

Making It Work: Rural Low-Income Women in Service Jobs

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Abstract

Women who live in rural areas of the United States often have few employment choices open to them. Service occupations, however, do tend to be readily available. Utilizing a framework based on the structure of the work system, most service occupations of the rural mothers in this study are constrained or labor intensive, and characterized by low wages, low skills, and non-standard hours. The mothers' ability to manage work and family obligations are facilitated by their support systems. These mothers rely on family and friends to assist them in a variety of ways to manage their multiple roles.

Introduction

Work does not guarantee that families in the U.S. will stay above poverty and be able to become economically sustainable. This is especially true for women, living in rural areas, raising children, and working in service occupations. In 2001, the poverty rate in rural areas was higher than in metropolitan areas, and, for women in service occupations, the poverty rate was 12.6%. The likelihood of being among the working poor was higher for women who headed families and among those who worked in service occupations (Mosisa, 2003).

Studying the situation from an ecological perspective, Cotter (2002) found that when holding household characteristics constant, nonmetropolitan status increased the likelihood of being poor by 40 percent. When Cotter added controls for the labor market characteristics, the increase of poverty in non-metro areas fell to 19 percent, leading him to conclude that the "...*context* of nonmetropolitan America rather than the *composition* of nonmetropolitan Americans" (emphasis in the original) may be the real story of rural poverty (Cotter, 2002, p. 549). There may be a double challenge for low-income mothers in rural communities who are working to take care of their children and are often supporting partners and extended family members as well.

For many rural mothers, social networks and supports provide material goods, services, and emotional support (Lee, Netzer, & Coward, 1994) that make it possible for them to remain in their community and work. These family members, friends, neighbors, and co-workers supply needed emergency assistance in a crisis and ongoing support in a variety of ways, including child care, transportation, job contacts, and many other types of aid (Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993).

While a major benefit of staying in their rural communities may be living within their social support system, one negative factor for many is that fewer formal systems are available to facilitate employment and ease the strains of balancing work and family responsibilities. For those low-income rural mothers who have informal support, extended family members and friends often provide childcare, transportation, information about community agencies and for assistance in finding jobs (Duncan, Whitener & Weber, 2002; Miller & Darlington, 2002; Levitan & Feldman, 1991). Variability of work hours and schedules in low-wage service occupations can make informal support vital to maintaining employment.

The low-wage (secondary) labor market appears to differ from the primary labor market in that it does not respond to the classical economic forces and is marked by few opportunities for advancement, little job stability, and a greater amount of gender and ethnic discrimination (Bernstein & Hartmann, 1999). While the numbers of low-wage workers are growing, the earnings of low wage workers have declined in real terms (Bernstein & Hartmann, 1999). Jobs in the low-wage sector are characterized by instability, with little upward mobility, few benefits, inferior working conditions such as variable hours and days of the week and permanent part-time status or even extended leave for permanent workers, and are found in services, low-end retail and other sales, and administrative support (Bernstein & Hartmann, 1999; Lambert, Waxman, & Haley-Lock, 2002; Kornbluh, Isaacs, & Boots, 2004).

The service industry accounts for between 30 and 40 percent of all the low-wage jobs, (Acs, Philips & McKenzie, 2000; Andersson, Holzer, & Lane, 2003; Lee, 2004). Working mothers with little education and welfare leavers often find few employment choices when beginning or re-entering the workforce. Openings available are

often low-wage service sector jobs in the hospitality industry, especially in food service; health care; cleaning services; and child care (Sherman, Fremstad, & Parrott, 2004; Boushey & Rosnick, 2003).

The jobs often available to, and sometimes chosen by, low-wage mothers are non-standard, part-time (under 35 hours per week) or temporary. Part-time and temporary jobs typically come without benefits of health insurance for the worker or family members and sick leave, paid or unpaid (Friedman, 2004; Kornbluh, Isaacs & Boots, 2004; Olsen & Kalleberg, 2004). Service workers often work non-standard hours, including split shifts, evenings, and week-ends. Belman and Golden (2000) found that low wage women are concentrated in the industries such as services, where the probability of non-standard work hours is great. Wages were found to be lower and health insurance coverage less likely among those who worked non-standard hours. In her study of shift workers, Gosswald (2003, p. 33) also found significant negative effects of working non-standard hours on the employee's home responsibilities and family relationship, specifically the "transfer of bad mood, low energy, and fatigue."

