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COVID-19 and the Ensuing Recession Puts Women in Retail at Risk

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As the COVID-19 pandemic's effects continue, millions of women working in low-paid jobs are on the front lines of the crisis. The economic recession triggered by the pandemic has dampened economic activity and resulted in nearly 20.7 million people losing their jobs in April 2020 alone.¹ That job loss hit the retail sector particularly hard, and while some of these jobs have begun to come back, they remain precarious, as spikes in infection drive new shutdowns and cause customers to stay away. In particular, women who have struggled to get by in the retail sector are now facing a high risk of losing their jobs altogether—while those who are still employed are forced to put their and their families' health at risk, with decent pay and benefits too often still out of reach.

Retail trade is a large sector that accounts for roughly 1 in 10 jobs in our economy, and women make up nearly half (48.7%) of all retail workers.² However, women have been disproportionately affected by pandemic-related retail job losses, accounting for 65.2% of the total job losses that occurred in the retail trade sector between February and June 2020.³

Between February and April 2020, 2.4 million retail jobs were lost; more than half of those jobs—1.4 million—belonged to women.⁴ From April to June, there was a slight recovery of 1.1 million retail jobs, with just over half (53.5%) of job gains going to women⁵—but many are at risk of being lost again as a continuing surge of coronavirus cases threatens a new wave of business closures. Caught in a devastating Catch-22, women in the retail sector continue to experience a high risk of being displaced from their jobs and a high risk of being exposed to the virus if they go to work. And women in retail jobs were already undervalued and underpaid, a long-time problem now exacerbated by the current crisis.

Women Are Essential to the Retail Workforce and Are Among the Hardest Hit by the Pandemic

Retail trade is a huge sector of employment in the United States: 10.3% of all workers, including 10.6% of all women workers, work in retail.⁶ Women are 47.5% of the entire U.S. workforce, and are slightly overrepresented in the retail sector, making up 48.7% of the retail workforce—meaning more than 7.8 million women are employed in the retail industry.⁷ Unfortunately, women in the retail sector are among the hardest hit by the pandemic’s effects on the economy. Women in many specific subsectors of retail trade are being displaced from their jobs at much higher rates than their male counterparts. Additionally, in almost every subsector that saw job losses, the share of lost jobs attributed to women was higher than the share of women in the subsector before the pandemic—showing the disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on women’s jobs.

Women in Retail Subsectors

Retail Subsector	Change in Number of Jobs	Change in Number of Women’s Jobs	Women’s Share of Job Losses	Women’s Share of Subsector Jobs in February
Food and Beverage Stores	5,300	-15,400	100.0%	50.3%
Health and Personal Care Stores	-156,600	-133,100	85.0%	71.9%
General Merchandise Stores	-93,200	-69,700	74.8%	58.3%
Clothing and Clothing Accessories Stores	-723,500	-540,900	70.8%	71.1%
Miscellaneous Store Retailers	-211,900	-148,600	70.1%	59.1%
Gasoline Stations	-54,200	-35,200	64.9%	56.5%
Furniture and Home Furnishings Stores	-173,200	-105,100	60.7%	48.5%
Sporting Goods, Hobby, Book, and Music Stores	-182,600	-91,400	50.1%	42.7%
Electronics and Appliance Stores	-120,900	-44,700	37.0%	32.9%
Motor Vehicle and Parts Dealers	-293,900	-71,600	24.4%	20.1%
Building Material and Garden Equipment and Supplies Dealers	18,500	7,700	N/A	32.7%

