

COMMUNICATIONS WORKERS OF AMERICA

Report of the CWA National Women's Committee

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CWA

CWA National Women's Committee

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Educating and Empowering Women Through Strong Unions

*Jo Angela Herrera, CWA Local 6143, Maggie McCormack, CWA Local 9588
& Natasha Pickens CWA Local 6355 (Committee Chair)*

Labor unions fight for and work to strengthen many of the essential laws and norms that protect and uplift women. For decades, women have been closing the gender gap in labor, but they are still not equally paid to their male counterparts. In 1985, women made up 49 percent of union membership, but today they represent over half of the working class¹. Despite the increasingly high number of women joining the workforce or the great strides made by the women's rights movement over the past 100 years, women are still not equal in this country.

From health care, to safety at work, to wages that allow women to support their families, unions set the standard for protecting women and deserve credit for workplace rights and protections that guarantee equal rights at work for women. Let's take health insurance as an example. Women covered by a union contract are 19% more likely to have health insurance provided by their employer or union than women who do not have union jobs². This number jumps to 26% more likely for women who work in low wage jobs³. Overall, 77% of women in unions are likely to have employer-provided healthcare compared with 51% of women who are not covered by a union contract⁴.

Women affiliated with unions also earn higher wages than women who are not in unions. Currently, in the state of Texas, women earn 80 cents for every dollar a man earns.⁵ In the United States, women earn 78.3 cents to the dollar. If we continue at this rate, women will not receive equal pay until 2058.⁶ Also, 29.9% of employed women work in low wage jobs, which is roughly double the number of men (15.2%) even though women and men make up roughly the same share of the workforce overall.⁷ Women in unions make 94 cents for every dollar earned by a man proving again that unions make a significant difference in reducing wage gaps.⁸

Another factor that contributes to this wage gap is that women are promoted at work far less often than men. This is evidenced by the fact that women make up fewer than 5% of all CEOs and fewer than 10% of women are top earners in the S&P 500.⁹ While women and

¹ <https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-in-the-workforce-united-states/>

² <https://cepr.net/documents/publications/benefits-unions-women.pdf>

³ <https://cepr.net/documents/publications/benefits-unions-women.pdf>

⁴ <https://iwpr.org/publications/union-advantage-women-2018/>

⁵ <https://statusofwomendata.org/explore-the-data/state-data/texas/>

⁶ <https://statusofwomendata.org/explore-the-data/state-data/united-states/>

⁷ https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/final_nwlc_lowwagereport2014.pdf

⁸ <https://www.epi.org/blog/unions-help-narrow-the-gender-wage-gap/>

⁹ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2018/11/20/461273/womens-leadership-gap-2/>

men ask for wage increases at roughly the same rate, women's requests for higher pay are rewarded about 15% of the time, whereas for men, they are rewarded about 20% of the time.¹⁰ This difference adds up over a lifetime of employment.

Studies also show that while women make up the majority of the workforce they tend to fill the most marginal, low-authority positions and have the shortest tenures. As a result, women are in greater danger of losing their jobs and therefore disproportionately affected by company downsizing and layoffs.¹¹

An additional obstacle that many women face in the workforce is sexual harassment. While the #MeToo movement has helped shed light on the issue, not enough has been done about how many women are subjected to this type of mistreatment. Through our Steward Training program, CWA can train members to recognize signs of sexual harassment, advocate for policies and practices that allow women to feel safe in the workplace, and provide support to members. We can also use the bargaining table to include contract language for sexual harassment prevention and protections against sexual harassment and retaliation. While CWA has training for National Staff employees, CWA must commit to developing training for locals in every District and Sector. Sexual harassment of women is an abuse of power and having a union is one of the important tools for women in fighting back and preventing harassment at work.¹²

Unions are a dynamic and ever-evolving institution of the American economy that exist to give working people a voice and leverage over their working conditions and the economic policy decisions that shape our society. Giving workers a voice in the workplace and legislation is essential for democracy. In the last year, CWA members have mobilized with the community on issues of sexual harassment, wage disparity, and healthcare. As members of the CWA Women's Committee, we can do more to engage and educate women through our union. We can use our power to highlight the importance of women's contributions, encourage and support more women in leadership positions both nationally and locally, create and strengthen mentoring programs for women, and provide a dedicated space for women to voice their concerns.

CWA is on the front line of labor creating a vision for the future of working women in this country, and we need every working body fighting with us. The writing on the wall is clear: women are the new face of labor, and protecting women is a step towards protecting labor.

