



**NATIONAL
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JULY 2021 | FACT SHEET

Unions Are Good for Women

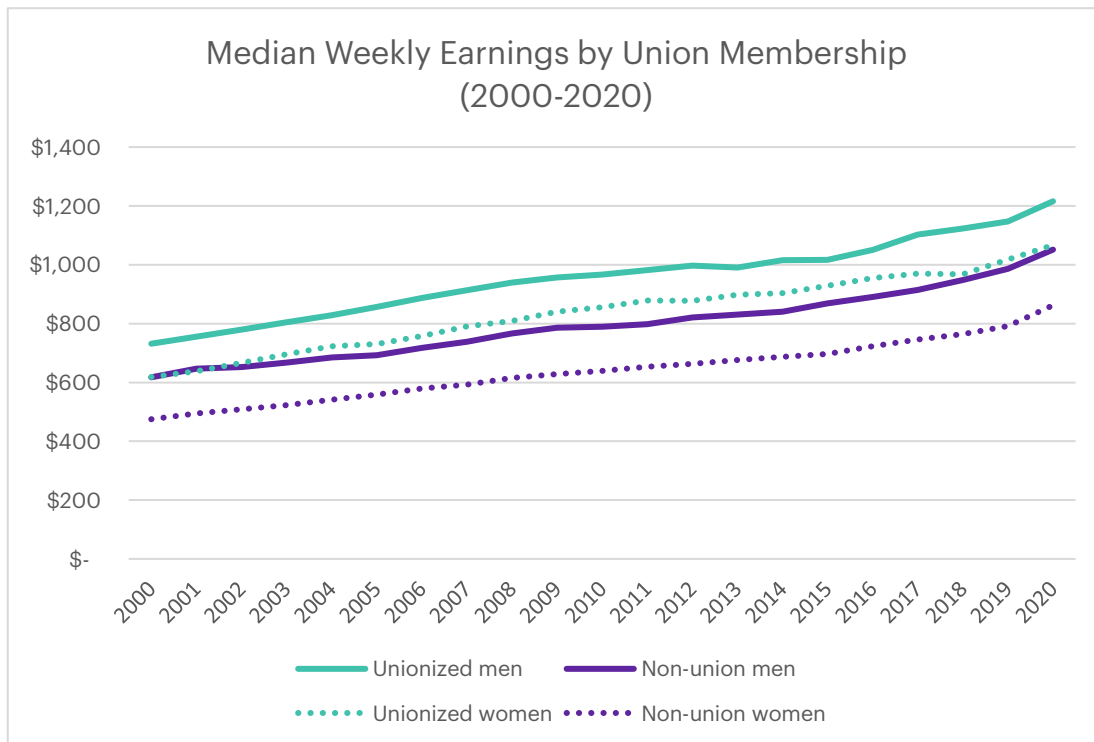
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As of 2020, public approval for unions in the United States was at the highest point in [17 years—at 65%](#).¹ Among women, that number rises to 67% and among people of color, to 70%.² [Nearly half of non-unionized workers say they would join a union if they could.](#)³ Through collective bargaining, union members have been able to win economic security for themselves and their families, including higher and more equal wages, access to affordable benefits, and the right not to be fired without cause. The presence of a union in the workplace also makes it more likely that working people will raise safety concerns and have access to benefits – which is especially critical in light of COVID-19. While unions are beneficial for all workers, union membership is especially important for women workers.

The data in this factsheet is based on union density, or the rate at which working people have joined unions as dues-paying union members. It does not reflect the number of workers who are represented by a union but who are not union members. To be a union member, employees must pay dues.⁴