In service occupations, scheduling of work hours is highly dependent on the individual's supervisor, and whether or not the supervisor is sympathetic and understanding of a mother's family situation and needs. A new supervisor or a change in employer policies may alter working conditions in a number of ways (McCrate, 2002). Those with the least flexible jobs were the ones who were in greatest need for the flexibility, according to Heymann and Earle (1998).

Conceptual Framework

Herzenberg, Alic and Wial (2000) constructed a new theory regarding the structure of the U.S. labor market based on the organization of production and regulation of task performance in occupations. Their framework takes into consideration elements that make service sector work both appealing and difficult for workers. *Tightly constrained* work systems, such as those in food service, have very controlled work boundaries and a high level of supervision. Skill requirements are low, and little training is needed. These jobs can be fast-paced, high-stress, with little opportunity for advancement, resulting in a high turnover rate. *Unrationalized, labor-intensive* work systems, such as custodians or nurse's aides, typically have a fixed set of tasks to complete, but the quality and quantity of work may be difficult to measure. Although these jobs may not require a lot of skills, those who have experience are more desirable and efficient workers to the employers. In these types of jobs, too, economic advancement is difficult. Non-standard job hours are common. *Semiautonomous* work systems, which include police and security officers, require skills and training. Work is not highly supervised due to the complexity of the work, and wages are higher. Finally, the *high-skill autonomous* work systems, which include teachers and tutors, are based on occupational skill and pride. These kinds of jobs require careful and formal training and education, and workers are carefully screened prior to being hired. Job tasks are often complex and difficult to evaluate. The possibility for advancement is greater.

The purpose of this mixed methods study is to explore the strategies and support systems utilized by rural, low-income mothers who work in service occupations, using their own words. Comparisons are made using the work system framework of Herzenberg, Alic and Wial (2000) to categorize the types of jobs the mothers held.

Methodology

Data used in the present study are from the three Waves of a 14-state⁴, USDA-funded, longitudinal study NC223/NC1011 "Rural Low-Income Families: Monitoring Their Well-Being and Functioning in the Context of Welfare Reform." The 234 low-income mothers, who participated in all three Waves of data collection, were from 22 rural counties across the country, had at least one child under the age of 13, and were eligible for food stamps or the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). Mothers meeting these criteria were recruited by persons working in programs that serve the eligible families: Food Stamps, WIC, Head Start, work centers, social service offices, technical schools, and adult education and literacy programs. Cooperative Extension educators assisted in recruitment in many of the fourteen states.

Rural counties were identified by researchers in each state based on the Butler and Beale (1994) coding scheme. Utilizing the definition of metropolitan and non-metropolitan counties as determined by the Office of Management and Budget, Butler and Beale grouped all U.S. counties into a rural-urban continuum codes ranging from "0" (dense population) to "10" (sparse population). Counties in this study were located in counties coded as 6, 7 or 8. Codes 6 and 7 indicate counties that are nonmetropolitan with an urban population of 2,500 to 19,999. Code 8 counties are completely rural with no population center of more than 2,500 people. California, Massachusetts, and New York do not have any counties meeting the Beale Code criteria of 6 through 8. In California, two counties were chosen from the central valley with no population center greater than 10,000 people.

In New York and Massachusetts, counties coded as 4 were chosen, that is having an urban population of 20,000 to 50,000 but that had rural areas.

Data Collection and Analysis

Trained researchers collected Wave 1 data in 2000, Wave 2 data in 2001, and Wave 3 data in 2002, using a qualitative-quantitative protocol in face-to-face interviews with the mother of the household. Interviews were administered in either English or Spanish. Interviews were conducted in the participants' homes or public places, such as at an organization's office or public library. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Quantitative data were obtained from the transcripts and supplemental survey instruments regarding employment and wages.

Sample

Selecting those mothers who were employed in service occupations in any of the three Waves resulted in a sample of 105 mothers. Sixty-one of them worked in service occupations in only one of the three Waves, 20 worked in service occupations in two Wave (but not necessarily consecutively), and 24 worked in service occupations in all three Waves (Table 1).

