

# A Racial and Gender Equity Argument for a \$15 Minimum Wage

Corrin Davis

It's no secret that the pandemic has had numerous drastic effects on our economy. Throughout the pandemic, workers went through phases of not working at all, to working from home, to going back to work in person with masks and quarantine procedures, and many other measures depending on how 'essential' their work was deemed. Aside from just healthcare workers, we deemed grocery store attendants, fast food workers, truck drivers transporting goods, and many more low-wage workers essential throughout the pandemic,<sup>1</sup> and yet many of them may have been compensated with the outdated federal minimum wage of \$7.25 currently offered in most states. This has not been raised since July of 2009.<sup>2</sup> For many states, including Indiana, the federal minimum wage is the same as their state minimum wage, and there aren't any planned increases to the state minimum wage of Indiana in 2022,<sup>3</sup> despite the rising inflation throughout the pandemic, which reached a high of "5.3%... in the 12 months through August 2021."<sup>4</sup>

As described in Dr. William Spriggs's 2018 paper, Black Americans are disproportionately harmed by a stagnant wage, as was the case in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> This is because a larger proportion of the working class comprises Black Americans. The case is similar now, with minorities such as Black Americans facing more of the rough impact of this pandemic not only through lost jobs and wages, but loss of life as well. Wage gaps have made the rate of uninsured Black Americans near twice that of whites or Asians, which limits their access not only to healthcare in the event of COVID or another disease but testing for COVID as well. Loss of sources of income due to illness, new debts from the bills of illness, or even loss of life of a primary provider can all contribute to an increased economic struggle in Black American households.

In fact, a bill such as the Raise the Wage Act of 2021 (comparable to the Raise the Wage Act of 2017 noted by Dr. Spriggs) which would aim to raise the minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2025,<sup>6</sup> would predominantly benefit Black Americans in particular. Dr. Spriggs determined that the Raise the Wage Act of 2017 would "directly raise the

wages of Black American workers" but overall would even "help almost 30% of Americans see a pay raise."<sup>7</sup> Americans need that pay raise after a long, taxing pandemic where we've seen many lose their jobs or go without pay due to closures, isolation, or quarantine procedures. It follows that a minimum wage raise should come now, when buying power of our dollar has decreased as prices rise, similar to the last federal minimum wage increase which would have been shortly after the Great Recession in 2008.

And, in the case of women, a raise in the minimum wage is just one of many changes necessary to make joining the workforce more accessible. According to Dr. Spriggs and Dr. Ellen Kossek, women are out of the labor force at high rates this century.<sup>8</sup> This issue was greatly exacerbated by the Great Recession, since women had more trouble rejoining the labor force than men,<sup>9</sup> as well as the pandemic, with kids being home to learn and no place or person to watch them if mom needed to return to work. However, as women make up about half of our population and should make up as much of our workforce, it is troubling to note that only 57% of women were participating in the workforce as of February 2021, the lowest it's been since 1988.<sup>10</sup>

Above all, women need access to affordable childcare in order to be successful in the labor force and to remain in the labor force long term. According to Spriggs and Kossek, the price of childcare has risen faster than the median wage, so it is well out of the price range of the average woman, let alone minority women. They elaborated that what we really are going to need is government sponsored childcare and maternity leave (and maybe even paternity leave if we can get that far), but there is a narrative that women are "innately" meant to raise children to explain how jobs are not traditional for women, thus why they can't ever be successful.<sup>11</sup> Similar ideas surround most minorities trying to be successful in non-traditional or stereotypical roles, to explain away their struggles rather than recognize the inequities that exist within our society and economy for

marginalized groups. In the case of women, in absence of free childcare supplied by the government, wages need to be increased to put childcare back into their affordability. According to the House Committee on Education and Labor, the Raise the Wage Act as it stands now would disproportionately benefit women in that nearly 6 in 10 workers receiving the federal minimum wage are women, and so nearly 20 million women will receive a raise, with “32.7% of single parents” and “19.5% of women of color” being some of those women.<sup>12</sup>

In conclusion, due to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on minorities such as Black Americans and women, as well as pre-existing systemic and institutionalized inequity in the workforce and economy, an increase in the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour is necessary. In addition to the improvements for women and Black Americans, other minorities and Americans such as essential workers and those laid off during the pandemic will also benefit from raised wages in a post pandemic world. Of course, these are just the first steps to reshaping our economy and society to one that is both equal and equitable.

