



PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION

An Employer Guide to Building Gender Equity in the Workplace



Businesses have a critical role to play in improving gender equity and opportunity for our nation’s working people. Workers, especially women and caregivers, have become keenly aware of when their employers’ policies are incompatible with their ability to keep themselves and their families healthy, which seriously affects their ability to continue working and their choice of where to work. By instituting policies that help all workers stay healthy and safe, care for their families and maintain economic stability — particularly for workers in low-wage, hourly, or part-time jobs — businesses can make huge strides towards gender equity for their employees. These policies are not only beneficial to workers, they are smart for employers. These businesses can set themselves apart as leaders in the field and reap the benefits of attracting and retaining more workers, ensuring a more stable workforce, and improving productivity and morale.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, working families are in crisis. Many workers faced a sudden increase in personal and family caregiving responsibilities in the form of staying home to maintain quarantine or isolation, recover from COVID, help a sick family member or deal with school and care facility closures. All too often, they found that their jobs were incompatible with those responsibilities,¹ which contributed to record numbers of women leaving the workforce at the outset of the pandemic.² And although women overall have finally regained all of their job losses since the pandemic began, jobs in critical industries such as home health care, nursing and residential care and child care — which both disproportionately employ women and help women and caregivers go to work — have still not recovered.³

Women are reporting devastating effects on their mental and physical health, household finances and ability to find employment.⁴ Despite the many transformations that have come to the workplace as a result of the pandemic, very little has been done to improve the conditions hourly workers contend with. Even before the current crisis, women did not have adequate workplace protections and benefits to help them remain employed and financially stable, and the pandemic only made these existing inequities worse.

The workers facing the greatest pressures from this crisis tend to be hourly, low-wage and part-time workers, who often have little or no control over the workplace policies that affect their ability to provide and care for themselves and their families. Women, especially women of color, are overrepresented in the low wage, hourly and part-time workforces, and they are more likely to serve as their families' main breadwinners than those in higher paying jobs.⁵ At the same time, these low wage jobs are far less likely to come with the benefits and policies that women need in order to stay employed while meeting their caregiving responsibilities.⁶

This blueprint provides key policy recommendations for businesses that are looking to improve gender equity within their workplaces, with a specific focus on paid family and medical leave, paid sick days, reasonable accommodations for pregnant workers, fair scheduling, livable wages, fair pay and sexual harassment. The recommendations are informed by direct interviews with low-wage, hourly and part-time workers (some of which are quoted throughout this guide), as well as by the National Partnership for Women & Families' decades of experience in workplace policy. We encourage companies to adopt multiple practices from this guide and focus on applying them as broadly and equitably as possible. We also invite and encourage further conversation and collaboration on best practices between corporate leaders, workplace advocates and human resource professionals committed to gender and racial equity.

This guide was developed by the National Partnership for Women & Families, a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy group that has worked for more than 50 years to advance every major policy impacting the lives of women and families. The National Partnership works for a just and equitable society in which all women and families can live with dignity, respect, and security; every person has the opportunity to achieve their potential; and no person is held back by discrimination or bias.

Note: The policies outlined in this guide are critical to improving gender equity in the workplace because they give employees the space and resources they need to make a living, stay safe and healthy, and care for themselves and their families. The policies and practices listed in this guide are intended to go beyond the requirements of state and federal laws; however, the guide is not exhaustive, and businesses can and should innovate beyond these standards. The National Partnership for Women & Families welcomes the opportunity to provide additional information to companies that are considering introducing or strengthening benefits and practices.