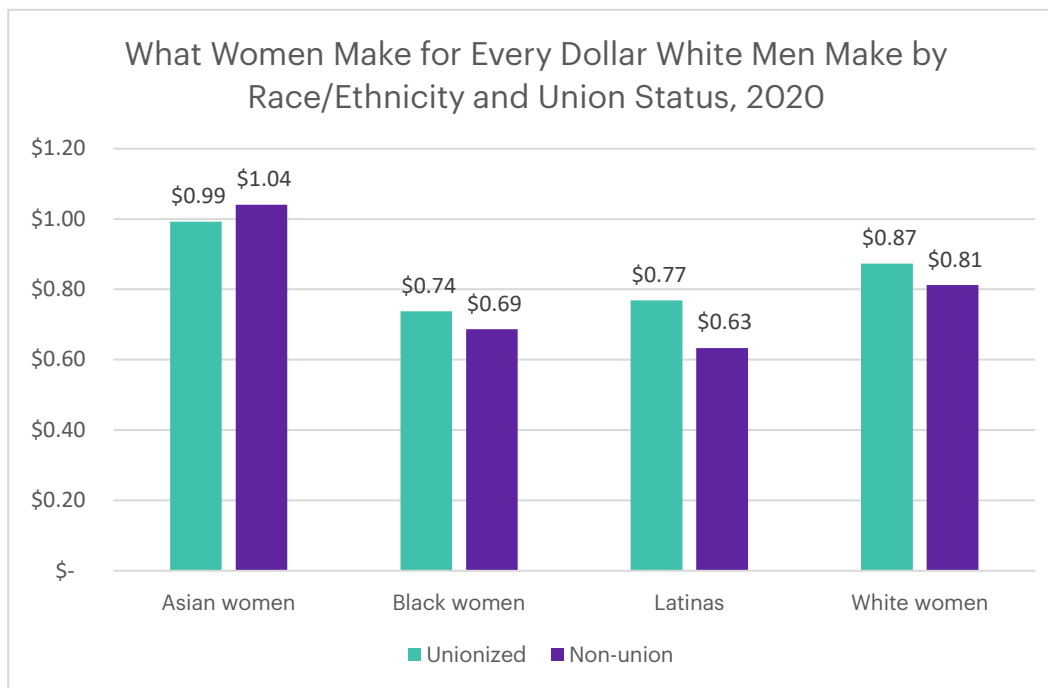
WOMEN IN UNIONS MAKE HIGHER WAGES AND EXPERIENCE SMALLER GENDER WAGE GAPS.

Many women—particularly women of color, women with disabilities, and single-parent households—struggle to make ends meet in low-paid jobs.⁵ Though belonging to a union raises wages for all workers, women in particular benefit from being in a union. Women who are union members typically make \$205 more per week than women who are not union members—a larger wage advantage than men typically receive from being members of a union.⁶ And while the gender wage gap persists even when women are unionized, women in unions are consistently paid wages that are [not just higher but also more equal to men's wages.](#)⁷



Source: BLS, "Median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers by union affiliation and selected characteristics, 2019-2020 annual averages," Table 2 in *Union Members - 2020* (Washington, DC: Jan. 22, 2021), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t02.htm>. Historical data available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpslutab2.htm>.

- Union members typically make more per week than non-union workers—but the bonus is larger for women, both as a percentage and as absolute dollars, and is especially large for Latinas.⁸
- Unionized women who work full time typically make \$1,067 per week—24% more (\$205 more) than women workers who are not in a union, who typically make \$862 per week. In contrast, unionized men who work full time typically make \$1,216 per week—16% more (\$165 more) than men workers who are not in a union, who typically make \$1,051 per week.
- Among women, **Latina** workers experience particularly large financial benefits from union membership. Among full time workers, unionized Latinas typically make 40% more per week (\$271 more) than Latina non-union workers.
- Among full time workers, unionized **Black women** typically make 24% more per week (\$175 more) than Black women non-union workers.
- Among full time workers, unionized **Asian women** typically make 10% more per week (\$109 more) than Asian women non-union workers.
- Among full time workers, unionized **white women** typically make 24% more per week (\$208 more) than white women non-union workers.



Source: NWLC calculations using BLS, "Median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers by union affiliation and selected characteristics, 2019-2020 annual averages," Table 2 in *Union Members - 2020* (Washington, DC: Jan. 22, 2021), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t02.htm>. Comparisons are to white men within the same union status; for example, Black women in unions make 74 cents for every dollar white men in unions make.

- Women typically lose more than \$10,000 per year to the gender wage gap, with even higher losses for many women of color.⁹ However, unions work to level the playing field.
- In 2020, unionized **women overall** typically made 88 cents for every dollar made by unionized men, while non-union women typically made just 82 cents for every dollar made by non-union men.¹⁰
- While unionized **Asian women** typically made 99 cents for every dollar unionized white men made, and Asian women not in unions typically made 1.04 cents for every dollar non-union white men made, Asian women still experience a wage premium of 10% by being unionized.
- Unionized **Black women** typically made 74 cents for every dollar unionized white men made, while Black women not in unions typically made just 69 cents for every dollar non-union white men made.
- Unionized **Latinas** typically made 77 cents for every dollar unionized white men made, while non-union Latinas typically made just 63 cents for every dollar non-union white men made.
- Unionized **white women** typically made 87 cents for every dollar unionized white men made, while non-union white women typically made just 81 cents for every dollar non-union white men made.¹¹

One reason for the smaller gender wage gap among women who are members of unions is that unions help to ensure transparency around wages, [including greater access to and control over information about salaries, and set pay scales](#).¹² Union pay transparency helps to interrupt a culture of secrecy around pay that often makes it extremely difficult for individual workers to prevent or discover disparities. In one powerful example, Wisconsin teachers began to see a gender wage gap—where there had been none before—after the state passed Act 10, a bill weakening teachers unions’ ability to set pay.¹³ Before Act 10 passed in 2011, teacher salaries were set on a publicly available schedule; after Act 10 passed, unions could only negotiate base salaries, and further negotiations were left to individuals.¹⁴ Without collective union negotiation power and wage transparency, women began to fall behind.