¹⁰ <https://hbr.org/2018/06/research-women-ask-for-raises-as-often-as-men-but-are-less-likely-to-get-them>

¹¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5959048/>

¹² <https://aflcio.org/2018/2/15/why-having-union-such-powerful-tool-preventing-and-addressing-sexual-harassment>

How Women are Transforming Organized Labor

Cheryl Bacon, NABET-CWA Local 59053

“Whatever the fight, don’t be ladylike.” – Mother Jones

Women have always been on the front lines of the labor movement. From the early days of the needle trades to the growing service and public sectors, women have been a driving force in unionism. Over a hundred years ago, the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) was created by educated women reformers, middle-class women, and young, immigrant workers to improve factory wages and working conditions. The WTUL is perhaps the earliest example of the emergence of feminists in the labor movement.¹³ This story is told in our own history as organized telephone operators progressed from company associations to the National Federation of Telephone Workers (NFTW), to the Communications Workers of America.¹⁴

Women entered the labor market in large numbers in the 1970s, just as the second wave of feminism took off. Soon after, in 1974, the Coalition of Labor Union Women was founded. Energized by the feminist movements of the 60s and 70s, women brought that passion to their workplaces and demanded the protections they needed to care for their families. They did not trade in their traditional roles of wife, mother, homemaker, and caretaker when they entered the workforce. The responsibilities of home and family remained, and women had to find a way to meet them. Using their voices in the workforce, women began to transform the labor movement as they brought issues of work/life balance, equal pay, harassment, career opportunities, and childcare to the negotiating table.¹⁵

Women continue to play a critical role in shaping our labor movement. Just as women have helped strengthen the labor movement, the labor movement has also produced strong and fierce women who are constantly breaking through barriers and deconstructing restrictive social norms.

As CWA, we have multiple resources available to further empower women in our union and the community. Our Minority Leadership Institute prepares women for leadership positions within the union and beyond. We can also use our local Women’s Committees to educate and mobilize our membership around critical women’s issues.

¹³ Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and WorkingClass Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995)

¹⁴ <https://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2017/women-in-the-workforce-before-during-and-after-the-great-recession/pdf/women-in-the-workforce-before-during-and-after-the-great-recession.pdf>

¹⁵ https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/documents/faculty_staff_docs/FAF05.pdf

We will only be able to effectively challenge the current power structure if we generate a mass movement of union members and community activists who are committed to fighting for gender equality. Collectively, we have the power to foster effective leadership that will change our union, our community, and our country.

The Fight Continues Against Workplace Bullying

Ebony Burgess, IUE-CWA Local 81381

Unfortunately, workplace bullying continues to be a common phenomenon that impacts workers in every industry. In my last report on the same topic, I provided detailed information on what constitutes workplace bullying, the different types of workplace bullying, its disproportionate impact on certain workers, and how CWAers can combat bullying in the workplace. This report will provide an update on the ongoing efforts to combat workplace bullying by highlighting actions taken by IUE-CWA Local 81381 members and suggest additional ways CWA can help fight against workplace bullying.

IUE-CWA Local 81381 is the oldest public sector social worker union in the U.S and represents more than 900 employees of the County of Monroe in upstate New York. Members of IUE-CWA Local 81381 have been subject to unreasonable expectations from County Executives that restrict their participation in union activities and penalize members for taking care of themselves and or their loved ones. Several members who failed to meet these unreasonable expectations were faced with disciplinary actions, including termination. This continued mistreatment and abuse from County Executives and other members of the Administration infuriated members and drove them to take action.

The members focused their strategy on voting out the incumbent County Executive, who was a member of a political party that had a stronghold on the seat for over 30 years, and voting in a pro-worker candidate. By working with other union members and community allies, our members identified Adam Bello as the ideal candidate for the position.

Not only did Adam champion working peoples' values as a County Clerk, he also had first-hand experience of mistreatment and abuse from County Executives. When he noticed inequities in the Administration's handling of funds and nepotism, he was not afraid to call them out or share his observations with the public. After Adam shared his findings, the Administration did not make his job easy, but he continued to fight and speak up about the issues he cared about.

In order to fully support Adam's candidacy for the position, IUE-CWA 81381 members went through CWA's Political Activist Training. They received the necessary tools needed to effectively build political power in the community. Members engaged in phone banking, door-knocking, and even offered rides to voters on Election Day. Thanks in large part to those efforts, on November 5, 2019, Adam Bello won the election. Our members felt empowered by our ability to stand up to workplace bullying and win changes that not only benefit us but also benefit the community at large.

This goes to show that by organizing on all sides of the CWA triangle, we can increase our effectiveness as a union in addressing issues that impact our members and the community, such as workplace bullying. We can build on the success of our local and empower more members to take action to address issues they deal with in their workplaces and communities.

