



Why Less Educated Women Struggle in the U.S. Labor Market – And How We Can Help More of Them Opt In

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When former Princeton University professor and former U.S. State Department official Anne-Marie Slaughter declared in a 2012 article in *The Atlantic* that “women still can’t have it all,” her piece generated a media firestorm, rekindling longstanding cultural debates about women’s work and family lives. It also reinforced the notion that highly educated professional women are fleeing the workplace for the comforts of home. A decade ago, Lisa Belkin writing in the *New York Times* termed this trend “the opt-out revolution.”

But the popular media has the basic U.S. labor market story backwards, because opting out is actually a trend led by less educated women. Employment is highest among the most educated women. More than 70% of women with a college degree were employed in 2011 compared with less than half of women who do not have a high school diploma, according to research by the National Center for Family and Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University.

This pattern represents a shift from 40 years ago, when the labor force was disproportionately composed of women with lower levels of education. For example, in 1970, more than three-quarters of women in the labor force ages 25 to 64 had no more than a high school diploma. Today, two-thirds of women in the labor force have a college degree, an associate’s degree, or have spent some time studying in college.

Women who arguably have the fewest resources – as indicated by their relatively modest levels of education – are least likely to be employed. Consider mothers whose youngest child is under age six. Only one-third of these mothers who did not finish high school are employed. Slightly more than half who finished high school are working; and about 62% with some college experience are employed. Mothers with a college degree are the ones most likely to be employed – more than seven in ten of these women are working.

So why are less educated women less likely to work? A key reason is pretty straightforward: the jobs they can get simply do not pay a living wage. A woman without a high school diploma who works full-time typically earns less than \$400 a week; and women who have finished high school earn roughly \$560 for a full week’s work. In contrast, women college graduates earn about \$1,000 a week working full-time. This makes it quite costly for such better-educated women to stay out of the work force – and of course they can use part of their higher earnings to pay for child care and other things they would do if they stayed home.

What might be done to encourage and more fully support women’s employment below the upper reaches of the educational and salary scale?

One way is to **raise the minimum wage**, which has not kept pace with inflation. The minimum wage is a women’s issue – because nearly two-thirds of workers who earn no more than the minimum are women. The
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push to raise the minimum wage is gaining momentum among workers and politicians alike. Fast food workers are pressing for \$15 wages and on Labor Day, President Obama trumpeted his support for both a minimum wage hike and equal pay for equal work.

Paid family and medical leave is another obvious step. Currently, only workers for large firms have the right to take time off from a job if they are seriously ill or need to care for a child or other family member – and legally mandated leaves are unpaid, which means they are not realistic options for workers in families with low and moderate incomes. Some states have moved to mandate paid leave for all workers, and the U.S. Congress could do the same. Employers and employees cover the cost with very modest payroll contributions.

Apart from higher wages, women would benefit if businesses treated low wage employees less like a contingent, disposable labor force by offering them **predictable work schedules**. A recent *New York Times* feature about a Starbucks barista laid bare the travails of most low wage workers, who regularly deal with hastily announced, variable shift assignments that, week in, week out, leave them scrambling to plan for the care of children and other family members. Worse, just because such workers are on the schedule does not mean they will put in the hours and collect the wages. If customers are scarce, workers can arrive ready to work only to get sent home without pay. A more predictable work schedule might lure some less educated women into the workforce – and it would certainly go a long way toward keeping such women employed. Otherwise, women in low-wage jobs face a near impossible juggling task, because after all, most are mothers who need to coordinate employment with child care.

Wider access to good-quality child care and early education programs could also help even women who must work variable or long shifts. If we want women to be productive members of society who support themselves and their children, then we need to ensure they have the tools to succeed. Child care or universal pre-kindergarten is a fundamental first step to allow women to handle workplace demands while still knowing their children are safe and in places where they can learn.

The United States can make progress for all working women and their families in many ways, because it currently lags woefully behind other industrialized nations in helping families navigate the workplace – putting American women workers at an extra disadvantage and undercutting a key resource in the national economy. Higher wages, predictable schedules, and parental and family leave benefits are critically important scaffolding to support steady labor force participation by women (and men), especially those with family obligations. So is affordable child care.

No wonder, as things stand, so many less educated American women are holding back from an unrewarding and unforgiving labor market. Although financially advantaged women can "opt out," forsaking employment for work at home when employers are not sufficiently responsive to their needs, relatively few do. Instead, it is the least advantaged women who are shut out of employment. Low wages coupled with irregular work schedules and limited support for families and children prevents many less-educated women from holding down a job.

But as we have seen, some very simple changes can ease the burden on women clinging to the lowest rungs of the ladder, enhancing the economic well-being of our nation's most at-risk families.