UNION WORKERS ARE MORE LIKELY THAN NON-UNION WORKERS TO ASSERT THEIR RIGHT TO A SAFE AND HEALTHY WORKPLACE.

[Women have borne the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic](#),¹⁵ incurring staggering job losses and facing precarious working conditions [while overrepresented as essential workers](#).¹⁶ For example, women—disproportionately Black women and Latinas—make up [more than eight in 10 of those working as home health aides, personal care aides, and nursing assistants](#), at great risk for contracting COVID-19.¹⁷ When workers speak out about workplace concerns, [they too-often face retaliation, including termination](#).¹⁸

[But unions can improve safety](#)¹⁹, and not just for workers: [in a recent study of nursing homes in New York](#), homes with health care worker unions had greater access to personal protective equipment and saw 30% fewer deaths from COVID-19 compared to facilities without these unions.²⁰ During the pandemic, [hospital and health care unions have seen an uptick in membership as COVID-19 underscored the need for more robust workplace protections for health care workers](#).²¹ Unions representing working people across industries have been able to call attention to and organize around [shortages of personal protective equipment](#),²² and in some cases [win paid sick leave](#)²³ and [premium pay](#).²⁴

UNION WORKERS ARE MORE LIKELY THAN NON-UNION WORKERS TO HAVE ACCESS TO HEALTH BENEFITS AND PAID SICK DAYS.

The barriers that women already face to accessing health care have only been [heightened during the COVID-19 crisis](#).²⁵ But when unions can negotiate health benefits with employers, benefits are more likely to be accessible and affordable to the working women covered by those plans. In 2019, [84% of unionized workers participated in an employer-sponsored health care plan, compared with only 54% of non-union workers](#).²⁶ Union-bargained plans are typically more affordable for workers, especially for family health coverage: [one study showed](#) annual employee contributions for family coverage averaged \$828 for employer-sponsored insurance in union-bargained plans, compared to \$4,565 for non-union bargained plans.²⁷ And [93% of unionized workers have access to paid sick days, compared with 75% of non-union workers](#).²⁸

UNIONS CAN FILL GAPS IN THE LAW AND BARGAIN FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE WHOLE COMMUNITY.

Some benefits are harder to quantify. Unions can be a powerful force for good, beyond traditional bargaining over wages and working conditions. For instance:

- Collective bargaining agreements can provide more avenues for preventing, addressing, and reporting employer wrongdoing, and significantly more protection from firing and retaliation than are available to most non-union workers.
- Union collective bargaining agreements can provide protections that would otherwise be unavailable under federal and state law. For example, before the Supreme Court case in *Bostock*²⁹ affirmed that federal antidiscrimination law extended to workers discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, [unions frequently bargained to protect LGBTQ workers from harassment and discrimination](#).³⁰
- Unions can and do bargain—and win—for the benefit of the whole community. Often called “[Bargaining for the Common Good](#),”³¹ unions have made demands at the bargaining table on issues like [housing, climate justice, racial justice, and immigration](#).³² One such fight occurred in 2019 in Los Angeles, when teachers picketed for six days to win, among other measures, the [establishment of a hotline and legal help](#) for immigrant families.³³

WOMEN ARE INCREASINGLY AT THE CENTER OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT.

Despite positive public perception and quantifiable workplace benefits for unionized workers, only 6.3% of workers in the private sector and 34.8% of workers in the public sector are unionized.³⁴ Union membership has been declining for decades as a result of sophisticated and sometimes brutal anti-union tactics by employers and shortfalls in public policy that leave the right to organize insufficiently protected. However, the headlines don't tell the whole story. While the rate of union membership among all workers has fallen by 19.4% between 2000 and 2020, the disaggregated data show that the overall decline in union density is mostly the result of falling union membership for men. In the last 20 years, men's rate of union membership fell by 27.6% while the rate for women has decreased by only 7.9%.³⁵ Of the 7.9%, unionization rates for Black women have dropped most sharply, by 22.9%.

