The Minimum Wage and its Impact on Women

At some point in our lives, we all become familiar with the concept of minimum wage, whether it be through actual experience or simply writing a research paper about it. The minimum wage first appeared when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which allowed workers to earn 25 cents per hour (Grossman). Today, this wage has reached $7.25, stirring up more controversy than ever. With some believing it to be too low and others viewing it as a fair share, the minimum wage affects individuals across the nation in diverse ways. It can positively impact teenagers working part-time to earn extra money for themselves. Yet, for women, who make up the majority of minimum wage workers, the outcome is less positive. The minimum wage pulls single mothers below the poverty line, forces women to work numerous jobs, and leaves them with little to no savings. From low living standards to numerous health problems, the obstacles that come with the minimum wage make life difficult for thousands of women.

Individuals work towards living the American Dream, yet with the growing number of females in the nation living paycheck to paycheck, this idea can seem impossible for many. A common misconception about the minimum wage labor force is that teenagers mainly comprise it, along with part-time workers. In reality, women make up nearly 6 out of every 10 workers earning the minimum wage, and nearly one-third of these women have children (Mejia). According to “How Minimum Wage Increase Would Impact on Women,” 75.3% of these
women are adults of 20 years or older, with nearly one million of them being single mothers. This group of women represent an array of racial backgrounds, specifically minorities. Hispanics make up 14.4% of all low-wage women, and African-Americans take 16.2% (Bernstein). These women, who characterize the minimum wage labor force, deal with daily challenges and suffer from a low standard of living due to their poor wages. They are not teenagers. They don’t have others to support them financially. These women make up the true face of the minimum wage labor force.

With such a low hourly wage, female workers face the hardships of living under low standards and poor conditions. Nearly 42 million women in the U.S. live in or near poverty (Alter). The minimum wage provides a small income of $14,500 annually, which is not even sufficient for a mother and her two children to survive (Tyson). Many single mothers work for the sole purpose of providing for their children, who endure the harsh consequences of living in poverty. 65 percent of the children living in female-headed working families fit the low-income requirements (Tyson). The lack of income results in a sacrifice of food, proper shelter, and an overall “normal” childhood for these kids. Such circumstances surface in the documentary

*Paycheck to Paycheck: The Life and Times of Katrina Gilbert*, which explores the day to day struggles of a single mother making $9.49 an hour. A certified nursing assistant, Katrina uses her miniature paycheck to support herself as well as three young children. She goes through a long list of bills, ranging from rent to daycare. Overworked, underpaid, and uninsured, Katrina struggles to make ends meet as the sole breadwinner of the family; her husband’s addiction to painkillers destroyed their marriage and left her with nothing but her kids. At times, Karina works eight days straight with no days off in order for her family to not suffer from because of a
missed paycheck. Her children feel the effects of living in poverty. “I couldn’t give none of them a birthday party,” Katrina recalls in the documentary. “Not even a birthday present.”

This is reality for minimum-wage, poverty-stricken moms and the 28 million children who depend on them (Alter). The low wage forces families into a low living standard, depriving families of basic needs. Since 2007, the cost for food, housing, transportation, utilities and child care has only risen (Mejia), yet the minimum wage has stayed stagnant. By failing to increase along with inflated prices, the minimum wage does not allow women to live comfortably. Females feel the minimum wage’s negative effects the most because of the gender wage gap, which makes the lives of these women even more difficult. By not increasing the minimum wage to match the inflated prices of goods and services, wage inequality continues to grow.