General Practices

Adopting great policies is not enough — companies must be thoughtful and equitable about how these policies are conveyed, administered and encouraged. For all of the policies outlined in this guide, companies should follow certain best practices if they hope to realize the full benefits of gender equity

- ▶ Provide a feedback loop for employees to engage with employers in crafting workplace policies
- ▶ Create clear, plain-language, informational resources explaining the content of the policies, workers' protections under these policies and how to seek redress for violations
- ▶ Make such resources available in the languages most commonly spoken in the workplace
- ▶ Provide such resources upon commencement of employment and at regular intervals, as well as making them easily accessible through employee handbooks and the company's internal intranet
- ▶ Ensure managers and supervisors are informed about these policies and the company's commitment to implementing them;
- ▶ Support and encourage employee efforts to discuss and take action on these issues, including but not limited to employee resource groups, employee advisory committees and union activity
- ▶ Cultivate a leadership and workplace culture that supports and encourages employees to utilize these policies and models extended leave-taking
- ▶ Regularly monitor the implementation of these policies in order to create accountability and identify areas for improvement

Paid Family and Medical Leave

Paid family and medical leave is defined as paid time away from work to deal with one’s own serious illness, care for a family member with a serious health condition or welcome a new child. Without it, people dealing with major personal and family medical issues must make the impossible choice between going weeks or longer without a major income source in order to care for themselves and their families, or sacrificing that care in order to maintain their already precarious household finances.

By eliminating this unworkable trade-off, paid leave serves as a critical lifeline for all workers — especially for hourly and low-wage workers, who can least afford the loss of income. These workers are far less likely to have paid leave through their employers than salaried and higher-wage workers: among part-time, private sector workers, only 11 percent have paid family leave through their employers, and only 18 percent have employer-provided short-term disability benefits, compared to 27 percent and 50 percent of full-time workers, respectively. A dismal 6 percent of the lowest-paid workers (those whose wages are lower than 90 percent of other workers) have employer-provided paid family leave, and 9 percent have short-term disability, compared to 43 percent and 71 percent of the highest-paid, respectively.⁷

Research has thoroughly documented that paid leave reaps major benefits for employers. Paid leave improves worker retention and saves employers money through reduced turnover costs, which on average costs one-fifth of an employee’s annual pay.⁸ It also improves productivity,⁹ morale and employee loyalty.¹⁰ Businesses nationwide, from Fortune 500 companies to small “mom-and-pop” shops,¹¹ are becoming more aware of the benefits and competitive advantages that paid leave policies can yield.

In order to maximize both equitable outcomes and business benefits, companies should offer paid leave policies that:

- ▶ Cover all workers, regardless of part-time or temporary status
- ▶ Continue to pay the employee’s full salary for the period of leave
- ▶ Allow leave to be taken for a range of reasons, including one’s own serious illness, caring for a seriously ill family member, caring for a new child, and dealing with certain circumstances arising from a family member’s military deployment or injury
- ▶ Prohibit firing, retaliation, demotion and other negative employment consequences for employees as a result of requesting or using paid leave
- ▶ Allow employees to take leave to care for more than just immediate family members, including chosen family who are not related by blood or marriage

“I was very, very sick for a long time. We did a workup, and it just did not, like, it just did not lead to anything. I just didn’t know what happened. [...] People thought I was malingering or like faking my illness. When that really wasn’t the case. And there were times when I was literally ruining my body because I wasn’t being believed and I wasn’t being given the time off and rest that I needed. [T]hat’s kind of the moral of the story. I don’t look sick enough until my body’s literally falling apart. And then somebody’s like, maybe she’s sick enough. I’m like, I’m not lying. I’ve never been lying about my health.”

— Asian American woman, late 20s, chronically ill, working part time and making less than \$20,000 per year

Paid Sick Days

Paid sick days are defined as paid time away from work to deal with short-term and/or unexpected illness, injury and certain emergency situations. Similarly to paid leave, paid sick days mean that workers are not forced to choose between their livelihoods and their personal and family health and safety. And like paid leave, access to paid sick days is lowest among the low-wage and part-time workers who are most harmed by this trade-off: only 51 percent of part-time workers in the private sector have paid sick days through their employer, compared to 86 percent of full time workers; and only 38 percent of the lowest paid workers have this employer-provided benefit, in contrast to a whopping 96 percent of highest paid workers.¹²

Paid sick days also make great business sense. Like paid leave, paid sick days reduce turnover costs by improving retention,¹³ and these effects are especially pronounced in many low-wage industries where turnover is the highest: a study of restaurant industry practices found that implementing better workplace practices, including paid sick days, can reduce turnover by 50 percent.¹⁴ In addition, workers who come to work sick are less productive,¹⁵ and the lost productivity among sick workers is estimated to be far more expensive than the amount lost by employees being absent.¹⁶ Allowing sick workers to stay home also reduces the risk of contagious illnesses spreading to coworkers and customers, both of which can be damaging to a company's reputation.

