

# Rough seas for Washington's women

HIGHLIGHTS FROM A 2011 REPORT ON WOMEN'S AND CHILDREN'S ECONOMIC SECURITY



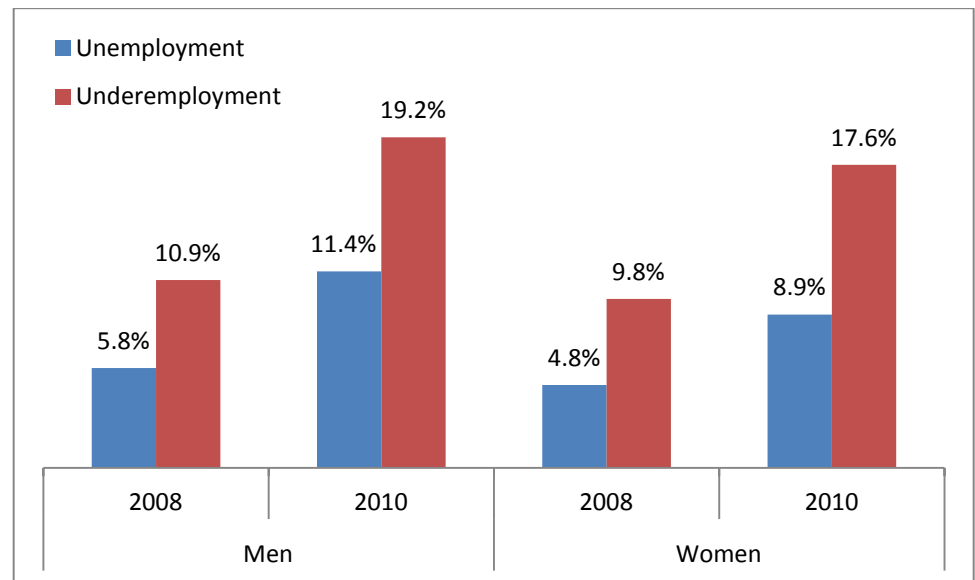
By TATSUKO GO HOLLO, MSW

Although the Great Recession has ended according to economists, women and children are slipping further from economic security. Wage growth has slowed to a crawl.<sup>1</sup> The weak economy compounds workplace inequities, while declining public budgets shred the social safety net. Persistent low earnings for women and the lack of workplace standards that guarantee access to health insurance, retirement income, and paid leave, put both women and children at risk of not having basic needs met.

## Unemployment and Underemployment

Since the official end of the recession in 2009, unemployment rates have remained persistently high and even increased. The 2010 unemployment rates are the highest in decades. Unemployment numbers do not provide a complete picture of economic insecurity. People who have stopped actively looking for work and those who are working part-time jobs while searching for full-time employment are not considered in unemployment calculations. Rates of underemployment have increased dramatically since 2008.

UNEMPLOYMENT AND UNDEREMPLOYMENT, BY SEX  
WASHINGTON, 2008 AND 2010



Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of Current Population Survey data

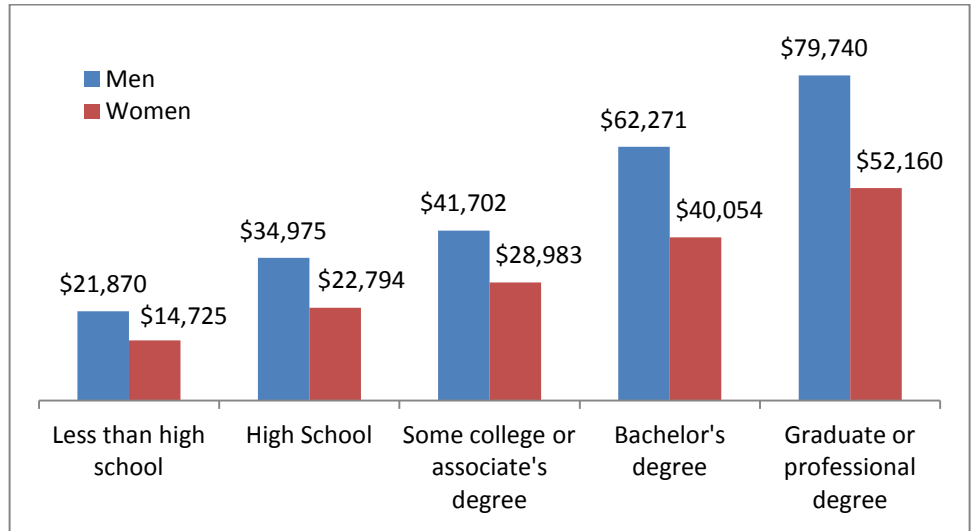
## Earnings

Men earn more than women: in every field, at every education level and age, whether comparing hourly, monthly, or annual earnings. The typical Washington

