ECONOMIC SECURITY FOR IMMIGRANT WOMEN

Immigrant women play a vital role in the U.S. economy yet face significant barriers to their overall economic security. With limited access to higher wage occupations, immigrant women are disproportionately represented in low-wage jobs that are culturally and historically viewed as “women’s work.” Many immigrant women are denied fair wages, safe work environments, adequate health care, and other benefits and working conditions that men, higher wage workers, and U.S.-born women enjoy.

These challenges are exacerbated by a variety of factors that undermine economic mobility and successful workforce participation for immigrant women. Limited English proficiency and educational credential requirements for higher wage jobs pose barriers for many immigrant women. Part-time hours and irregular, unpredictable schedules that are typical of low-wage jobs make finding reliable child care difficult. Segregated housing patterns leave many immigrant women living in lower income neighborhoods without access to transportation options that could connect them to higher wage opportunities.

Moreover, immigrant women in low-wage jobs are particularly vulnerable to employer abuse, including wage theft, unsafe working conditions, discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual violence. Fear of losing their jobs, putting their immigration status at risk, and further retribution keep many immigrant women from reporting harassment, assault, and other misconduct by employers when it happens.

From our work in communities across the country, YWCA understands deeply that the confluence of these issues with systemic racial and gender inequities keeps many immigrant women in a cycle of poverty that is extraordinarily difficult to break. Yet policy changes can be made to enable immigrant women to climb the ladder of economic mobility. YWCA is committed to ensuring that these policy changes are centered in our advocacy for women’s economic empowerment.

FACTS

Immigrant women are disproportionately represented in low-wage jobs.\(^1\)

- 42.45 percent of immigrant women work in low-wage jobs earning $20,000 or less per year, while only 15.2 percent of immigrant women make more than $60,000 per year.\(^{ii}\)
The highest concentrations of low-wage immigrant women workers are in housekeeping/cleaning, cashier, personal care, cooking, and health aide positions.\textsuperscript{iii}

More than half of women working as maids or housekeepers are immigrant women.\textsuperscript{v} Median wages for maids and housekeeping cleaners are $9.94 per hour — just 60 cents above the poverty threshold.\textsuperscript{v}

In beauty and personal service occupations, immigrants make up 63 percent of manicurists, pedicurists, makeup artists, shampooers, and skin care specialists. Median wages in these positions are barely above the poverty line.\textsuperscript{vi}

A quarter of direct care jobs are filled by immigrant women. Many workers in this sector are paid near-poverty wages: median wages for the 2.4 million nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides are $12.13 per hour, and even lower for the 89 percent of women who hold these positions ($11.83 per hour for women as compared to $14.32 for men).\textsuperscript{vii}

Agriculture and hospitality jobs are also sectors with high concentrations of immigrant women earning low wages. Median wages for food preparation, hostess, and counter attendant positions all fall below the poverty line of $9.17 per hour.\textsuperscript{viii}

**Wage theft is a common problem for immigrant workers, with undocumented women most likely to experience wage theft.**

- One report of wage practices in Los Angeles found that 50 percent of immigrant women were not paid the minimum wage and estimated that more than $26 million in wages were stolen each week. Immigrant workers also reported being forced to work off the clock or during their breaks without pay.\textsuperscript{ix}
- In another report, 24 percent of domestic workers in the Texas-Mexico border region reported being paid less than previously agreed upon for their labor, or not paid at all.\textsuperscript{x}
- Many immigrant women in beauty and personal service occupations lack legal status, and are susceptible to wage theft and being paid less than minimum wage.\textsuperscript{xi}
- A 2015 investigative report by the New York Times found that inexpensive nail services offered by salons across New York City are subsidized by underpaid or unpaid labor from undocumented Asian and Latinx women. Women are forced to pay a “training fee” to get a job, then work unpaid or on tips alone until the salon owner decides to pay her a wage that is likely to fall well below the New York minimum wage. Nail technicians work long hours with few breaks and can have their pay docked as punishment for small mistakes like spilling a bottle of nail polish.\textsuperscript{xii}
Immigrant women in low-wage jobs face dangerous working conditions, including sexual harassment and sexual violence, exposure to toxic chemicals, physical and verbal abuse, and high risk of injury.