We might have won this battle, but creating harassment-free workplaces is an ongoing war. By promoting and supporting national legislation such as the Healthy Workplace Act, we can ensure that employers implement policies and procedures that prevent bullying and protect all workers.

I have always been proud to be a member of a union that is at the forefront of the fight for social and economic justice. The collective actions we took as a local to stand up and fight back against mistreatment and abuse make me even prouder. We, as union members and working people, have the ability to harness enough power to make the changes we need happen, including eliminating workplace bullying once and for all.

The Union Advantage for Women

Ann Vogler, CWA Local 2006 & Karen Pearce, CWA Local 7704

Although it was not always the case, women are currently part of every major industry in the global economy, including manufacturing, construction, technology, telecommunications, healthcare, hospitality, journalism, airline, the public sector, and many more. Women continue to rise to positions of leadership and even make up the majority of the workforce in certain industries. However, women are still underrepresented in certain industries and job positions. Traditional gender roles and outdated stereotypes, as well as historical discrimination against women, are among the factors that prevent women from entering or advancing in certain male-dominated industries.¹⁶

The labor movement has played a major role in supporting women's entry into more industries. Through bargaining, good contracts, and forceful representation on the job, women in labor unions have added protections against gender-based and other forms of discrimination. By instituting fair hiring practices, unions have helped eliminate barriers that have prevented women from entering certain industries. In addition to fighting for equal employment opportunities for all workers, unions have also provided more women with the opportunity to become leaders within their unions and have a stronger advocating position for other working women.

In addition to being at the forefront of the fight for women's rights, CWA has implemented internal programs and practices to further the involvement of women within the union. Through its National and Local Women's Committees, CWA intentionally develops women members to become activists and leaders within the union and the community to organize other members to take part in advancing women's rights. CWA also works with other unions and outside organizations who advocate for equal representation. For example, recently in West Virginia, CWA members of Local 2006 partnered with Ohio Valley Breaking Barriers (OVBB), a learning facility dedicated to providing women with the tools needed to overcome systemic hurdles to achieving economic independence. Local 2006 activists have helped to educate women and provide them with the resources they need to be successful. Through efforts like these, continued progress is being made in ensuring equal representation of women across industries. We must use every step of the ladder to drop down the ladder behind us and offer a hand up. We must take our shot and make sure we make it easier for others to take theirs.

¹⁶ <https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-in-male-dominated-industries-and-occupations/>

Advocating for Equality and Furthering Women's Involvement in Politics

Kimberly Liska, CWA Local 4302

Women have been historically underrepresented in American politics. Significant progress has been made in recent years, but the gap in representation is still jarring. Women are the majority of the electorate in the U.S but still remain to hold only approximately 25-30% of high elected office. The gap in representation has resulted in issues that disproportionately impact women being pushed to the back seat in the general political discourse of this country.

Take the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), for example. The ERA is a proposed constitutional amendment designed to guarantee equal legal rights to all Americans regardless of sex. Although this amendment was introduced more than five decades ago and is supported by the majority of Americans, it has yet to become law.¹⁷ Although the issue of gender discrimination impacts all genders, it still predominantly affects women.¹⁸ Perhaps if more women were in office, the ERA would become the law of the land. This is not to say all women support the ERA, but the majority of women do, as do the majority of Americans. However, the current landscape of lawmakers, which is mostly made up of men, do not see this as a priority, and some have actively worked against it. In January 2020, Virginia became the 38th state to ratify the ERA – satisfying the requirement that three-quarters of states approve it following passage by Congress in 1972. Unfortunately, by then, the deadline to ratify the amendment had expired. Although the House recently voted to extend that deadline, the Senate, led by Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, (R-KY) is not likely to act on this issue. Although other obstacles have prevented the ERA from becoming law, it is a daunting reminder of how the underrepresentation of women in the lawmaking process negatively impacts the consideration of the ERA and other women's issues such as reproductive justice and equal pay.

Currently, women hold 126 of the 535 seats in the United States Congress, and the highest leadership position in the House of Representatives - the speakership - is held by Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), the first woman to hold this position. The number of women not just in the halls of Congress but also in state legislatures and other elected offices is the highest it has ever been. Although that is something to be praised, there is still a long way to go to remedy the underrepresentation of women.

¹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2020/feb/24/equal-rights-amendment-era-poll-congress>

¹⁸ <https://www.workplacefairness.org/sexual-gender-discrimination>

As a union built on the principle of protecting workers' right to equal representation, CWA recognizes that a major step in achieving women's equality is through ensuring that the representation of women in elected office is reflective of the population. To make this a reality, we must continue to build on the progress we have made and will require the involvement of all CWAers at all levels.