In order for businesses to truly reap the benefits of paid sick days while improving gender equity, a paid sick days policy should:

- ▶ Cover all workers, regardless of part-time or temporary status
- ▶ Be paid at the employee's usual wage rate
- ▶ Allow time off to care for loved ones in addition to the employee's own illness
- ▶ Include leave to also be taken for certain non-medical emergencies, such as circumstances arising from domestic violence, sexual assault, harassment, and stalking; a family member's place of care closing due to public health or climate emergencies; or following pandemic-related quarantine requirements
- ▶ Protect workers from job loss, punitive attendance policies and other negative employment consequences for using or requesting paid sick time
- ▶ Provide the equivalent of at least five workdays of paid sick time

“[E]ven within the hospital I saw my residents who were employed still not take their sick days off, which is absolutely horrifying and deplorable because they look after people who could die because they contract illnesses. [...] There was so much pressure not to even ask [for time off], and then it bled down to the students and it was encouraged by everybody. Everybody just said it was like the culture, oh you don't take time off, oh you don't do this. Oh, you don't do that. But then people would be, like, bragging about like how they were chilly and feeling convulsive while taking care of their patients.”

— Asian American woman, late 20s, chronically ill, working part time and making less than \$20,000 per year

Reasonable Accommodations for Pregnant Workers

Pregnant workers are often able and willing to continue working while they are pregnant, but may require some adjustments in their working conditions in order to do so safely. These reasonable accommodations — for example, allowing a worker to carry a water bottle, limiting the amount of weight a worker is required to lift, or allowing more frequent bathroom breaks — are a critical part of achieving gender and racial equity in the workplace. Pregnant workers, especially pregnant workers of color, are disproportionately employed in low-wage jobs and jobs that pose physical risks to the workers and their pregnancies.¹⁷ Despite a 2015 Supreme Court decision which found that failing to accommodate pregnant workers can amount to a violation of the federal Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, questions remain about the scope of protections under the law.¹⁸



Fortunately, these accommodations are often short-term and low-cost,¹⁹ and are likely to yield similar benefits to those gained by providing disability accommodations, such as improvements in productivity, turnover, workplace safety and diversity.²⁰ Indeed, leading businesses have been vocal in their support for a federal law that clarifies existing law to explicitly ensure accommodations for pregnant workers on the job.²¹ But companies do not have to wait for federal clarification; they can improve their policies now and serve as leaders on the issue.

An accommodations policy that meets the needs of companies and their workers should:

- ▶ Cover all workers, regardless of part-time or temporary status
- ▶ Make reasonable accommodations for an employee's known limitations related to pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions (including lactation), unless doing so would impose an undue hardship on the business
- ▶ Ensure that workers are not denied employment opportunities based on their need for such accommodations
- ▶ Ensure that workers are not required to accept unnecessary accommodations
- ▶ Prohibit adverse employment consequences such as cutting hours, demotion, or termination for workers who request or use accommodations

“Since I’m part time, I don’t really have too many benefits. [...] Whether it’s the person who’s full time forever, part time, or contract — give them all the benefits. That’s my mantra. Like, all the things, for everyone, please. Life is really hard! Let’s make it a little easier.”

— Asian American/Black woman, early 20s, caring for a young family member with complex health needs, working part time and making less than \$20,000 per year

Fair and Flexible Scheduling

Approximately one out of every six workers has an unstable schedule, with unpredictable work hours, lack of advance notice and frequent last-minute changes in timing.²² The lowest wage workers have the most irregular schedules — and women and women of color disproportionately hold these jobs. This unpredictability makes it difficult, if not impossible, to attend to basic personal and family necessities, such as planning health appointments, arranging child care, or even getting enough sleep.²³ Such schedules not only hurt workers in the moment, but also harm their long-term economic security in the form of lost wages, ineligibility for social safety net programs and inability to pursue educational advancement.²⁴