- Immigrant women across multiple industries (domestic service, agriculture, hospitality) report instances of sexual harassment, assault, and unwanted attention from superiors and co-workers. Many feel disempowered and silenced when they experience sexual assault in the workplace, and often do not report their abuser for fear of retaliation.\textsuperscript{xiii}
- Women working in the domestic and agricultural sectors are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault due to the isolation and invisibility of their work in fields and in private residences.\textsuperscript{xiv}
- Farmworker women face long hours in the field under extreme heat putting workers at risk of dehydration, exhaustion, heatstroke or even death.\textsuperscript{ xv} Additionally, farmworker women are routinely exposed to toxic pesticides which can cause infertility, miscarriages, and birth defects in babies.\textsuperscript{xvi}
- Cleaning and housekeeping positions are some of the most physically demanding and lowest paid jobs, with most working on their feet in physical activities like vacuuming, sweeping, lifting, and scouring all day. Exposure to dust, germs, human waste, and chemicals is also common.\textsuperscript{xvii}
- Beauty and personal appearance jobs expose workers to chemicals and solvents that pose significant health risks like asthma, allergies, and dermatitis, and put pregnant women at risk of a range of dangerous maternal health outcomes.\textsuperscript{xviii}
- Among direct care workers, injuries resulting from physical demands like bathing, feeding, dressing, grooming, and moving patients in homes and residential-care facilities are common.\textsuperscript{xix}

Despite these health and safety risks, immigrant women in low-wage jobs often work without the labor benefits and protections afforded to higher wage occupations and U.S.-born workers.

- Many immigrant women in low-wage positions face unpredictable schedules and irregular hours, particularly in industries like retail and food service that function around the clock.\textsuperscript{xx} Domestic workers in direct care positions face unpredictable work hours, and few receive employer benefits or have labor protections.\textsuperscript{xix}
- Immigrant workers have less access to paid sick days than U.S.-born workers. Only 54 percent of immigrant women have access to paid sick days as compared to 64 percent of U.S.-born
women. For immigrants working low-wage jobs, access to paid sick days is even lower.\textsuperscript{xii}
Without access to paid sick days, many immigrant women struggle even more to meet basic expenses for themselves and their families as their below- and near-poverty wages decrease. They also risk losing their jobs entirely, with one in seven low-wage workers reporting that they lost a job because they took a sick day.\textsuperscript{xiii}

- Low-wage workers rarely have access to temporary or long-term disability insurance.\textsuperscript{xiv}

Moreover, millions of immigrant women face barriers to obtaining health insurance coverage and to accessing social assistance benefits, based solely on their immigration status.

- Uninsured rates are higher among immigrant women than U.S.-born women. While 84.6 percent of U.S.-born women aged 18-64 have health coverage, only 66.3 percent of immigrant women in this age range have coverage.\textsuperscript{xv}
- While many low-wage workers are able to turn to Medicaid, SNAP, subsidized or free school lunch programs, or other means-tested benefit programs to help make ends make, many immigrant workers are precluded from doing so: depending on the state, lawfully-present immigrants are ineligible for Medicaid and other means-tested benefits during their first five years of legal status.\textsuperscript{xvi,xxvii}
- Immigrants who have been granted temporary protection from deportation through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program are barred from nearly all public health coverage, and their years in the U.S. do not count toward their five-year path to Medicaid eligibility.\textsuperscript{xxviii}
- These limitations jeopardize the health, well-being, and economic security of immigrant women, as well as that of their families.\textsuperscript{xxix}

**ADVOCACY RESPONSES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE:**

- Strengthen labor, civil rights, and occupational safety protections for low-wage workers.
- Enact a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights.\textsuperscript{xxx}
- Ensure immigrant workers are informed of their rights, including their right to fair pay and safe working conditions.
- Protect low-wage workers from wage theft and other unfair practices by enforcing minimum wage and work time requirements, ensuring fair scheduling for workers, and guaranteeing paid sick days and paid family leave.
• Enact protections against retaliation, especially retaliation based on immigration status, so that immigrant workers can report unlawful practices, labor violations, and workplace harassment and abuse without fear of termination or deportation.
• Increase skill-based trainings and educational opportunities for immigrant women.
• Expand health care coverage access for immigrant women by lifting the five-year bar on Medicaid and CHIP eligibility, and through legislative proposals such as the HEAL for Immigrant Women and Families Act (H.R. 2788 in the 115th Congress).

5 Id. at 38.
6 Id. at 19.
7 Id. at 10,15.
8 Id. at 14.
11 Undervalued and Underpaid, at 19.
17 Undervalued and Underpaid, at 20.
19 Undervalued and Underpaid, at 10, 15.
20 Undervalued and Underpaid, at 13.
21 Undervalued and Underpaid, at 10,15.
23 Undervalued and Underpaid, at 11.
24 Undervalued and Underpaid, at 12.

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