

## **New conservative state policies are falling hard on women**

**By Tazra Mitchell**

RALEIGH – A lot of well-deserved criticism has been heaped upon North Carolina lawmakers this year. By all appearances, state leaders are dead set upon undermining and dismantling many of North Carolina's basic public structures and services that lay the groundwork for a more inclusive and prosperous future. As many have reported and decried, the state's "new normal" has been to the detriment, rather than to the benefit, of the state's long-term unemployed, poor, and uninsured.

What has been less widely reported and criticized is this: many of these decisions fall especially hard on women.

The recovery has been far less favorable to women than it has been for men, erasing some of the economic improvements women have made over the last two decades. A majority of job gains have gone to men during the recovery even though women have higher levels of education. Not only are men outpacing women in landing jobs, men are also out-earning women at every educational level. Women earn only 82.5 cents on the dollar compared to men in North Carolina, according a report released earlier this month by the NC Council for Women. Even worse, the wage gap has only grown wider during the recovery.

North Carolina's economy is in the process of transitioning away from high-wage jobs that can provide a path to middle class prosperity towards low-wage jobs that cannot sustain a family. This shift is catching women in the crossfire. Women comprise more than half of minimum wage workers in the state. And, the ten largest occupations paying under \$10.10 per hour—or just above minimum wage—are majority women nationwide. In light of gender wage gap, it is no surprise that women also experience higher poverty rates compared to men. These disparities are even larger for women of color.

All of this means that lawmakers' austerity fervor is only making matters worse for the average woman in North Carolina. For instance, just two weeks into the current legislative session, lawmakers drastically cut unemployment benefits for the jobless and rejected more than \$700 billion in federal funds for long-term unemployment benefits. They also eliminated the family hardship provision, which allows people who are unable to work due to care-giving responsibilities to receive unemployment benefits. This radical restructuring will disproportionately impact women in the state because they are more likely to be among the unemployed and long-term unemployed as well as be their family's primary caregiver compared to men.

Lawmakers subsequently blocked the Medicaid expansion, forgoing the opportunity to provide health coverage for a half-million poor, uninsured working parents and other adults. More than one in five women ages 18 to 64 lack health insurance in the state, and as a result of legislators' short-sighted decision, some of these women will face a health coverage gap in which they will be both unable to enroll in Medicaid and ineligible for the tax credits to buy coverage in the new

health insurance exchange. This means that many women will continue to rely on costly emergency room visits for their health care in addition to a less healthy workforce.

Next, lawmakers set their sights on low-paid workers and voted to immediately ax the state's Earned Income Tax Credit at the end of year. Research shows that this tax credit is particularly effective at encouraging work among low-wage working mothers—both during their working years and even after they retire. Not only are low-wage jobs filled by a majority of women but more than four in ten working women in the state are their family's primary breadwinner. At a time when good-paying jobs are still hard to come by, eliminating this tax credit was just another swing at struggling families and women in the state.

The prospect of lawmakers reversing their agenda is not promising, especially as they pursue "reforms" in public education and tax policy. Women seem quite likely to be caught in the crossfire yet again.

Recognizing that lawmakers can still do more harm, women across the state are gearing up for Women's Advocacy Day on April 9th at the General Assembly. Women will join together and call upon state lawmakers to prioritize their needs and rebuild the foundations that are critical to the state's future and that make women and families healthier, happier, and stronger.

Learn more about Women's Advocacy Day at [www.ncwu.org](http://www.ncwu.org)

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