Unions boost women's earnings, benefits and workplace flexibility

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Over the past four decades, women have played increasingly important roles as breadwinners in their families. At the same time, women's share of unpaid care work and housework has remained high. A new report from the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) explores the role unions play in addressing the challenges facing working women and families in balancing their work and family responsibilities.

The paper — "Women, Working Families, and Unions" — looks at trends in unionization for women; the impact of unions on wages, benefits and access to family and medical leave; and the role of unions in addressing work-life balance issues.

"There are few other interventions known to improve the prospects for better pay, benefits and workplace flexibility as much as unions do. Anyone who cares about the well-being of women workers and working families should also care about unions," said Nicole Woo, a co-author of the report with Janelle Jones and John Schmitt.

The report finds that unions increase access to benefits that help working families succeed in this economy. Women in unions are 36 percent more likely to receive health insurance benefits through their jobs and 53 percent more likely to participate in an employer-sponsored retirement plan.

Unions also support workers when they need time off to care for themselves or their families. Unionized workplaces are 16 percent more likely to allow medical leave and 21 percent more likely to offer paid sick leave. Companies with unionized employees are also 22 percent more likely to allow parental leave, 12 percent more likely to offer pregnancy leave, and 19 percent more likely to let their workers take time off to care for sick family members.

One out of nine women in the United States is represented by a union. They make up almost half of the union workforce and are on track to be the majority by 2025. The report also analyzes the demographics of women in unions, including the shares of black, Latino, white, and Asian and Pacific Islander women, educational attainment, age, occupations, and states of residence.

On average, women in unions earn 13 percent more per hour — about $2.50 — than their nonunion counterparts, all else being equal. This advantage holds even for low-wage jobs such as hotel cleaners, office cleaners, child-care workers, and health aides. The report discusses how unionization helps reduce the gender pay gap as well.

The report's findings indicate that union coverage gives a significant boost to women's pay, benefits, and workplace flexibility, and then demonstrate how unions can play a central role in helping workplaces meet the needs of 21st century working families. As the share of women in unions continues to grow, the importance of unions in addressing work-family issues grows, too.

To see the full report, go online to: *www.cepr.net/documents/women-union-2014-06.pdf.*

(Editor's Note: The Center for Economic and Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan think tank that promotes debate on important economic and social issues that affect people's lives.)

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