

To eradicate poverty, eliminate gender inequity ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

She lives with her mother and two young children in a one-bedroom apartment, working odd and demanding hours at minimum wage, barely making ends meet. Now that her mother is ill and can no longer help her care for her children, she must leave her job and move her family into a shelter.

All too often, profiles of poverty in the United States are profiles of women. October 17th marks the 25th International Day for the Eradication of Poverty and provides a critical opportunity to reflect on this unyielding trend. In the United States, women are 35 percent more likely to live in poverty than men and twice as likely to work low-wage occupations, despite overall higher levels of education. In fact, more than two-thirds of minimum wage workers are women, and the numbers only get worse for women of color and households led by single women. Moreover, nearly one in five working mothers with small children work low paying jobs. Consequently, the United States has one of the highest child poverty rates among developed nations. When women are in poverty, children are in poverty.

Contrary to popular rhetoric, poverty is not perpetuated by scarcity or laziness. For women in the United States, much of the dynamic is driven by persistent and systemic forms of gender discrimination. As a result, low-income women in our society are uniquely overburdened, undervalued, and rendered vulnerable in ways that impede their ability to break free from poverty.

Four key factors create singular vulnerabilities for women:

1. segregation of women into low-paying jobs;
2. a common expectation that working women retain the bulk of caregiving responsibilities;
3. lack of accommodations for gender-based violence, pregnancy, and the realities of raising children; and
4. sexual exploitation of female workers based on lack of economic mobility.

How can we change this dynamic? Re-think the workplace as a place for women. With the aim of eradicating global poverty by 2030, the United Nation's Sustainable Development Agenda provides a holistic framework for enhancing gender equality in the workplace. In the United States, this framework requires that we implement comprehensive policies that provide a continuum of support for women and families.

Here's Legal Momentum's Call to Action:

CHILD CARE: Increase funding and ease eligibility to subsidize public childcare assistance and expand assistance in the private sector. This practice is not just the responsible thing to do, it's a profitable thing to do. Access to child care is essential to assist women obtain employment, keep their jobs, and put their children on a path of opportunity. However, quality child care is typically out of reach for low-income families due to its high cost and limited supply, and the complicated work schedules of working families.

PAID FAMILY LEAVE: Enact legislation that provides decent paid family leave. To help address what is referred to as the "motherhood penalty" it's essential that families, both men and women, are afforded equal opportunity to take paid family leave to bond with a new child. While progress is being made at the state level, we must ensure consistent protections throughout the country.

MINIMUM WAGE: At \$7.25 an hour, the federal minimum wage must be updated to reflect current realities. In the absence of movement at the federal level, states and localities must act to reflect the current cost of living.

FAIR & FLEXIBLE SCHEDULES: Enact legislation and reform employer practices to establish fair and flexible work hours to allow employees to meet caregiving responsibilities without risk of retaliation.

PREGNANCY & CAREGIVER ACCOMODATIONS: Enact laws that prohibit pregnancy and caregiver discrimination and establish accommodations for sexual violence, pregnancy, and caregiving responsibilities.

EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT: Reform public education systems to cover childcare and early education, when the benefits to early childhood development are substantial. By caring for and educating children from the start, we create opportunities for women to

enter the workforce and enhance long-term chances of success for their children.

SOCIAL SAFETY NET: Fund social safety net programs broadly. These programs, including social security, refundable tax credits, food stamps, and housing subsidies undeniably reduce the number of people in poverty. The progress we've made on this front, including a reduction in poverty to pre-recession levels, hang in the balance and must be safeguarded from further erosion.

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