On the local level, our Women's Committees can encourage the participation of women and all members in the legislative and political process by collaborating with LPAT committees. They can identify pro-worker women candidates running in statewide and national elections and support them through volunteering and mobilizing other voters. They can actively participate in lobbying and advocacy efforts to ensure the voices of women are heard in the policymaking process.

Local and National CWA leadership should create more opportunities for developing women members as activists and leaders through available training and existing programs within CWA and with outside organizations such as the AFL-CIO. Under the new Steward Strong training, an emphasis should be placed on ensuring women are equally represented in the make-up of local shop stewards. In addition, we should further our alliances with community organizations that advocate for equality and increase CWA's presence in the fight for women's rights.

The uphill battle for equality often feels daunting, especially under this current administration. But the upcoming election offers the biggest opportunity for change yet. The women of CWA and all CWAers, along with community activists, can and will make a difference.

Violence Against Women and Human Trafficking

Yolanda Pearson, CWA Local 3204 & Kimberly Johnson, CWA Local 29026

Women continue to be victims of violence in our society. The consequences of violence against women include not just physical harm and even death; Violence against women can result in severe long term sexual and mental health damage. According to a 2014 report from the Urban Institute, victims can suffer from chronic back, hearing, vision, and respiratory problems as a result of violence, as well as sexually transmitted diseases, infertility, and substance abuse.¹⁹ The negative impact of violence also extends beyond the individual. It can impact families, friends, co-workers, and the community at large. An increase in healthcare costs and reduced productivity as a result of violence against women can also impede societal development as a whole. Violence against women can take on many forms ranging from verbal and physical abuse to domestic and workplace violence.

For decades, advocacy groups and union members, including CWA activists, have fought to decrease violence against women and its impact on individuals and the community at large. This has resulted in harsher laws, increased protection for victims, and expanded programs to help women in dire situations. However, a significant population of women continue to be subject to various forms of violence.

One form of violence that disproportionately impacts women globally is human trafficking. According to a report published by the UN in 2018, adult women account for nearly half (49%) of all human trafficking victims detected globally. Women and girls together account for 72% of human trafficking victims, with girls representing more than three out of every four child trafficking victims.²⁰ Not only that but, more than four out of every five trafficked women and nearly three out of every four trafficked girls are trafficked for sexual exploitation. Although human trafficking primarily impacts women, it can happen to anyone in any community. Traffickers often use violence, manipulation, or false promises of well-paying jobs or romantic relationships to lure victims into trafficking situations. Language barriers, fear of their traffickers, and/or fear of law enforcement frequently keep victims from seeking help, making human trafficking a crime hidden in plain sight.

Unions play a critical role in curbing the impact of violence against women and human trafficking. Through bargaining and representation, CWA and other unions have already made significant progress in ensuring a safe workplace for women and other victims of violence. CWA stewards often play a critical role in supporting victims and recognizing signs that a member disciplined by management for calling out sick or tardy may have done

¹⁹<https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/43051/411507-Comprehensive-Services-for-Survivors-of-Human-Trafficking.PDF>

²⁰https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTiP_2018_BOOK_web_small.pdf

so because of abuse at home. In addition, several unions, including CWA, have programs that support victims of violence. CWA and AFA-CWA also helped spearhead the implementation of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in the early 1990s. VAWA is a landmark piece of legislation that sought to improve criminal justice and community-based responses to domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking in the United States.

In recognition of the unique role flight attendants play in fighting against human trafficking, AFA-CWA has been actively participating in the Blue Campaign, which aims to raise awareness and provide training on recognizing signs of human trafficking and assisting victims, particularly children. Some of the indicators include²¹:

- Does the person appear disconnected from family, friends, community organizations, or houses of worship?
- Has a child stopped attending school?
- Has the person had a sudden or dramatic change in behavior?
- Is the person disoriented or confused, or showing signs of mental or physical abuse?
- Does the person have bruises in various stages of healing?
- Is the person fearful, timid, or submissive?
- Does the person show signs of having been denied food, water, sleep, or medical care?
- Does the person lack personal possessions and appear not to have a stable living situation?

AFA-CWA's "100,000 Eyes in the Skies" campaign successfully resulted in mandatory training for flight attendants to recognize and report human trafficking. However, this alone will not be enough to curb the impact of such a sophisticated and global form of violence. Attacking human trafficking is going to require all of us to stay vigilant of the signs such as the ones listed above and act to protect victims. In addition, we have to be active through our union and our communities in the fight against any and all violence against women. We have to push our elected representatives to take action, such as passing the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which passed the House but still remains to be voted on by the Senate. Our actions can protect so many victims from the detrimental consequences of violence.