OCTOBER 2011

woman still earns just 76% of men's wages, \$15.96 per hour compared to men's \$21.00.<sup>2</sup> The gap between Washington men's and women's average monthly earnings was nearly \$1,900 in 2010.<sup>3</sup> Disparities between men's and women's earnings increase with age, as women are more likely to take time away from the workforce to bear and raise children. In their early twenties, women earn 77% of men's average monthly earnings, but that rate drops to under 60% by the time women reach their mid-forties.<sup>4</sup>

**MEDIAN ANNUAL EARNINGS BY EDUCATION, AGED 25 AND OLDER  
WASHINGTON, 2010**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey

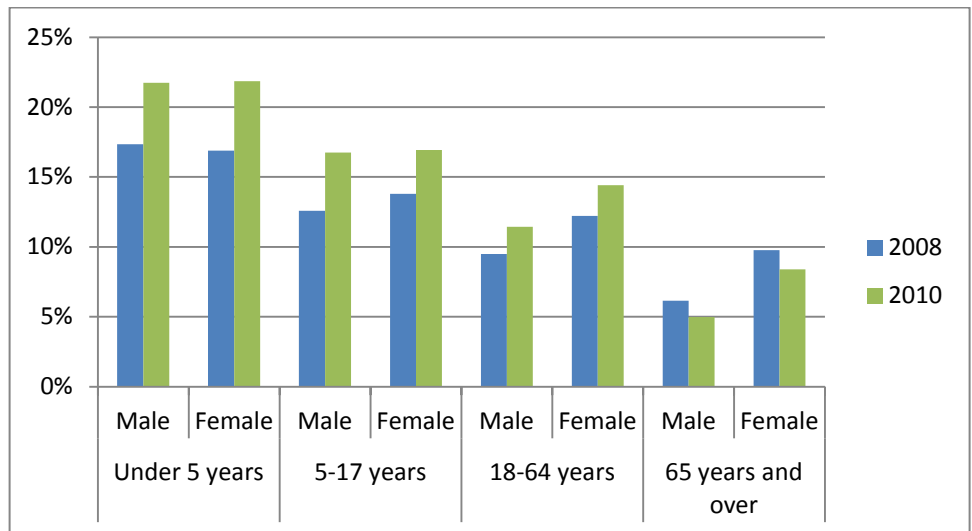
**\$1900**

GAP BETWEEN  
MEN'S AND  
WOMEN'S AVERAGE  
MONTHLY  
EARNINGS IN  
WASHINGTON

**Poverty and Near-Poverty**

Children are more likely to live in poverty than adults.<sup>5</sup> For most age groups, poverty rates have increased between 2008 and 2010.