Unfair scheduling practices also hurt businesses. People with nonstandard work schedules — for example, evening, irregular, on-call or split shifts — report less job satisfaction, which can decrease overall worker performance.²⁵ Unpredictable scheduling also leads to lower worker productivity and higher employee absenteeism and turnover, which hurts both workers and businesses.²⁶ The rise in “just-in-time” scheduling, in which employers “[adjust] work schedules week by week, day by day, and even hour by hour...to ensure they have just enough workers to meet the need of the moment,”²⁷ means that more workers are getting their schedules with little notice, frequent changes and little predictability. These practices can lead to persistent understaffing, which is associated with poor customer service, reduced sales and an estimated 7 to 10 percent decline in profitability.²⁸

Businesses should address the inequities of unfair and unpredictable scheduling by implementing policies that:

- ▶ Eliminate “just-in-time” scheduling practices
- ▶ Provide clear expectations about hours and scheduling upon hire and on an ongoing basis
- ▶ Give workers more control over their schedules, including the opportunity to request more flexible or predictable work arrangements
- ▶ Give consideration to worker requests regarding their hours, location, schedule, and schedule fluctuations
- ▶ Provide some amount of additional pay for employees who report to work and are sent home before being permitted to work at least four hours; are required to call in less than 24 hours before a shift to determine whether to report to work; or are required to work a daily schedule in which the hours worked are not consecutive
- ▶ Prohibit retaliation and other adverse employment consequences (for example, cutting hours, demotion, harassment or termination) against employees who need scheduling flexibility
- ▶ Provide employees with at least 14 days’ notice of foreseeable schedule changes

“I thought it wasn’t really COVID, because I would not even think that. Then I had to go to the hospital. And then they confirmed that it was COVID, and I had to call my manager, my HR [to tell them] I am sick, and I won’t be able to come over and all that. [...] I didn’t go back to the job, because after the third week, I just discovered that I had been relieved from my job.”

— Black man, early 30s, laid off from a full-time job while recovering from COVID

Higher and More Livable Wages

In addition to addressing gender-based wage disparities, businesses can also improve gender equity by raising the wages of their lowest-paid workers. Women, especially women of color, make up a disproportionate share of workers at or near the minimum wage, as well as tipped and disabled workers paid subminimum wages. Low and unfair wages undermine people’s ability to care for their families, to make a better life for themselves and their families and to care for and make decisions about their own health. Raising wages for the lowest paid workers helps improve financial stability for women of color and all workers, and advance racial equity. One analysis determined that if minimum wage worker’s pay was raised to \$15 per hour, nearly 19 million women would benefit, including 3.4 million Black women and four million Latinas, helping to narrow the persistent gender wage gap.²⁹

Raising pay for the lowest paid workers also yields significant benefits for businesses’ bottom lines. Higher wages are a central part of improving recruitment and retention. In addition, studies have shown that increasing wages results in lower rates of employee absenteeism,³⁰ and less absenteeism means greater productivity.³¹ A growing number of global initiatives³² and companies³³ that have committed to a living wage demonstrates a recognition of the benefits these policies can have for businesses and the economy.



The following steps can help businesses move towards paying livable wages for all of their employees:

- ▶ Use a reputable online tool, such as this [Living Wage Calculator](#) from MIT,³⁴ to determine the minimum amount someone would need to be paid in order to meet basic necessities such as food, housing, transportation, child care and others, and commit to meeting this minimum salary for all employees
- ▶ Identify any positions that are paid special subminimum wages under federal law — for example, the subminimum wage rates for tipped workers or disabled workers — and establish a timeline for bringing these positions in line with wage rates at the rest of the company
- ▶ Make a public commitment to exclusively source from and contract with companies that pay livable wages
- ▶ Contribute to public dialogue about the importance of stronger minimum wage laws to prevent low-road companies from driving a “race to the bottom” in wages

