



Women Employed's 2020 Priorities

Founded in 1973, [Women Employed](https://www.womenemployed.org) (WE) has worked to improve the economic status of women through effective advocacy to bring about systemic change by improving public and corporate policy and practices; conducting research and policy analysis; creating innovative education and training programs and curriculum; expanding access to and success in high-quality education and training; and developing collaborative initiatives pursued with a wide range of national, state, and local stakeholders.

With a relentless focus on achieving equity for all, our goal is to influence systems that have the largest impact on economic equity for women, especially women of color and women in low-paid occupations.



Make College Affordable, Accessible, and Equitable

For many adults, the cost of college is a significant barrier to accessing and completing a degree or credential. Students most often cite college costs and the demands of work as reasons they drop out of college. Nationally, [women carry two-thirds](#) of the United States' \$1.4 trillion in student debt.

In addition to an affordability problem, we need to address racial equity in higher education. In Illinois, just over 50 percent of white adults have a college degree, compared to about [31 percent](#) of black adults and [20 percent](#) of Latina/o adults. Gaps in degree attainment have corresponding impacts on jobs and careers, wages, and family economic security, and we need to ensure that all potential students can access college and that their experiences are equitable.

Making college affordable, accessible, and equitable is critical to building an economy that works for everyone.

Our Priorities

- Optimize and restore funding for the Monetary Award Program (MAP), Illinois' need-based financial aid program, to return it to a program that covered 100 percent of the cost of tuition and fees at an Illinois public university for all eligible students.
- Establish statewide postsecondary equity targets and goals to close our racial achievement gaps and position Illinois as a visible leader for educational equity.
- Ensure higher education supports take into account the experiences of and obstacles faced by students with children, particularly single mothers.
- Advocate for protections for student borrowers.
- Protect and expand funding for higher education and student supports and maintain financial aid eligibility for low-income students, students struggling academically, nontraditional adult students, and undocumented students.
- Establish a fair tax structure in Illinois and ensure a fair and adequate distribution of all new state revenue streams to support the needs of low-income students and students of color in higher education.



Strengthen Career Pathways to Family-Sustaining Wages

For women who seek to improve their employment opportunities or wages by advancing their skills, the traditional college system can be challenging to navigate, especially so for students of color and low-income students. Many college programs center around students who are entering immediately after leaving high school and don't account for adult learners who may have been out of school for a while, who may need to brush up on their basic math and reading skills, who may not be interested in pursuing traditional college degrees, and who may need different supports and approaches that recognize their unique needs to be successful.

For example, students over 25 are [more likely to be working](#) while going to school—often grappling with erratic work schedules and parenting—yet the current ill-equipped postsecondary system does not serve the realities of a non-traditional student's daily life. Further, programs in male-dominated, well-paying fields don't do enough to recruit, retain, and promote women, creating an opportunity gap for women in fields that provide family-sustaining wages and don't require a traditional college degree.

All students should be able to find education and training programs that address their specific needs and adequately support them in attaining credentials that lead to family-sustaining wages.

Our Priorities

- Smooth the pathways to postsecondary education for low-skilled adults, positioning them for jobs in their chosen career field. Hyper-focus should be given to those without a high school diploma or its equivalent, those who are English-language learners, and those not college-ready.
- Increase the number of college students who successfully pass gatekeeper courses in math and English and progress toward a degree or credential.
- Scale and expand best practice career pathway programs—like bridges, integrated education and training programs, and Career Foundations—that accelerate student progress and learning.
- Ensure that education and training pathways in family-sustaining, nontraditional career fields for women are attractive, welcoming, and accessible to them.
- Increase funding for adult education.



Improve Job Quality for All Workers

There are more than [76 million women in the civilian labor force](#), but their wages, benefits, and experiences vary widely. Black and Latina/o workers are not only making lower wages, but they are less likely to have access to critical benefits like paid leave, health insurance, and pensions than their white peers. In Illinois, in 2017, the [unemployment rate](#) for white women was 4.2 percent; for black women, it was significantly higher at 7.2 percent.

States and cities—including Illinois and Chicago—have raised the minimum wage, but even now, not all workers are included, with tipped workers still getting a smaller minimum wage and many states still using the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour. Furthermore, [24 percent of all working people in the U.S.](#)—and 69 percent of the lowest-paid working people—do not have access to a single paid sick day. Only 19 percent of working people get paid family leave through their employers.

All work has dignity, and every worker should have adequate pay and access to benefits like paid sick days and paid family and medical leave that allows them to sustain themselves and their family.

Our Priorities

- Expand paid sick days to all workers.
- Establish a paid family and medical leave insurance program that covers all employees.
- Eliminate the subminimum tipped wage.
- Increase the minimum wage in the United States to at least \$15 an hour.
- Advocate for employer policies that stabilize work schedules and improve the predictability of pay for workers in hourly jobs.
- Advocate for minimum workplace standards to ensure all jobs are good jobs.
- Address the specific needs of the care workforce—which is dominated by women and particularly women of color—making sure they are well-paid, well-supported, and well-prepared.



Advance Gender Equity at Work

The benefits of a diverse workforce are clear: A stronger bottom line. Gender inequity [costs the U.S. \\$2 trillion](#) in lost gross domestic product. Yet our systems in the U.S. were not developed to support women workers, particularly women of color, and, as a result, often have damaging effects.

Harassment, discrimination, and implicit bias all inhibit gender equity at work. A woman working in the U.S. today reckons with a persistent wage gap that can rob her of economic stability into retirement, [losing more than \\$400,000](#) over her lifetime and affecting her Social Security as well. White women working full time make 82 cents for every dollar paid to white men. Asian women make 90 cents—but in some subgroups, the gap is much larger—black women make 62 cents, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander women 61 cents, Native women 58 cents, and Latinas just 54 cents compared with white men.

Beyond income inequality, the racial wealth gap—which in Chicago means that a white family has about [ten times the wealth](#) of a black or Latina/o family—means that families of color experience generational disparities and are often closer to the brink of a financial disaster than white families. It is critical that public and corporate policies root out and eliminate inequities to ensure more women and people of color can achieve parity at work.

Here's the reality: A job cannot be a good job unless it is a fair job for women.

Our Priorities

- Inform job applicants of their rights and employers of their responsibilities with respect to Illinois laws addressing pay equity, workplace harassment, and other workplace gender equity issues.
- Work with enforcement agencies to ensure their rules are strong and their resources comprehensive.
- Advocate for legislation that advances pay equity and eliminates workplace harassment and discrimination.
- Ensure that childcare is affordable and accessible to working women, women seeking work, and women pursuing an education.
- Advocate for the application of business best practices to eliminate gender bias, including conducting pay equity and advancement audits.
- Bring together business, advocacy, civic, philanthropic, and government stakeholders to take action to address historical and deeply entrenched gender and racial pay inequity.
- Work with stakeholders to ensure a balanced representation of women, especially women of color, in jobs and industries offering higher wages.