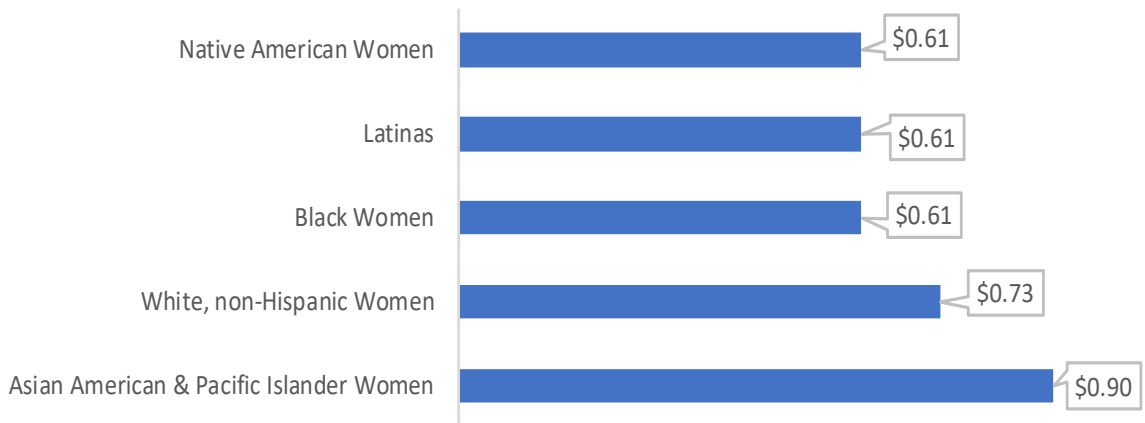
Source: NWLC calculations based on historical data for U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), historical data for Table B-1: Employees on nonfarm payrolls by industry sector and selected industry detail, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab1.htm> and historical data for Table B-5: Employment of women on nonfarm payrolls by industry sector, seasonally adjusted, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab5.htm>. Change in the number of jobs in retail subsectors and job losses calculations are using February to May 2020 data.

Women in the Retail Workforce Are Underpaid and Undervalued

While women are about half of the entire retail workforce, they are not paid equally to their male counterparts for their work. Among full-time, year-round workers, women in retail sector jobs typically are paid \$34,000, while men in retail typically are paid \$42,000.⁸ This means women make 81 cents for every dollar paid to men in the retail sector.⁹

Many women of color working in retail—and others who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination—typically earn less than women working in the sector overall, producing gender wage gaps that are even more striking relative to men. For example, Black women, Latinas, and Native American women working full-time, year-round in retail jobs typically make \$30,000 annually, meaning they are paid just 61 cents for every dollar paid to their white, non-Hispanic male counterparts, who typically make \$49,000 annually.¹⁰ Similarly, among full-time, year-round workers in the retail trade sector, women who have a disability typically make 71 cents for every dollar men without a disability typically make, and women born outside of the U.S. make 71 cents for every dollar men born in the U.S. make.¹¹

What a Woman Made for Every Dollar a White, non-Hispanic Man Made in the Retail Sector (2018)

