More than 35 million mothers live with minor children in the United States; 6.5 million, nearly one in five, are poor; and another 3.6 million live between 100 percent and 150 percent of the poverty line. The challenges of unequal pay and low wages that many women face—especially women of color—are compounded by the additional responsibilities many mothers bear, particularly single mothers. For many mothers, quality child care is unaffordable, work schedules are unpredictable and inflexible, and they have no paid sick or family leave.

Despite these obstacles, mothers are playing an increased role in their families’ economic security and the nation’s economy as breadwinners or co-breadwinners in two-thirds of American families. There is a lot of work to be done to ensure that mothers are provided the same economic opportunities to thrive not only as individuals but also for their families and for the nation.
American workplaces are still not family friendly, and our nation’s work and income supports fail to meet the needs of low-income mothers. These shortcomings disproportionately affect single mothers, mothers of color, and the children of both. While single mothers in many countries are at higher risk of poverty than other parents, the United States does far less to alleviate poverty for single mothers and their children than many of its international counterparts.

There are clear policy solutions to help remedy these disparities, including paid family and medical leave so working mothers are not forced to choose between staying home to care for a sick child or losing their jobs; raising the minimum wage and strengthening equal pay laws to help close the wage gap, which is especially large for mothers; and expanding high-quality pre-K and child care to enable families to work. These popular policies, backed by at least 80 percent of Americans, are a win-win, effectively supporting families and the economy.