



**To:** Interested Parties  
**From:** ThinkTennessee and A Better Balance  
**Date:** May 14, 2019  
**Re:** Key Findings from New Report on Women in the Tennessee Workforce

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## **Introduction**

Half of Tennessee families depend on a female breadwinner, and more than 40% of female-headed families in our state live in poverty. Women in Tennessee are twice as likely as men to hold a low-wage job and are paid less than men on average. States across the country have taken note and are enacting pro-family policies to address systemic barriers facing women workers. Below are the key findings and recommendations from our latest policy brief on working women in Tennessee.

## **Key Findings**

**Pro-family policies that make it easier for Tennessee women to join and stay in the workforce would boost economic growth and make our state a better place to live, work and raise a family.**

- Tennessee today has one of the largest gaps (ranked #43) between male and female labor force participation in the country: 54.5% of women are employed or seeking employment, compared to 67.6% of men.
- Tennessee could add nearly \$34 billion to the state GDP by 2025 if it were to adopt policies that help increase the number of women in the workforce.

**When women are financially insecure, Tennessee families suffer.**

- Nearly half of all families in Tennessee financially depend on breadwinning mothers, or mothers who earn at least 40% of a family's combined income.
- A single mother's annual expenses in Tennessee are estimated at \$40,500, but her median annual earnings are only \$36,812 -- not enough to cover basics like housing, food, transportation and child care. That helps explain why 40% of female-headed households in Tennessee live in poverty.

**Pro-family policies would help Tennessee women, especially women of color and mothers, break down the barriers that are preventing them from achieving economic security for themselves and their families.**

- **Pregnancy Accommodations:** 60% of Tennessee women who gave birth within the last year are in the workforce, but our state lacks Pregnant Worker Fairness laws to ensure that these women have a clear legal right to reasonable workplace accommodations when needed to keep them healthy and safe on the job. Absent these policies, which are critical to preventing adverse

outcomes like miscarriages, women may be forced out of the workplace, disrupting their healthcare coverage and causing them to lose much-needed income.

- **Paid Family and Medical Leave:** Women in the U.S. are far more likely than men to reduce their work hours or quit due to a caregiving responsibility. Forced unpaid leave leads to the loss of crucial income for bills, healthcare and other family expenses and creates headaches for businesses who struggle to retain skilled female workers.
- **Affordable, High-Quality Child Care:** Reducing a family's child care costs by as little as 1% could grow the state economy by nearly \$1.1 billion. The vast majority of Tennesseans who are forced to work part-time due to insufficient child care are women. Even for those who can make it work, costs can be astronomical: A single working mother who earns the median income would need to spend 40% of her income to cover the cost of child care for an infant.
- **Closing the Wage Gap:** The wage gap is a contributing factor to the high number of women living in poverty. Tennessee mothers earn just \$0.72 to every \$1.00 earned by fathers, and the average Tennessee woman loses over \$300,000 in income during her 40-year career. The gap is even worse for women of color.

**Tennessee's peer states have taken important steps to remove economic barriers for women and their families, and our state must do the same if we want to retain our workforce and continue to attract new businesses.**

- 25 states provide pregnant workers with a clear legal right to reasonable accommodations, including Kentucky, West Virginia, Louisiana and Texas. In 2018, South Carolina passed a similar law with overwhelmingly bipartisan support. The law requires employers to provide pregnant workers things like seating and access to a water bottle or more frequent breaks to keep them healthy and safe on the job.
- Six states and the District of Columbia have passed paid family and medical leave laws.