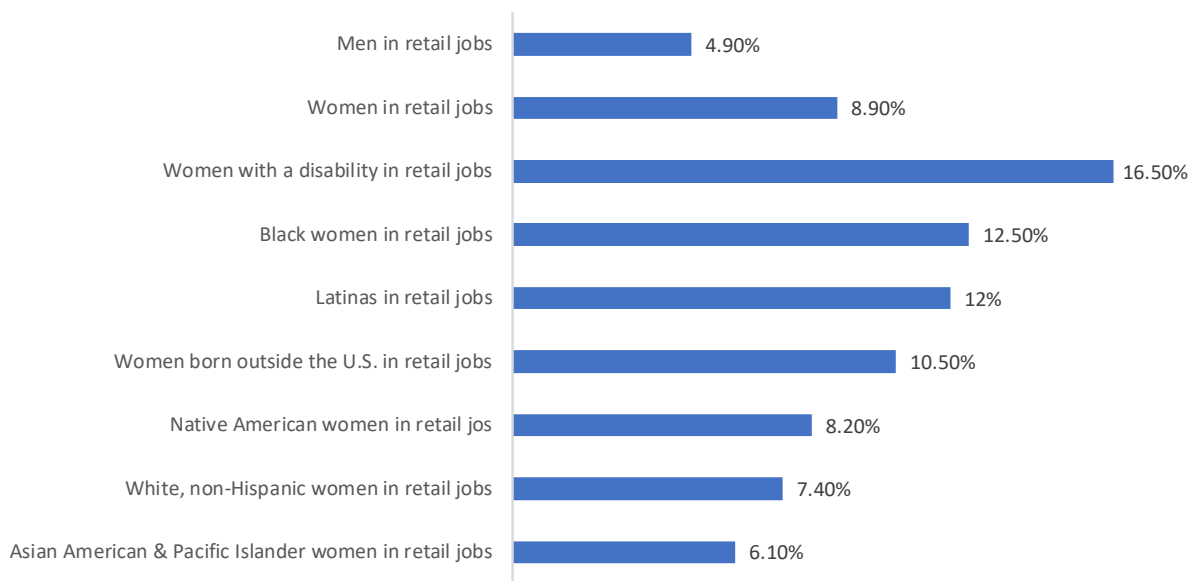


Source: NWLC calculations based on 2019 CPS ASEC, using IPUMS. The gender earnings ratio for women overall (or “what a woman makes for every dollar a man makes”) is calculated by dividing the median annual wages for women working full-time year-round by the median annual wages for men working full-time, year-round. Gender earnings ratios for AAPI women, Black women, Latinas, Native American women, and white, non-Hispanic women are calculated by dividing the median annual wages for women working full-time, year-round in each demographic group by the median annual wages for white, non-Hispanic men working full-time, year-round.

Moreover, many women in the retail sector are not working full-time, year-round—even if they would like to be. In 2018, 32.5% of women in the retail workforce were part time, compared to 20.1% of men in the retail workforce.¹² The share of people who are working part time involuntarily is growing due to the pandemic: while data specific to the retail sector is unavailable, in June 2020, one in every four women (25.2%) working part time wanted full-time work, but were unable to obtain it for economic reasons, such as their employer not giving them full-time hours.¹³ In February, before the pandemic hit, only 11% of women working part-time were doing so for economic reasons.¹⁴ And these estimates do not capture people who want to work part time but receive fewer hours than they are seeking from their employer—a scenario that is particularly common in retail jobs. For example, surveys of hourly retail and food service employees in multiple jurisdictions show that among those working fewer than 30 hours per week, at least six in ten typically want to work more hours.¹⁵

With inadequate wages and hours, many women working in retail jobs were struggling to make ends meet well before the COVID-19 crisis. In 2018, 8.9% of women working in retail jobs lived in poverty—nearly twice the rate of poverty among workers overall—and poverty rates for Black women, Latinas, and women with disabilities working in retail were considerably higher.¹⁶ Moreover, the federal poverty line, which is just \$20,231 for a parent with two children,¹⁷ barely begins to capture what families need to make ends meet.¹⁸

Poverty Among Retail Workers (2018)



Source: NWLC calculations based on 2019 Current Population Survey ASEC. The federal poverty line varies by family size and composition; for a parent with two children, the poverty line was \$20,231 in 2018. Respondents self-identify their sex, race, and whether they are Latinx. Persons with disabilities are those who have identified themselves as having any physical or cognitive difficulty, as measured by affirmative responses to any of the CPS' six cognitive difficulties. Women born outside of the U.S. are those who have identified themselves as born outside of U.S territories and possessions.

Today, many women in the retail sector have lost their jobs and face an uncertain future, with further shutdowns looming and the \$600 federal boost to weekly unemployment benefits set to expire at the end of July. Women who are still working are putting their lives on the line to provide essential services, while still receiving poverty-level pay, minimal benefits, and inadequate protection against COVID-19.

- Women are 66% of cashiers and retail salespeople in grocery stores and hold 71% of these positions in general merchandise stores (like Target and Walmart)¹⁹—jobs that typically pay about \$11.40 and \$12.11, respectively, per hour.²⁰ The modest, typically \$2 to \$3 per hour, wage boosts that some retail businesses instituted for these essential workers earlier in the year have largely expired.²¹
- Prior to the pandemic, only about 40 percent of workers in large retail and grocery stores reported access to any paid sick days.²² Many still don't have paid sick days or paid leave to care for children whose schools or child care facilities have closed, because companies with more than 500 employees are exempt from the emergency paid sick day and paid leave provisions enacted in COVID-relief packages.²³
- Fewer than 2 in 5 women (37.4%) working in the retail sector had health insurance through their employers in 2018.²⁴
- Retail workers often lack personal protective equipment (PPE) on the job. Survey data from the Shift Project indicates that only about one-quarter of workers in large retail and grocery stores had access to masks in March and early April 2020.²⁵