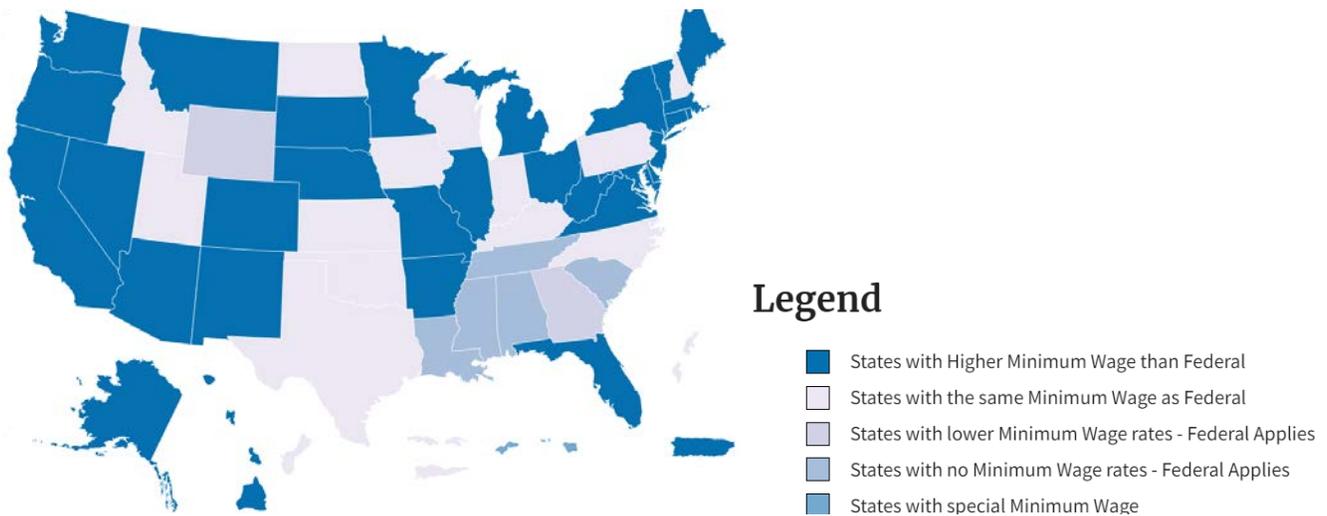


Figure 1: A representation of minimum wage by state, compiled by the U.S. Department of Labor.

Source: “History of Changes to the Minimum Wage Law,” United States Department of Labor, (accessed January 17, 2022), <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/minimum-wage/history>.

## Notes

---

- <sup>1</sup> “Categories of Essential Workers: Covid-19 Vaccination,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 29, 2021), <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/categories-essential-workers.html>.
- <sup>2</sup> “History of Changes to the Minimum Wage Law,” United States Department of Labor, (accessed January 17, 2022), <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/minimum-wage/history>.
- <sup>3</sup> Bink Addy, “These States Will Increase Their Minimum Wages in 2022,” Fox 59 (Nexstar Media Inc., December 31, 2021), <https://fox59.com/news/national-world/these-states-will-increase-their-minimum-wages-in-2022/>.
- <sup>4</sup> Alberto Cavallo and Oleksiy Kryvtsov, “How the Pandemic Has Affected the Economy, from Empty Shelves to Higher Prices,” PBS (NewsHour Productions LLC, November 10, 2021), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/how-the-pandemic-has-affected-the-economy-from-empty-shelves-to-higher-prices>.
- <sup>5</sup> Cydney Adams, “Not All Black People Are African American. Here’s the Difference.,” CBS News (CBS Interactive Inc, June 18, 2020), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/not-all-black-people-are-african-american-what-is-the-difference/>; Maritza Vasquez Reyes, “The Disproportional Impact of COVID-19 on African Americans,” *Health and human rights* vol. 22,2 (2020): 299-307, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7762908/>
- <sup>6</sup> “The Budgetary Effects of the Raise the Wage Act of 2021,” Congressional Budget Office (Congressional Budget Office, February 8, 2021), <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/56975#:~:text=If%20enacted%20at%20the%20end,rate%20as%20median%20hourly%20wages>.
- <sup>7</sup> William E. Spriggs, “A Look at Inequality, Workers’ Rights, and Race,” *Law and Inequality: A Journal of Theory and Practice* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 231-246, [https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/lieq36&id=242&men\\_tab=srchresults#](https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/lieq36&id=242&men_tab=srchresults#)
- <sup>8</sup> William Spriggs and Ellen Kossek, Social and Gender Equity in Workforce Development and Manufacturing Panel organized by Purdue Policy Research Institute, *Contemporary Matters*, January 24, 2022. Dr. Kossek is a Professor in Krannert School of Management at Purdue University.
- <sup>9</sup> “Gender Inequality and Women in the US Labor Force,” International Labour Organization (International Labour Organization (ILO), November 23, 2011), [https://www.ilo.org/washington/areas/gender-equality-in-the-workplace/WCMS\\_159496/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/washington/areas/gender-equality-in-the-workplace/WCMS_159496/lang-en/index.htm).
- <sup>10</sup> Courtney Connley, “Women’s Labor Force Participation Rate Hit a 33-Year Low in January, According to New Analysis,” CNBC (CNBC LLC, February 9, 2021), <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/08/womens-labor-force-participation-rate-hit-33-year-low-in-january-2021.html>.
- <sup>11</sup> Spriggs and Kossek, *Contemporary Matters*, 2022; Kim Parker, “Women More than Men Adjust Their Careers for Family Life,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, August 14, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/01/women-more-than-men-adjust-their-careers-for-family-life/>.

<sup>12</sup> “Raise the Wage Act- Women Fact Sheet,” House Committee on Education and Labor (House Committee on Education and Labor, 2021), [https://edlabor.house.gov/download/raise-the-wage\\_-women-fact-sheet](https://edlabor.house.gov/download/raise-the-wage_-women-fact-sheet).