CHANGE IN UNIONIZATION RATES BY SELECTED DEMOGRAPHICS, 2000-2020

	Unionization rate in 2000	Unionization rate in 2020	Change between 2000-2020
All workers	13.4%	10.8%	-19.4%
Women	11.4%	10.5%	-7.9%
Asian women	11.0%	9.7%	-11.8%
Black women	15.3%	11.8%	-22.9%
Latinas	9.8%	9.5%	-3.1%
White women	10.9%	10.4%	-4.6%
Men	15.2%	11.0%	-27.6%
Asian men	12.0%	8.2%	-31.7%
Black men	19.3%	12.9%	-33.2%
Latinos	12.0%	10.1%	-15.8%
White men	14.8%	11.0%	-25.7%

Source: NWLC calculations using BLS, "Union affiliation of employed wage and salary workers by selected characteristics" Table 1 in *Union Members - 2020* (Washington, DC: Jan. 22, 2021), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t01.htm>. Historical data available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpslutab1.htm>.

WHERE DO UNIONIZED WOMEN WORK?

While the image of a union member as a man in a hardhat persists, almost half of workers (46.8%) who are members of a union are women.³⁶ Women make up most of the workforce in the industries in which union membership has been the most stable in recent decades. For example, women are 77.2% of the workforce in the education and health services sector—and union membership actually increased by 6.3% in this sector between 2000 and 2020. In government, the most heavily unionized sector, women are 57.6% of the workforce and the unionization rate dropped by just 5.7% during the past two decades. In contrast, unionization rates dropped by 27.4% in the very male-dominated construction sector over the same time period, and by 43.0% in the manufacturing sector, in which women make up less than three in ten workers. The leisure and hospitality and retail sectors, which are more evenly split between men and women, also saw significant drops in unionization rates over the past two decades.

CHANGE IN UNIONIZATION RATES BY SELECTED INDUSTRY, 2000 - 2020

Industry	Share of industry that is women as of May 2020	Unionization rate for all workers in 2000	Unionization rate for all workers in 2020	Change in unionization rate for all workers between 2000 and 2020
All industries	49.8%	13.4%	10.8%	-19.4%
Government	57.6%	36.9%	34.8%	-5.7%
Private sector	48.4%	9.0%	6.3%	-30.0%
Education and health services	77.2%	7.9%	8.4%	6.3%
Leisure and hospitality	53.1%	3.8%	2.2%	-42.1%
Retail trade	48.4%	6.1%	4.6%	-24.6%
Manufacturing	28.8%	14.9%	8.5%	-43.0%
Construction	13.6%	17.5%	12.7%	-27.4%

Source: Share of industries that are women are BLS, "Employment of women on nonfarm payrolls by industry sector, seasonally adjusted," Table B-5 in May 2021 Employment Situation Summary (Washington, DC: June 4, 2021), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t21.htm>. Unionization rates are BLS, "Union affiliation of employed wage and salary workers by occupation and industry," Table 3 in Union Members - 2020 (Washington, DC: Jan. 22, 2021), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t03.htm>. Historical data available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpslutab3.htm>.

LEGAL REFORMS ARE NEEDED TO SUPPORT UNIONIZATION.

Our labor laws are outdated. The federal law designed to protect private sector workers' rights to organize a union, the National Labor Relations Act, has been worn down and weakened over time from relentless corporate attacks. Employers [regularly break the law](#) and face minimal penalties, mounting sophisticated campaigns to scare their employees away from voting in their own interests.³⁷ In a recent high-profile example, when Amazon workers in Bessemer, Alabama, tried to organize a union, the company went so far as to [change the traffic light pattern outside the warehouse](#) to make it less likely that employees would be able to talk to union organizers.³⁸ It could be years before Amazon faces any penalties for this—[if they face repercussions at all](#).³⁹

And in the public sector, where many unionized women work, there is no uniform federal law protecting the ability of public service workers to organize into unions. The right to unionize for public workers varies state by state, and all over the country, state-based collective bargaining rights have been weakened with the spread of laws and [bad Supreme Court decisions](#) that allow unionized workers to bow out of paying their fair share for the benefits they receive through their contract, weakening the strength of their unions in the process.⁴⁰

Much is needed to support, strengthen, and protect workers' right to organize. Federal legislation like the Protecting the Right to Organize Act,⁴¹ and the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act,⁴² among others, will reform our labor laws in ways critical to building strong unions.

These reforms, and more, are desperately needed to level the playing field for workers seeking to unionize, helping to ensure working women can come together collectively, without fear, to build better workplaces for all. Unions are key for protecting and strengthening women's rights in the workplace; unions are good for women.

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