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TRANSCRIPT

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Report

Programs Seek to Aid Low-Paid, Working Women

Millions of women in the United States work long hours at jobs that do not pay enough to support their families. Elizabeth Brackett reports on several programs set up to help these working women.

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JIM LEHRER: And next, back in this country, help for women who work long hours for low pay. NewsHour correspondent Elizabeth Brackett of WTTW-Chicago reports.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT, NewsHour correspondent: Millions of working women are trapped in jobs that don't pay enough to support their families. Trying to change that is the latest challenge taken on by Chicago women's activist Anne Ladky.

Thirty-five years ago, Ladky founded Women Employed, an advocacy organization dedicated to improving the working lives of women.

ANNE LADKY, Women Employed: I think what we're seeing now is that tremendous contrast between women who've taken advantage of opportunities that have opened over the past 30 years and are now working in hundreds of fields that were closed to them before.

That's where all the attention is right now, but we still have this enormous problem of this concentration of women in low-wage, low-opportunity jobs.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Marie Griese, a divorced mother, is one of those women Ladky is concerned about. Griese rarely complains about her hectic schedule, but for the last 18 years she has worked two jobs in order to support her daughter.

She makes \$4.50 an hour, plus tips, waitressing at this upscale Chicago restaurant at night. At her day job in a suburban hotel restaurant, she makes just \$13 an hour, despite working there for nearly two decades.

Still, it's not the long hours and low pay that bothers her.

MARIE GRIESE, food service worker: Not being home enough with my daughter at nighttime, because I always had to work two jobs, so -- sorry -- her dad was taking care of her, so I had to work. So probably that's my only regret, is not being there sometimes to tuck her in good night or just to be with her.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Trudging through a Chicago snowstorm to her job as a home health care aid, Sharon Lewis knows what it is like to try and support a family with a low-wage job. She cleans homes and provides light nursing care for two clients a day. Lewis earns \$7.75 an hour and gets one week of vacation each year and no paid sick leave.

SHARON LEWIS, home health care aide: The toughest part is there's no health insurance for right now. And we don't get paid for like certain days when my children are out of school. I have to come to work, because we don't have state government housing, so the days that they're out of school I have to come to work, which means that I have to work extra hard to get them to the babysitter.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Ladky says Lewis' situation is typical.

ANNE LADKY: Many low-wage jobs in this country have no paid time off whatsoever, not a day of earned vacation, not a day of sick time, nothing like that.

And they're unstable schedule-wise. They make it difficult for people to care for their families or get additional schooling. So there are lots of problems in the low-wage workforce in that part of the labor market that we really need to address.

Bringing attention to the problem

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Though job opportunities for women have expanded, women still remain clustered in jobs dominated by women that pay low wages, such as preschool workers, home health care aides, nursing aides.

Though education does help a woman move up the pay scale, college graduates who are women still make 33 percent less than male college graduates.

To raise awareness about the problems of low-wage work for women, Lady enlisted highly successful women to launch a new initiative, Working Women for Change, women like Bridget Gainer, the head of government relations for the Aon Corporation.

Gainer says she wants businesses to realize that treating low-wage workers better is good for their bottom line.

BRIDGET GAINER, Aon Corporation: We're going to do two things. The first will be to make the business case. Part of that business case will be a reduced cost of turnover. The other part of the business case will be looking at the examples of the peers in their industry who are implementing these policies and are profitable.

The second thing is to exert information and exert pressure. The more people you tell about this, what we would encourage women is, when you check into a hotel, ask what their policy is. When you pass the maid as you're leaving your room, ask her what happens if she calls in sick.

You know, the woman who comes to clean your office at night, you're talking with her, ask her, "Well, what happens if you have to take a sick day? Do you get paid for that? Do you feel like you're at risk of being fired for that?"

So I think that, the more people who are talking about it, it becomes something that is in the public domain.