²¹ <https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/indicators-human-trafficking>

Voter Suppression and Its Impact on Women

Elizabeth Mercado, CWA Local 1105

Truly living up to the democratic values we are typically told this country was founded upon would require - at the most basic level - the participation of every American in the process of electing their representatives in government. However, throughout its existence, the top political and economic class has systematically restricted certain groups of people from executing their most fundamental civic duty of voting. Historically, these groups of people include people of color, women, the poor, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

Since the foundation of this country up until the Civil War, the only group of people who had the full privilege of voting was wealthy white men. Following the Civil War, the passage of the 15th amendment, which guaranteed the right to vote regardless of race, color, or previous servitude, gave black men the right to vote. However, soon after, confederate lawmakers, mostly from the South, began instituting Jim Crow laws to prevent black people from voting as part of a larger effort to continue oppressing black people and keep them as a source of cheap labor. While Jim Crow laws continued to intensify the discrimination of black people, the Women's Suffrage movement led to the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920, which gave women the constitutional right to vote.

In the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965, which formally eradicated Jim Crow laws by legally ending discrimination in voting. However, voter suppression continues to impact a broad group of people. Although there is a racial motive to systemic voter suppression, its true goal has always been to discourage or prevent whole communities from voting, thereby allowing certain groups of people to stay in power.²² Since the passage of the VRA, voter suppression has taken on several different forms, including the purging of voter rolls, gerrymandering and redistricting, voter ID laws, reduction of polling locations, voter disenfranchisement of the formerly incarcerated and many more. These tactics have been implemented to strip away the voting rights of working-class voters systematically. They are disproportionately targeted towards people of color, women, the poor, the elderly, students, and people with disabilities.

Some forms of voter suppression impact certain groups of people more than others. For example, voter ID laws have a disproportionate impact on women. Since 2010, 35 states have passed and implemented new restrictions on voter ID.²³ These laws require voters to present a government-issued photo ID to vote and offer no meaningful fallback options for

²² <https://www.demandthevote.com/what-is-voter-suppression>

²³ <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id.aspx>

people who do not possess one of these IDs. Voter photo ID laws are particularly costly and burdensome for women in part because roughly 90 percent of women change their legal name upon marriage or divorce.²⁴ Up to 33% of women, regardless of race or income, do not have the proper documentation to get an ID to vote.²⁵ According to the Brennan Center, only 48 percent of voting-age women have a birth certificate that accurately reflects their current name.²⁶ Additional factors such as domestic violence, low-wage hourly jobs, being the primary caretaker of children and elderly parents, and the lack of resources further restrict women's access to the polls.

The labor movement has been at the forefront of efforts to fight back against voter suppression. The only way to build true worker power and protect workers' rights is by ensuring everyone is able to participate in our democracy. Lawmakers who expand voter suppression measures are often against working people's values and enact laws that hurt unions and workers. CWAers have and continue to stand alongside other workers in the labor movement and community activists to fight for a more inclusive democracy.

In 2011, CWA passed Resolution 73A-11-3 and urged the membership to support legislation for the protection of voting rights. The Resolution states, "CWA will educate members about the nationwide attempt to suppress citizens from their right to vote and what to bring with them to the polling place in order to vote and not be denied their fundamental right...CWA will join with allied groups to expose the true intent of voter ID laws and eliminate them...CWA will participate with AFL-CIO and other allied groups in documenting abuses and consequences on the laws against voters." CWA has also supported the Voting Rights Advancement Act, which allows for greater transparency with nationwide notification, review, and remedies for current discriminatory voting changes before they take effect. Additionally, CWA has supported the Voter Empowerment Act of 2017, which aims to guarantee the right to cast a ballot as well as modernizing voting systems and demanding accountability of elected officials.²⁷ In 2019, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, CWA engaged members and community activists to demand Congress provide more funding to states for the safe administration of the November election.

The fight for a democracy that excludes no one is going to require every single one of us. We must join the movement and organize others to build a mass movement of working-class people to eradicate voter suppression once and for all.

²⁴<https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2013/11/05/five-reasons-voter-identification-bills-disproportionately-impact-women/>

²⁵ <https://rantt.com/how-voter-suppression-stifles-womens-right-to-vote>

²⁶<https://www.lwv.org/blog/how-voter-id-laws-disproportionately-impact-women-and-what-were-doing-about-it>

²⁷ <https://cwa-union.org/national-issues/economic-justice-democracy/voting-rights>