The minimum wage and the gender pay gap go hand in hand. According to “The Impact of Raising the Minimum Wage on Women,” a significant reason for the existence of the gender pay gap in America comes from women being concentrated and overrepresented in low-wage jobs, resulting in females earning around 77 cents for every dollar a male earns (pp.3). Almost half of low-income working mothers work in retail and service-sector jobs and by 2012, working mothers headed 4.1 million low-income working families with children (Povich). Karen Click, the director of SMU’s Women and LGBT Center, discussed how women play the role of the breadwinner for their families. “This is the face of families now,” Click said. “If women consistently are in lower paying jobs, then everybody who depends on that woman is impacted by the low paying job.” Such a pay gap hinders women from supporting themselves and their children, and pulls them into poverty. With little to no money left to spend on health care and proper nutrition and no health insurance, women face numerous health issues ranging from obesity to reproductive problems, as well as a lack of money for medication.
Low-wage work results in little money available to spend on taking care of one’s physical needs. Obesity poses as a major public health crisis in societies across the world, and a small income impacts it. In “Minimum Wage and Overweight and Obesity in Adult Women,” a research article found in the academic journal “PLOS ONE,” researchers analyze the relationship between the minimum wage and obesity among 190,892 women in 27 low and middle income countries. According to the research, “the economic security theory of obesity postulates that minimum wage could affect women’s BMI through lowering physiological stress.” In regards to obesity, this theory indicates that increasing the minimum wage would allow individuals in lower-income countries to consume more calories, and it would allow those in middle-income countries to have access to more nutrient-dense food. The relationship between the wage and obesity did not have much of a correlation in low-income countries due to the scarcity of food in general. But, in middle to high income countries, there appeared to be a negative correlation. Out of the 11 middle-income countries analyzed in the research, 56% of the women earning the minimum wage were obese. Therefore, a higher minimum wage may prevent women from becoming overweight and relying on foods with less nutrition. Generally, healthy foods tend to be expensive and less available to those of poorer communities (UC Davis Health System), which contributes to the negative correlation. Obesity is one of the few health issues low-wage women face. Due to a lack of health insurance, women also face reproductive issues and are sometimes unable to afford necessary medications.

While the link may not be entirely obvious, the minimum wage can interfere with the reproductive rights of women. The crisis stems from minimum wage women not having proper health insurance or any health benefits. Low wage work leaves workers without employer-based insurance; if these workers do not qualify for government based health insurance like Medicaid,
then they must pay high out of pocket prices for services (O’Neill). This makes it harder for women to have access to their constitutionally-protected right to things such as contraception and abortion care. Many women are forced to choose between saving their paychecks to support their families’ basic needs, or pay a hefty price for reproductive care. Acknowledging women’s reproductive rights would do the economy a favor by advancing the economic interests of workers, who would rather put their paychecks towards family finances over reproductive health care (O’Neill). Luckily, the Affordable Care Act allows women to have access to birth control for free; the downside is that family planning clinics that provide free birth control are few in number and range in location, making it difficult for women to get what they need (Khazan).

Going past birth control, pregnant women face a new set of challenges as they work hourly wage jobs.

Pregnant women often times deal with discrimination by employers and do not receive enough accommodations. The “Respect the Bump” campaign began in 2014 and called on Wal-Mart to instill more accommodations for pregnant women, such as light duty and more frequent breaks (O’Neill). The campaign featured testimonials of women who faced major hardships while working at Wal-Mart during pregnancy. Some were forced out of their jobs, losing the steady paycheck they desperately needed. Others experienced accidents and could not give themselves the proper care needed. Within less than six months, Wal-Mart decided to allow some (but not all) pregnant women to receive accommodations while working (O’Neill). The future after pregnancy also instills a new set of obstacles for women. The United States entitles only 12 weeks of maternity leave, unlike the 162 weeks offered in France and Germany (Povich). But, usually only middle to high wage jobs offer this break for new moms. “For all of
the hourly wage jobs, you are not getting any kind of [maternity] leave,” Click said. “Your choice is to stay with your baby or earn money, but you cannot do both.”

Aside from reproductive health care, the minimum wage can prevent women from receiving medication for illnesses and other necessities for overall wellness. In *Paycheck to Paycheck*, Katrina reveals that she is diagnosed with Graves’ disease, an illness that affects the thyroid. Because she doesn’t have health insurance, Katrina is unable to purchase her medication and goes months without having a checkup. Her small paycheck cannot cover the potential out-of-pocket medical payments. A 2014 study done by the Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative (BARHII) found that minimum wage workers are more likely to report poor health and suffer from chronic diseases. This study concluded that "policies that reduce poverty and raise the wages of low-income people can be expected to significantly improve overall health and reduce health inequities." For Katrina, her illness requires attentive care, but her circumstances prevent her from visiting a doctor or taking days off if she does not feel well. As of today, the United States is the only nation with an advanced economy that does not guarantee paid sick leave for workers, specifically those working minimum wage jobs (Povich). Low wage women do not receive benefits such as employer-based health insurance, paid sick leave or even wage protections (Povich). Missing a day of work could lead to greater economic pressures later on. Women concentrated in low-wage work that offers few benefits face obstacles that hinder them from moving forward. Luckily, there are public work support programs that have supported these females and their families over the years.