Retail workers have also faced retaliation—including being fired—for asking for PPE or protesting unsafe working conditions.²⁶ One analysis found that, Black workers have been more than twice as likely as white workers to report that they or someone at their job had been punished or fired for raising COVID-related concerns.²⁷ As stores reopen, retail workers may also risk their jobs and their safety as they enforce company mask-wearing policies with customers who refuse (sometimes violently) to do so.²⁸

Retail Workers Need Immediate Relief and an Equitable Recovery

Before the pandemic began, the retail workforce was made up of 15.7 million workers. By June 2020, that number dropped to 14.4 million—a loss of 1.3 million jobs as a result of COVID-19. Women bore most of those job losses and are at risk of bearing the brunt of further losses as the pandemic continues. Policy makers must do more to support those who are unemployed as a result the pandemic, including extending and strengthening emergency unemployment insurance; shoring up nutrition assistance, child care assistance, and other public benefits; and halting evictions and foreclosures.²⁹ Congress can also dramatically reduce the number of people facing unemployment by enacting the Paycheck Recovery Act, which would keep workers connected to their jobs, restore millions of workers who have been laid off or furloughed since the pandemic hit payroll, and prevent employers of all sizes from being forced to close permanently.

At the same time, policy makers must ensure that millions of retail workers who continue to support our communities by working in pharmacies, grocery stores, and more are valued and protected. This includes making investments to ensure access to regular testing, PPE, and other essential supplies; instituting and enforcing stronger workplace safety standards; requiring companies to provide premium pay to essential workers; extending and expanding federal emergency paid sick time and paid leave provisions; ensuring that companies are not shielded from liability when they fail to take reasonable steps to protect their workers or the public; and strengthening protections so that workers can organize and speak up about unsafe workplace conditions without fear of retaliation.³⁰ To ensure an equitable recovery for retail workers—and all working people—in the long term, Congress must strengthen our antidiscrimination, employment, and labor laws so that everyone can work with equality, safety, and dignity.