Using Herzenberg, Alic and Wial's (2000) theory on the structure of the U.S. labor market, researchers sorted the cases by job type based on the organization of production and regulation of task performance: 1) tightly constrained; 2) unrationalized, labor intensive; 3) semiautonomous; and 4) high-skill autonomous (Table 1). While Herzenberg, et al. (2000) focused on the type of job itself, their framework also works as a lens through which to view employees' ability to integrate work and family life. Rural, low-income mothers typically have fewer choices for employment than others workers, due to the limited job market in their community, their education and skills, their family responsibilities, or possibly all three. They may be especially challenged to stay employed in low-paying jobs with inflexible schedules.

Results

Description of sample

One hundred five rural mothers were employed in a service occupation during at least one of three Waves of data collection. In Wave 1, these mothers ranged in age from 20 to 55, with a mean of 31.4 years. Most were non-Hispanic white (74.1%), with 15.7 percent Hispanic/Latina, 6.5 percent African-American/black and 3.7 percent multi-racial and other. The average household size was 4.3 persons, ranging from 1 to 9 persons. The mean number of children was 2.4, with a range of 1 to 7.

Human capital variables included education, job experience and health. All of these factors have been found to influence employability and pay. Four of five mothers employed in a service occupation had completed high school, with 31.2 % of them having attended or graduated from college. Thirty-eight percent of these rural mothers became parents before completing high school.

Work systems and mothers' employment characteristics

Engagement in work can be measured through the average number of hours worked per week and the number of weeks worked per year. The employee does not always have a choice about when and how many hours he/she will work, with hours fluctuating weekly or seasonally. A lack of choice and variability are characteristics of the low-wage sector, especially service occupations (Friedman, 2004; Kornbluh, Isaacs & Boots, 2004; Olsen & Kalleberg, 2004). The rural mothers who worked in service occupations worked an average of 32 hours per week, ranging from 2 to 55 hours per week. A significant difference was observed between work system and full-time (35+ hours per week) versus part-time hours ($\chi^2 = 6.342, p = .096$). A majority of *unrationalized labor-intensive* (51.5%), *semi-autonomous* (90.9%), and *high-skill autonomous* (60.0%) workers were employed full-time, while only 47.6% of mothers in *tightly constrained* jobs were full-time workers.

The mean monthly household income for families in the sample was \$2180, which included not only wages but cash benefits from government welfare programs. The mothers employed in service occupations earned an average of \$1061 per month. Although the differences in monthly earnings were not statistically significant, mothers employed in tightly constrained jobs averaged \$794 per month, those in unrationalized labor-intensive jobs averaged \$859 per month, those in semi-autonomous jobs averaged \$1132 per month, and those in high-skill autonomous jobs averaged \$587 per month.

Table 1

Labor market structure systems, and numbers of participants holding jobs in each

	Tightly Constrained	Unrationalized, Labor-Intensive	Semiautonomous	High-Skill Autonomous
Number of mothers				
<i>Single wave</i>				
Wave 1 only (N= 26)	8	14	3	1
Wave 2 only (N=14)	7	4	2	1
Wave 3 only (N =21)*	3	9	4	2
<i>Multiple waves</i>				
Waves 1 and 3 (N=6)	2	7	3	--
2 consecutive Waves (N=14)	2	19	4	3
Same job (N=11)	1	8	1	1
Different jobs (N=7)	1	11	--	2
3 consecutive Waves (N=24)				
Same job (N=13)	5	5	2	1
2 different jobs (N=9)	6	11	1	--
3 different jobs(N=2)	2	1	--	3
Total jobs in each category	35	70	19	11
Types of service sector jobs in each system	*Food service including cook, sandwich maker, waitress, hostess, dishwasher	*Child care, including baby-sitter *Nursing assistant or nurse's aid *Housekeeper or custodian	*Community living instructor *Hotel desk clerk *Police officer or other security *Pharmacy technician *Diet technician	*Teacher, including substitute teacher, tutor

* Data missing on job type from 3 cases

In addition to wages, having access to job-related benefits varies between the primary and low-wage sectors (Friedman, 2004; Kornbluh, Isaacs & Boots, 2004; Olsen & Kalleberg, 2004). Service occupations also showed differences with respect to benefits provided to employees (Friedman, 2004). Access to sick leave, vacation leave, and retirement plans differed significantly by work system for the mothers in our sample. A majority of those in *tightly constrained* and *unrationalized labor-intensive* jobs did not have access to sick leave, vacation time, or retirement plans, whereas a majority of those working in *semi-autonomous* and *high-skill autonomous* jobs did have these benefits.