Fair Pay

Women with low incomes and women of color face the greatest harms from inequitable wages.³⁵ In 2021, Asian American women were paid just 86 cents; Black women 64 cents; Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander women 61 cents; Native American women 51 cents and Latina women just 54 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men — wage gaps that add up to tens of thousands in lost income each year.³⁶ Mothers are typically paid less than fathers, which further illustrates and perpetuates the gender-based inequities that result from inadequate care-supportive policies.³⁷ These inequities are unintentionally reinforced by the common employer practice of using an applicant’s prior salary to determine the applicant’s starting salary — ensuring that any pay discrimination the person experienced in a previous job is reproduced in their new job.³⁸

There are several steps businesses can take to prevent or reduce gender disparities in pay, but one such opportunity that is often overlooked is policies that increase transparency about how much their workers are paid. More businesses are starting to include information about salary levels in their job postings in order to attract more talent — including in industries like food service that are disproportionately made up of women and low-wage workers.³⁹ More transparent pay practices can also help ensure that job applicants are aware of salary levels before they apply, reducing the likelihood that the employer and candidate will waste time and resources moving through the application process only to discover a mismatch in salary expectations at the end of the process.⁴⁰ Proactive internal audits of compensation levels across demographics can help businesses identify unintentional wage inequities and take steps to mitigate them. Greater transparency builds employee trust and loyalty and improves productivity, and is a critical component of eliminating gender inequities in the workplace.



Companies can begin to address wage inequities within their workplaces by taking steps to:

- ▶ Regularly conduct internal audits of employees’ compensation levels, broken down by gender, race and job category, to identify the greatest gaps
- ▶ Make the results of these audits available to employees and the public
- ▶ Identify any job categories that are disproportionately filled by women and people of color, and evaluate whether compensation levels for these positions are in line with compensation levels for male-dominated positions
- ▶ Eliminate any policies or practices that punish or discourage employees from discussing their compensation with each other
- ▶ Revise hiring practices to eliminate the usage of salary history in setting pay for new hires
- ▶ Include salary information in all new job postings

Sexual Harassment

Workplace sexual harassment unfortunately exists within all levels of the workforce, but the lowest paid workers are especially vulnerable to the power imbalances that make such harassment possible. One analysis of federal sexual harassment complaints found that such complaints were most frequent in industries dominated by low-wage jobs and women of color.⁴¹ Women in these jobs are made more vulnerable because they can't afford the potential financial consequences of challenging such harassment — especially women of color, who face intersecting forms of discrimination and harassment. Significant numbers of workplace harassment survivors report negative economic impacts, including difficulty finding a new job, as well as harm to their physical and mental health.⁴² Women experiencing sexual harassment are 6.5 times more likely to change jobs as women who have not experienced harassment⁴³ — often to a job of lower quality or with lower pay. The combined effect of these individual harms has overarching implications for the entire economy, as sexual harassment can affect women's career choices directly and indirectly, reinforcing occupational segregation and perpetuating the wage gap.⁴⁴

In addition to the reputational harm to companies that are revealed to have issues with sexual harassment, there can be significant effects on day-to-day operations in the workplace. Many women who experience sexual harassment at work report increased anxiety and depression, which is associated with lower productivity and poorer performance at work.⁴⁵ Many report experiencing a decline in job involvement and satisfaction, as well as increases in absenteeism, turnover, early retirement and a range of negative health outcomes.⁴⁶

Businesses that wish to take steps to address and prevent sexual harassment in their workplaces should:

- ▶ Clearly and frequently state that sexual harassment (including harassment based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or pregnancy), as well as harassment on the basis of other protected characteristics like race, color, national origin, disability, older age or genetic information, is strictly prohibited
- ▶ Prohibit retaliation and discrimination for individuals experiencing harassment, and ensure that employees and supervisors are made aware of these protections
- ▶ Incorporate the company's policies around harassment and other forms of discrimination into every part of the organization's operational framework
- ▶ Dedicate sufficient resources and time to harassment prevention and accountability efforts
- ▶ Inform supervisors, managers and organizational leadership of their responsibility to create and maintain a culture of anti-harassment
- ▶ Hold violators accountable
- ▶ Identify potential risk factors for harassment and take steps to mitigate these risks