Pressuring business owners

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: In December, Gainer and other women delivered more than 1,000 of these cards to retailers. Their aim: to flex their shopping muscles, saying they'd patronize business who pay fair wages and offer good benefits.

David Vite represents retailers and says the tough competition in the retail industry will make it hard to meet the goals set by Working Women for Change.

DAVID VITE, Illinois Retail Merchants Association: The competition in the retail industry is fierce. Whether it's in Florida or Chicago or wherever it is, there is competition. And competition drives prices lower.

And always retailers' meet their budgets or their payroll budgets are developed to meet their expected sales. And as margins are pushed down, keep in mind that, in the retail industry, if you're in the food sector, the average profit margin is 1.2 percent to 1.5 percent.

If you move into the department store business, it's 3 percent to 4 percent. If you're in the specialty store business, it's in the 5 percent to 7 percent. That's a pretty thin margin upon which to say you're going to meet your competition, you're going to beat your competition, you're going to raise wages.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Those low-profit margins do make it difficult to raise wages and benefits in many of the rapidly expanding service economy jobs, says labor economist Nik Theodore. And he

says the lack of advancement in those jobs intensifies the problem.

NIK THEODORE, University of Illinois at Chicago: Many of the fastest-growing jobs are very low-paying. They're cut off from career ladders. They offer very few opportunities for advancement and sometimes involve hazardous work, as well.

Improving quality of life

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Hasime Hashimi feels stuck in her job cleaning hotel rooms, a job that gets her home well after dark. Her employer, the Allerton Hotel, would not allow us to tape her doing what she calls a "tough job."

HASIME HASHIMI, hotel worker: I have to clean every day 15 rooms. I have to lift that mattress, which is very heavy. And I have to clean 15 bathrooms, 15 rooms to vacuum, and make sure to dust everything, because if they're going to find just little bit dust, we're going to be in trouble, and that's why it's hard.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Hashimi's teenage son and daughter wait for their mother after her long day at work. After arriving from war-torn Kosovo nine years ago with two children to support, she found her job at the Allerton Hotel.

She credits the union with getting her \$13.55 an hour and health benefits. Still, she struggles financially and sees little room for advancement.

HASIME HASHIMI: If I look for another job at hotel, it's non-union job. And if I look somewhere, it's very hard to find job, and I'm scared I'm not going to have job, so nobody have to pay my bills. My children are still too little. My son, he's now 17. My daughter's 14. And I'm very scared to find another job.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: The 200 successful women recruited by Ladky's initiative also asked Mayor Richard Daley to get businesses and the city to work together to improve the lives of low-wage workers. The mayor's deputy chief of staff says the city will host a job quality summit to explore solutions.

EVELYN DIAZ, City of Chicago: There are two potential fronts upon which to attack. And this is, I think, what would separate the city of Chicago from other cities nationally, and one is that we are looking to work with businesses themselves.

We think that there are win-win solutions possible. We think that there are ways that businesses can invest in their low-wage workforce, in ways that help the business's bottom line, and help workers.

But there are also things that we want to look at that the city can do to assist residents, supports to help them pay their heating bills and their light bills, those kinds of supports.

A model of success

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Diaz and Ladky say there are some model companies like Container Store, which says its wages are 50 percent to 100 percent higher than the industry and provides benefits for part-time employees.

Debra Heberling is the manager of training at a Chicago store.

DEBRA HEBERLING, The Container Store: What we found is, if we pay people well and support them and help them develop their careers, they'll want to stay. It is very much economically beneficial in comparison to always having a high turnover rate.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: But Vite says it's The Container Store's substantial investments that enable them to pay higher wages and better benefits.

DAVID VITE: They are a very specialized, niche retailer whose products, made in China and other places, are able to be sold at substantially higher margins than those products which are sold at virtually any other retailer.

ELIZABETH BRACKETT: Still, Ladky hopes the Working Women for Change initiative will convince more businesses that The Container Store model of improving wages and benefits will be a win-win situation for both the businesses and the low-wage workers they employ.

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