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- 1 NWLC calculations based on historical data for U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), historical data for Table B-1: Employees on nonfarm payrolls by industry sector and selected industry detail, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab1.htm>.
 - 2 NWLC calculations based on 2019 CPS ASEC, using IPUMS, available at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html>.
 - 3 NWLC calculations based on BLS, historical data for Table B-5a: Employment of women on nonfarm payrolls by industry sector, seasonally adjusted, available at <https://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/CES420000010>.
 - 4 NWLC calculations based on historical data for U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), historical data for Table B-1: Employees on nonfarm payrolls by industry sector and selected industry detail, available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cesbtab1.htm> and on BLS, historical data for Table B-5a: Employment of women on nonfarm payrolls by industry sector, seasonally adjusted, available at <https://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/CES420000010>.
 - 5 Id.
 - 6 NWLC calculations based on 2019 Current Population Survey ASEC, using IPUMS, available at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html>.
 - 7 Id.
 - 8 Id.
 - 9 Id.
 - 10 NWLC calculations based on 2019 Current Population Survey ASEC, using IPUMS. Median annual wages are for full-time, year-round workers in 2018. In the CPS, respondents self-identify their sex, race, and whether they are Latinx.
 - 11 NWLC calculations based on 2019 Current Population Survey ASEC, using IPUMS. Median annual wages are for full-time, year-round workers in 2018. In the CPS, persons with disabilities are those who have identified themselves as having any physical or cognitive difficulty, as measured by affirmative responses to any of the CPS' six cognitive difficulties. Women born outside of the U.S. are those who have identified themselves as born outside of U.S. territories and possessions.
 - 12 NWLC calculations based on 2019 Current Population Survey ASEC, using IPUMS, available at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html>.
 - 13 NWLC calculations based on BLS, June 2020 Employment Situation Summary, Table A-27: Persons at work in nonagricultural industries by age, sex, race, Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, marital status, and usual full- or part-time status, available at <https://www.bls.gov/web/emp/sit/cpseea27.htm> (last visited July 15, 2020). Figures are not seasonally adjusted and are for women ages 16 and over.
 - 14 NWLC calculations based on BLS, Table A-27 historical data. Data for all women working part-time available at <https://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LNU02033505>. Data for women working part-time for economic reasons available at <https://beta.bls.gov/dataViewer/view/timeseries/LNU02033506>.
 - 15 See <https://nwlc-ci49tixgw5lbab.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Part-Time-Workers-Factsheet-2.26.20.pdf> note 23.
 - 16 NWLC calculations based on 2019 Current Population Survey ASEC, using IPUMS, available at <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html>.
 - 17 U.S. Census Bureau, Poverty Thresholds for 2018, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-thresholds.html> (last visited July 17, 2020).
 - 18 For example, the Economic Policy Institute estimates that a family of that size living in Columbus, Ohio would need more than three times a poverty-level income (\$67,180) to pay for basics like rent, groceries, child care, and health insurance. See Econ. Policy Inst., Family Budget Calculator, <https://www.epi.org/resources/budget/> (last visited July 17, 2020).
 - 19 NWLC calculations based on 2018 American Community Survey, one-year estimates, using IPUMS.
 - 20 U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Occupational Statistics Employment Statistics Query System, available at <https://data.bls.gov/oes/#/indOcc/Multiple%20occupations%20for%20one%20industry>.
 - 21 Richard Feloni, Just Capital, "This Is When the Hazard Pay Benefits From the Largest American Employers Have Already Expired or Are About to" (June 17, 2020), available at (<https://justcapital.com/news/the-largest-american-employers-whose-coronavirus-hazard-pay-benefit-is-set-to-expire-in-may/>) (last visited July 20, 2020).
 - 22 Daniel Schneider and Kristen Harknett, Shift Project, "Estimates of Workers Who Lack Access to Paid Sick Leave at 91 Large Service Sector Employers" (March 2020), available at <https://shift.hks.harvard.edu/paid-sick-leave-brief/>. The Shift Project analyzed survey data collected between February and November 2019 from hourly workers at 91 large service sector employers, including major grocery store and retail chains. Across the grocery store workers surveyed, 41 percent reported that they had no paid sick days; for retail store workers (see Table 2a); among retail workers (a category that includes employees at stores like Target, CVS, Walmart, and Dollar General), 38 percent said they had no paid sick days (Table 4a).
 - 23 Steven Findlay, Health Affairs, "Congress Left Big Gaps In The Paid Sick Days And Paid Leave Provisions Of The Coronavirus Emergency Legislation" (April 29, 2020), available at <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20200424.223002/full/>.

- 24** NWLC calculations based on 2019 Current Population Survey ASEC, using IPUMS.
- 25** Daniel Schneider and Kristen Harknett, Shift Project, “Essential and Unprotected: COVID-19-Related Health and Safety Procedures for Service Sector Workers” (March 2020), available at <https://shift.hks.harvard.edu/files/2020/05/Essential-and-Unprotected-COVID-19-Health-Safety.pdf>.
- 26** Irene Tung & Laura Padin, “Silenced by COVID-19 in the Workplace” (June 2020), available at <https://www.nelp.org/publication/silenced-covid-19-workplace/>.
- 27** ID.
- 28** Neil MacFarquhar, The New York Time (NYT), “Who’s Enforcing Mask Rules? Often Retail Workers, and They’re Getting Hurt” (May 15, 2020), available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/us/coronavirus-masks-violence.html>.
- 29** See, e.g., [Fixing Unemployment Insurance in Response to COVID-19; Expanding Income Supports In Response to COVID-19; Improving and Expanding Child Care Assistance to Stabilize Our Economy; Improving Housing Assistance in Response to COVID-19](#).
- 30** See, e.g., [Securing Workers’ Rights and Employer Accountability During COVID-19 and Beyond; Expanding Paid Sick Days and Paid Family & Medical Leave in Response to COVID-19; Employer Immunity From COVID-19: Related Liability Endangers Women and People of Color](#).