When low-wage women cannot make ends meet on their own, the availability of public work support programs becomes imperative. Organizations such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) become especially valuable to those who have children to support
SNAP offers nutritional assistance to millions of low-income individuals and families, and it is currently the largest program in the domestic hunger safety net (USDA). Another huge aid to women employed in low-wage occupations is a federal tax credit called the earned income tax credit. The earned income tax credit is a refundable tax credit for low-income workers that depends on the worker’s income, number of children and marital status (Tyson). In 2012, this tax credit prevented the incomes of 5.5 million people from falling below the poverty line (Tyson). The EITC program is imperative for women and their children when the paycheck does not cover their needs. It provides essential support to those at the lower end of the wage scale by boosting their incomes. Research indicates that women who benefitted from the tax credit experienced higher wage growth over time (Marr). This program also reveals how detrimental the minimum wage can be on families, and how it forces them to search for other means of support. With a wage that does more harm than good, it might be time for society to consider reform.

A significant amount of controversy surrounds the issue of raising the minimum wage. While the nation’s productivity has increased over the years and continues to do so, wages have remained stagnant. According to “The Impact of Raising the Minimum Wage on Women,” minimum wage increases have not kept pace with the inflated costs of basic necessities for working families for the past 30 years, forcing families into poverty. The report estimates that increasing the minimum wage to $10.10 an hour could close about 5 percent of the gender wage gap. The overrepresentation of females in low wage sectors makes the minimum wage a tool that can help enforce gender pay equality in the workplace. The report claims that more than half of all female workers and three-quarters of female workers in predominantly tipped occupations
would benefit from increasing the minimum wage to $10.10. Because more women earn this wage than men do, increasing it would benefit females specifically and help the wage gap shrink.

Increasing the minimum wage could also help solve a growing crisis in the nation: poverty. In the U.S., the 2015 poverty level for a single parent and a child was $16,337 (US Census Bureau). A full-time employee earning $7.25 an hour makes an annual salary of $12,331, which is 8% below the poverty level for a household with a single parent and a child (US Census Bureau). According to a 2014 Congressional Budget Office Report, a minimum wage of $9.00 would pull 300,000 individuals about the poverty line, while a wage of $10.10 would help 900,000 individuals get out of poverty. Studies also show that an increased minimum wage would reduce child poverty in female-headed households (“The Impact of Raising the Minimum Wage on Women”). In 2012, 65 percent of children living in female-headed working families were low income (Povich). Poverty in the next generation would decrease with a wage increase, which greatly benefits the children as they move forward in their lives. Though the benefits seem abundant, many controversies still arise. A common worry among individuals is that increasing the minimum wage can result in inflation. But, in reality, increasing the minimum wage would just mean taking away some of the money that goes to the corporation and giving it to the employees. An increase of a few dollars in a wage does not have the capacity to damage the entire economy. “Right now we are skewing towards putting the profit at the company. I think we can skew it a little to put some of the profit to the people as well, but not to the point where it is going to hurt the company,” Click said. “The difference between $7.25 and $12.00 or $15.00 is not a lot. It is still going to be very hard to subsist on $12.00 an hour but $7.25 is morally shameful.”
Many women today face the challenge of working long hours only to receive a small compensation. They work full-time as employees during the day, and after the shift ends, many have to go home and be full-time mothers as well. Food, gas, rent, clothing, daycare, and medication must be paid for by a paycheck that can barely guarantee survival. The minimum wage is not only a women’s issue; it involves all individuals. People in government and within the community must work towards reform and push for a wage increase that could potentially aid thousands of workers. $7.25 an hour does not meet the needs of women and their children. It is time to acknowledge the problems of the minimum wage and work towards igniting change that could propel our society forward.
Works Cited


