, separated, widowed, or married with an absent spouse—and married mothers who earn as much as or more than their husbands. “Co-breadwinners” or “co-breadwinning mothers” are defined as “a working wife bringing home at least 25 percent of her family’s total earnings.” This terminology maintains consistency across CAP’s series of reports examining the evolution of mothers’ breadwinning roles. See, e.g., Heather Boushey, *The New Breadwinners*, in Maria Shriver & CAP, *THE SHRIVER REPORT: A WOMAN’S NATION CHANGES EVERYTHING* 31, 37 (2009), available at <http://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2009/10/pdf/awn/chapters/economy.pdf>; SARAH JANE GLYNN, CAP, BREADWINNING MOTHERS CONTINUE TO BE THE U.S. NORM (May 2019), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2019/05/10/469739/breadwinning-mothers-continue-u-s-norm/>. In the workforce overall, 41 percent of mothers are sole or primary breadwinners and another 23 percent are co-breadwinners. See GLYNN. Unfortunately, due to data limitations, it is not possible to analyze same-sex married couples, nor is it possible to differentiate LGBTQ unmarried mothers or parents who are gender nonconforming.
- 5 CAP calculations, *supra* note 4. Among Latina mothers in the low-paid workforce, 69 percent are sole or primary breadwinners and another 9 percent are co-breadwinners. About two-thirds (66 percent) of white, non-Hispanic mothers in the low-paid workforce are sole or primary breadwinners and another 15 percent are co-breadwinners. *Id.* Data for breadwinning mothers in low-paid jobs who are AAPI or Native women not available due to insufficient sample size.



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