Health Care and Insurance

In 2021, nearly ten million adult women were uninsured, making it extremely challenging for them to access quality, affordable, and equitable health care.⁴⁷ And 29 percent of people who did have health insurance through their employers were underinsured, meaning that their coverage didn't provide them with affordable access to health care because their out-of-pocket costs and/or deductibles were high relative to their income.⁴⁸ Uninsured people, particularly Black women, are less likely to obtain preventive care and needed health services. Where health services are available, some may be required to pay unaffordable out-of-pocket costs and may even delay care due to fear of financial burden. These barriers to health care often result in worse health outcomes. The types of services covered by health insurance plans also have significant implications for racial and gender equity, and these impacts are especially relevant in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and the ongoing damage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although a comprehensive accounting of the changes needed at all levels of the health care system to make it equitable for women and birthing people is beyond the scope of this guide, we will highlight key considerations around reproductive health care services, including abortion care, and maternal health care services, that employees should incorporate when crafting equitable benefits.

Bans on abortion exacerbate the many economic hardships that people — particularly people of color, those with disabilities and those with low incomes — already face in trying to care for their health and their loved ones while making ends meet. Prior to *Dobbs*, and even more so now, access to abortion care can involve navigating multiple barriers, such as traveling long distances, taking multiple days off work, caregiving responsibilities, making multiple medically unnecessary visits to a provider, and having to pay out of pocket for abortion care.⁴⁹ These barriers are further compounded by lost wages due to a lack of paid leave or sick days, the cost of accommodations and child care and a lack of personal transportation. All of these barriers can result in delayed access to care or being forced to carry a pregnancy to term, all while incurring hundreds or even thousands of dollars in expenses. Women who seek but are denied abortion care are more likely to experience chronic pain and poor health, and are more likely to report life-threatening pregnancy complications like eclampsia and postpartum hemorrhage compared to those who received wanted abortions.⁵⁰ They are also more likely to experience an increase in household poverty and more likely to report persistent challenges to having the money needed to cover basic living expenses like food and housing.⁵¹

Employers and the private sector are an essential backstop for people's ability to access reproductive health care, and can ensure equitable and inclusive benefits are available to support the spectrum of workers' reproductive health needs. This includes making sure employees have access to the care they need to thrive in whatever decision a pregnant person makes; supporting employees with travel funds and offering health insurance that covers the full spectrum of reproductive health care services; and providing paid leave and other policies that support people's ability to access health care, as well as protecting privacy in requesting leave or traveling out of state for care. Technology companies have an additional obligation to ensure that people's data is protected, especially from law enforcement. This includes data gathered from fertility or other health tracking apps, telehealth platforms, search engines and social media platforms.

Women and birthing people who do carry a pregnancy to term also face potentially deadly consequences from inadequate health care: Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that the U.S. maternal mortality rate has continued to worsen and four out of five pregnancy-related deaths are preventable,⁵² with Black and Indigenous women and birthing people disproportionately experiencing the brunt of poor maternal health outcomes due to systemic racism and discrimination. Fortunately, research shows that pregnancy, birth and postpartum services that incorporate midwifery care,⁵³ community birth settings,⁵⁴ doula support⁵⁵ and community-led health worker groups⁵⁶ can make a concrete difference in improving the quality of maternity care and produce better outcomes, especially for Indigenous, Black and other birthing women and people of color.

Offering equitable, affordable health insurance coverage makes business sense. Health insurance coverage is one of the most important factors for workers when it comes to choosing⁵⁷ a job and determining employee satisfaction.⁵⁸ The recent trend of employers offering increased benefits related to abortion services clearly demonstrates a growing understanding of the importance of services that support women and pregnant and birthing people as well as their families, and there are several ways in which they can make these benefits equitable for their low wage, part time and hourly workers.

Additional resources:

- ▶ Fact Sheet: [Paid Family and Medical Leave Is Good for Business](#)
- ▶ Fact Sheet: [Paid Sick Days Are Good for Business](#)
- ▶ Resource Page: [Advancing Paid Leave](#)
- ▶ National Partnership for Women & Families and National Employment Law Project
Employer Best Practice Guide: [Policies to Support Workers During the Coronavirus Pandemic](#)

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