



African American Women in the U.S. Economy

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African American women are critical to the economic stability and success of their families, and they play a central role in our economy, contributing as strong consumers, employees, and entrepreneurs. Despite their vital importance to their families and the economy, African American women face unique barriers in the workplace that can undermine their ability to succeed and thrive. African American women tend to earn less money than their white female counterparts and to lack access to the very policies they need to fulfill their responsibilities at work and at home.

Regardless of their employer, parental status, or income level, the majority of workers will experience a work-life conflict at some point in their lives. Whether it is to be at home to pick up a sick child from school, care for an elderly parent, or simply recover from their own illness, most workers will need access to policies that offer scheduling flexibility or different forms of paid leave to respond to these challenges.¹ Despite the nearly universal need for such policies, however, African American working women and men often have less access to paid sick days, fair and flexible scheduling, or any paid family and medical leave.

African American women at work

Despite their important roles at work and at home, African American women still experience sharp pay disparities for the work they do.

Wage gap

African American women working full time, year round are paid, on average, just 60 cents for every \$1 paid to white, non-Hispanic men.² And women overall earn just 79 cents for every \$1 earned by men.³

Lifetime wage gap

Over a lifetime, the cumulative effect of the wage gap for African American women is astronomical: For women overall, the average lifetime wage gap, as measured over a 40-year career, is \$430,480. For African American women, the average lifetime wage gap is more than double that, totaling \$877,480.⁴

Labor force participation

African American women participate in the labor force at a higher rate than women overall and at a higher rate than white, Asian American, and Hispanic women: In 2014, 59.2 percent of African American women were in the labor force, versus 57 percent of women overall; 56.9 percent of white, non-Hispanic women; 56 percent of Hispanic women; and 55.8 percent of Asian American women.⁵ Additionally, in 2015, more than 10.2 million African American women participated in the labor force.⁶

Occupational data

The occupational experiences of African American women are diverse, with a growing number in management and other high-paying jobs and others in service occupations, which tend to be lower paying and allow less access to the aforementioned workplace protections:⁷

- **35.2 percent** of African American working women are employed in management, professional, and related occupations.
- **29.2 percent** are employed in sales and office occupations.
- **27.7 percent** are employed in service occupations.

Despite African American women's increased representation in higher-paying occupations, nearly half of low-wage women workers are women of color. Overall, 18 percent of low-wage women workers are African American women.⁸

African American women at home

Breadwinners

African American women play a critical role in their families' economic security: In 2013, 66.9 percent of African American mothers were their household's breadwinners.⁹

Access to earned sick days and scheduling flexibility

Despite their critical roles as household breadwinners and contributors to the economy, many African American women still lack access to modern workplace protections. For example, only 55.6 percent of African American women workers are able to earn paid sick days, compared with 58.8 percent of white women workers and only 42.3 percent of Latina workers.¹⁰

When compared with otherwise comparable white workers, African American working men and women are:¹¹

- 5.3 percent less likely to have flexible days
- 7.2 percent less likely to have flexible work hours

African American women as consumers

African American women play a huge role in deciding where and how to spend their households' money. Effectively, they are empowered to decide how a large portion of money is spent in the U.S. economy.

For example, African American buying power was estimated to reach \$1.2 trillion by 2015,¹² and women tend to be the primary decision-makers for household purchases across all consumer segments.¹³

African American women as entrepreneurs

African American women are not just employees—they are also innovators, risk takers, employers, and job creators, and their businesses generate abundant revenue:

- From 1997 to 2013, African American women-owned businesses grew by 258 percent.¹⁴
- As of 2016, African American women-owned firms make up 61 percent of all African American-owned businesses.¹⁵
- African American women-owned firms generate an estimated \$52.6 billion in revenue per year.¹⁶

While African American women are an important segment of business owners, however, they are less likely to be employers than the average among all women. Ninety-seven percent of African American women-owned businesses are sole proprietors, compared with 89 percent for all women, representing the challenges these women face in growing their businesses.¹⁷

Conclusion

African American women are key to the economic security and stability of their families, and they deserve access to policies that will enable them to fulfill their work and family obligations. The ability to earn paid sick days, have access to paid family leave, and secure scheduling flexibility are not just nice perks; they are also economic essentials that all working families need to thrive. African American women are important contributors to the nation's economic success, and they must have access to policies that can continue that success into the future.

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Endnotes

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- 11 Glynn, Boushey, and Berg, "Who Gets Time Off?"
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