**LIVING BELOW 100% POVERTY LEVEL, BY SEX AND AGE  
WASHINGTON, 2010**

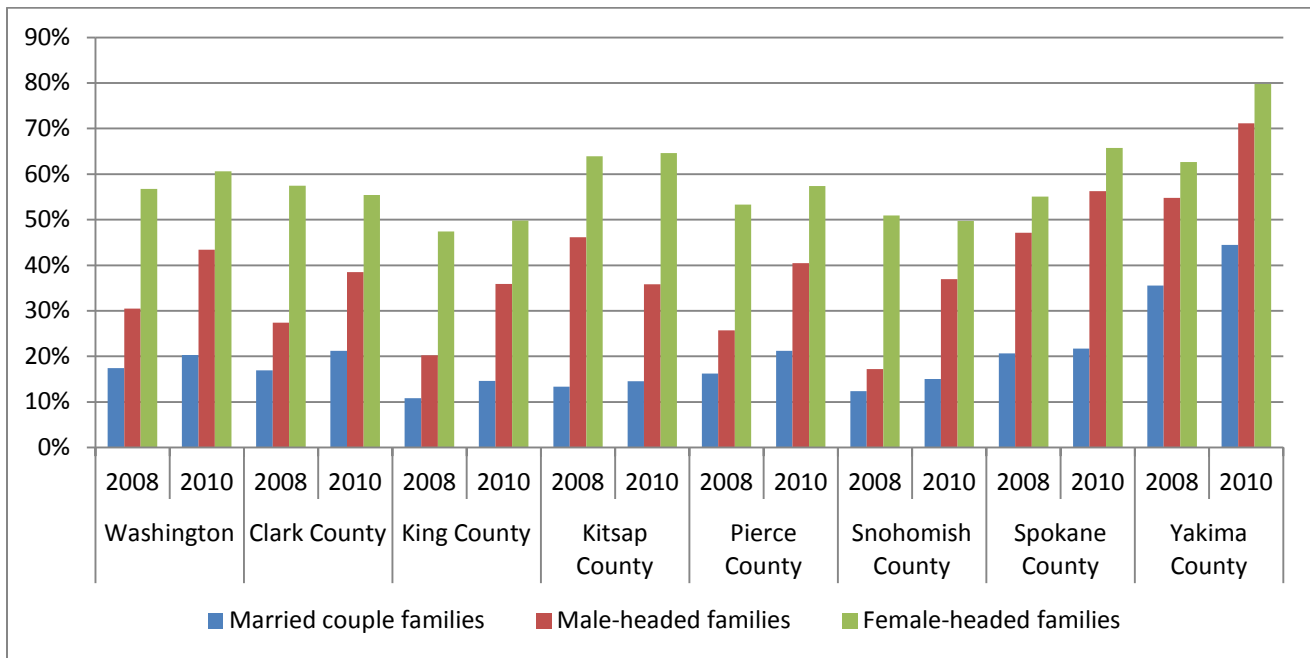


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey

Children of color have extremely high rates of poverty in Washington, with 35% of Native American and more than 36% of Hispanic children living below 100% poverty level.<sup>6</sup> In the Puget Sound region, poverty rates among children of color are particularly high in King and Pierce Counties. One in four children of color in King County and 27% of those in Pierce County live below the poverty level.

Children living with one parent are more than twice as likely to be in low-income families than those living with two parents. Single-mother households are three times more likely to be low-income than married couples with children. In Yakima County, 80% of single-mom families meet the low-income requirements for free or reduced price lunch.

**FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN UNDER 18 LIVING BELOW 185% POVERTY LEVEL  
WASHINGTON, 2008 AND 2010**



*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey*

### Changing policies to build economic security

The need for reformed labor standards is all the more clear given the status of working women and their families. The gender wage gap is persistently wide, extending across race, age, and educational attainment. The gender segregation of the labor force is remarkably similar to that of 20 years ago, with women dominating low-wage sectors that involve caregiving. Furthermore, employers continue to selectively provide benefits that favor workers who are already at greater economic advantage.

Public policy does make a difference. Washington’s lowest wage workers – disproportionately female and people of color – will benefit when the state’s minimum wage increases from \$8.67 to \$9.04 per hour to reflect the rising cost of living.<sup>7</sup> Even though today’s value still fails to meet the standard of a living wage, Washington’s minimum wage policy is more important than ever in these tough economic times when individual workers have little bargaining power and wealth disparities are growing.<sup>8</sup>



WOMEN'S FUNDING ALLIANCE

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**Special thanks to the  
Women's Funding  
Alliance for their  
support of this project.**

*The complete report  
will be published  
November 2011*

Next year, most people who work in the city of Seattle will be eligible to receive paid sick days, thanks to a new labor standard adopted by the Seattle City Council and signed into law in September 2011.<sup>9</sup> Paid sick leave is not only essential for reducing the public health risks of spreading common illnesses, but is important to children's educational outcomes, families' abilities to care for relatives, and the safety of persons experiencing domestic violence. Furthermore, as access to paid leave is very limited for low-wage and part-time workers, this Seattle ordinance will disproportionately benefit the working families who are most at-risk of economic instability.<sup>10</sup>

Despite these recent policy successes, women continue to be short-changed by antiquated labor force standards. Without new policies, women will continue to struggle during economic downturns and upswings alike. Moreover, state budget cuts have resulted in tens of thousands of families losing health care, child care subsidies, home health care services, and other supports, while costs of higher education have soared.

Some important steps toward ensuring economic security for women and their families include:

- Adopting wage standards that reflect a living wage and ensure equal pay for equal work.
- Implementing and expanding Washington's Family and Medical Leave Insurance Program.
- Adopting minimum paid sick and safe days standards statewide.
- Reforming Social Security benefits to limit the penalties on caregivers.
- Expanding access to affordable, quality childcare and early learning programs.
- Raising new state revenue to expand access to affordable, quality childcare and early learning programs, health care, and higher education.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanne Lang Jones, "Wages Rise in Puget Sound Area at 5 Times National Pace," Puget Sound Business Journal, October 7-13, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Economic Policy Institute analysis of Current Population Survey data.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Quarterly Workforce Indicators, adjusted using BLS inflation calculator.

<sup>4</sup> Marilyn Watkins, "Washington's Working Women 2010: Progress Stalled Without New Workplace Policies," Economic Opportunity Institute, [www.eoionline.org](http://www.eoionline.org).

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months by Sex by Age: 2010, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months by Sex by Age: 2010, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/>.

<sup>7</sup> Washington State Department of Labor and Industries, <http://www.lni.wa.gov/>; Kai Fillion, "Minimum Wage Issue Guide," Economic Policy Institute, July 2009, <http://www.epi.org/>.

<sup>8</sup> Economic Opportunity Institute, "The State of Working Washington," <http://stateofworkingwa.org/insights/whatitreallycosts.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Summary Provisions of Seattle Paid Sick and Safe Days Ordinance," Seattle Coalition for a Healthy Workforce, <http://seattlehealthyworkforce.files.wordpress.com/2011/05/summary-provisions-of-council-paid-sick-and-safe-days-ordinance-9-9-11.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Marilyn Watkins, "Evaluating Paid Sick Leave: Social, Economic and Health Implications for Seattle," Economic Opportunity Institute, May 2011, [www.eoionline.org](http://www.eoionline.org).