

These Women-Run Co-ops Push Back Against the “Feminization of Poverty”

Two-thirds of the country’s low-wage workers are women. That’s why they stand to benefit the most from greater equity in and control of the workplace.

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Green cleaning from *Si Se Puede!* Women's Cooperative, We Can Do It! Inc. Photo courtesy of [The Working World](#).

Last month, Seattle passed an ordinance to [increase its minimum wage to \\$15 an hour](#), making it the city with the highest minimum wage in the country. As women living in Seattle earn only around [half of what white men earn](#) and are over-represented in low-wage work, this ordinance will be particularly transformative for women—particularly women of color and female-headed households.

Nationwide, women comprise [two-thirds](#) of all minimum-wage workers. Minority women are more likely than white women to work these jobs, with 35.8 percent of African-American and 46.6 percent of Latina versus 26.2 percent of white [women working at minimum wage](#).

Laws like Seattle's that raise the wage floor go far in addressing living-wage concerns as well as grappling with gender pay-gaps in communities across the country.

This disproportionate representation of women in low-wage work is compounded by the fact that the majority of women in the United States still make only **77 cents** for every dollar that a man earns for equal work. Additionally, poverty rates are higher for women in this country than for men.

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In 2012, the poverty rate for women was **15.4 percent**, compared to **11.9 percent for men** and **31 percent for female-headed households**. Non-white women experience poverty rates significantly higher than their white, non-Hispanic counterparts: **One in four black and Hispanic women and about one in three Native American women** live in poverty.

So while Seattle's new law, and minimum wage movements like **15 Now**, can provide a tremendous boost to women's earnings, they are not by themselves sufficient to overcome the **feminization of poverty**, particularly in communities of color.

Women of color working low-wage jobs must often navigate unregulated work conditions, as much of their work is domestic labor—caregiving, house cleaning, child care—an industry that, historically, is not only low-paid but also exploitative.

The **National Domestic Workers Alliance** (NDWA), a 10,000 membership-based organization for nannies, housecleaners, and caregivers, describes, in its 2012 report *Home Economics: The Invisible and Unregulated World of Domestic Work*, the substandard conditions of domestic work. This includes lack of employment benefits, meager wages, exposure to toxic chemicals, and physical abuse. (The NDWA's efforts to expand labor protections for domestic care workers are described in this **interview** with Ai-jen Poo, co-founder and director of the Alliance, from Community Wealth.)

Such unhealthy work environments and insufficient pay have led a number of these low-wage women to take matters in to their own hands. Many have formed women-owned worker cooperatives that ensure good pay and healthy working conditions, help women overcome the isolation and vulnerability of domestic work, and empower women to build wealth for themselves, their families, and their communities.

One such cooperative is the **Women's Action to Gain Economic Security (WAGES)** in Oakland, California. Founded in 1995 by low-income immigrants (mainly Latinas), WAGES now supports five eco-friendly housecleaning cooperatives employing more than 95 women, all of whom are worker-owners. These worker-owners have a voice and vote in key business

decisions, and share an equal distribution of business profits, creating improved financial security for these women and their families.

The first of WAGES' cooperatives, Emma's Eco-Clean and Eco-Care Professional Housecleaning, provide for their member-owners 150-200 percent above prevailing wages in the commercial housecleaning industry; and WAGES' most successful co-op to date, Natural Home Cleaning Professionals, has generated sales upwards of \$1.4 million each year since 2011.

The cooperative is designed to create living-wage jobs in safe and healthy environments, as well as to provide social supports and educational opportunities for its members.

Cooperative Home Care Associates (CHCA) in the Bronx, founded in 1985, provides quality jobs and benefits for low-income minority women in direct personal health care. Today, CHCA anchors a national cooperative network yielding more than \$60 million a year in revenue and employing more than 2,000, making it the largest worker cooperative in the United States. It also runs a free workforce development training program that serves 600 low-income and unemployed women annually and is a significant driver of employment in the Bronx.

Started in 2006, *Si Se Puede! Women's Cooperative, We Can Do It! Inc.* in the Bronx now has 51 members in their women-run, women-owned, eco-friendly housecleaning business. The cooperative is designed to create living-wage jobs in safe and healthy environments, as well as to provide social supports and educational opportunities for its members. Members have an equal voice in decisions regarding policies and operations and retain the full amount paid by clients while contributing monthly dues to the cooperative for business expenses. In 2012 they began working with the *Working World* to create their own line of environmentally safe cleaning products.

Inspired by these examples, the *Beyond Care Childcare Cooperative*, also located in New York, started in 2008 with the support of the *Center for Family Life in Sunset Park*. This cooperative owned by immigrant women now has 30 members and provides access to business development and nanny training as well as other social supports and educational opportunities.



What's the Role of Race in the New Economy Movement?

Seattle's minimum wage ordinance is one step toward lessening inequality and poverty compounded by low-wage work. But there are still many challenges ahead that highlight the difficulties that municipalities face in regulating working conditions, including the International Franchise Association's lawsuit against the city on the grounds that the city "illegally discriminates against franchisees"; and the proposed [Washington Uniform Minimum Wage Measure](#), which would strip cities of their authority to set minimum wages.

Cooperative development is one tool in the community wealth-building strategy toolbox that circumnavigates these challenges and can help lift low-wage workers, and especially women, out of poverty.

The examples profiled above are just a taste of how women can work cooperatively to take control of their own work environments and build productive assets in a way that is best for them and for their families.



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