Social support played a role in successful employment and economic survival for mothers working in service sector jobs. We asked the mothers how often during the last month they received practical help from family or friends and how many people they felt they could call on for help. About half (50.5%) of the mothers who worked in service occupations said that they had between one and five people they could call on for help, 29.5 percent said they had ten or more people they could call on, and 18.1% said they knew between six and nine people who would help them. Only 1.9 percent stated they had no one to call on for help. Mothers reported getting more help from their family members than from friends, although more than half (52.4%) of the mothers reported they had received assistance from a friend during the previous month. Over half (58.4%) of mothers getting help from relatives sometimes or often got help from friends as well. Although the receipt of help from family and friends may be an indicator of greater need, it also shows that the social network is willing to provide resources when asked. Does assistance from family and/or friends supplement or substitute for formal support programs for these low income rural mothers who work in service sector jobs? Two thirds of the mothers participated in between one and

five government benefit programs regardless of the amount of support received from family and/or friends. This suggests that informal support from kith and kin may be a supplement, rather than a substitute, for families in need.

About their jobs and their lives

Mothers who work in the *tightly constrained* system have low skill jobs that can be fast paced, and with little chance of advancement. All of the jobs in this work system were in the food service industry. Mothers worked nights, weekends, and early morning hours which can be difficult to accommodate without a good support system to help with family demands.

These mothers often needed considerable assistance to cover child care. For example one mother who was a waitress told us she was trying to get her daughter into a licensed child care facility, “*But in the meantime, ...the lady that lived upstairs from me in my other apartment, she doesn’t work. And I bring Honor there Wednesday, Thursday and Friday mornings. Tuesday night, her father has her, and Sundays either my boyfriend’s mother or my mother has her.*” [NH135] Another mother complained about the lack of child care options given her working hours. “*(The community) could upgrade their childcare especially with someone like myself, I go into work at 6:00 a.m. and the day care center up town does not open until 6:00 a.m. So, you see what I’m saying, if they would open at 5:30, that would be great...* [IN211]

One mother quit her job working in a delicatessen when her employer was not understanding of the demands of her family. “*My mother had to go into surgery. And... MacKenzie was sick. She was on breathing treatments. And I called in and I told them that I wouldn’t be there that day and that I did have to go to the hospital, my mother was having surgery, and they had a very bad attitude. And, I just I resigned. ... I left my job because my mother needed me and my kids needed me.*” [NY101]

Low pay is a characteristic of the *tightly constrained* work system. Many mothers found it difficult to support their families on their wages. Those who work as wait staff are highly dependent upon tips to be able to support themselves and their families. It was not unusual for mothers to quit these jobs for ones from which they could earn more money or the earnings were more reliable.

Having two jobs is a way that some mothers make ends meet. A second job may only be profitable if one has assistance with child care. One mother who worked two jobs in food service got child care help from a relative, which was the only way she could manage the two jobs. “*...Now my brother-in-law is here and he said that he would be able to watch the kids on the weekends. Before it would not benefit me to go and have to get a babysitter. It is enough with the money I earn at the [restaurant], but it really helps to get that extra money.*” [OR119]

Those who are employed in the *unrationalized, labor-intensive* systems face similar problems as those in the *tightly constrained* systems. They too have jobs that have minimal training requirements, and they too often face non-standard work hours, and have little opportunity for advancement.

Few of these jobs have health insurance as an employee benefit. When a person is ill, the cost of the illness can be high, not only in terms of the cost of the medical care, but in terms of lost wages. One mother who had been working as a certified nursing assistant needed to have surgery. “*...They don’t have no type of disability program, ‘cause I asked them. I said ‘well, being I am going out for surgery, do you have a disability program?’ Like I know there is some type of disability where you can draw disability to help supplement your income while you’re out. But they’re like, ‘no, we don’t have that.’ So my next step was to go to the unemployment office, but I think unemployment said I wouldn’t be ready and available (to work) so that’s what would make me unqualified for unemployment.*” [MD104]

High level of supervision and little flexibility in hours is a characteristic of both the *unrationalized, labor-intensive, and tightly constrained* work systems. A supervisor who understands the demands employees have on them outside of work will help the employee thrive – and possibly stay with that employer. When the supervisor is inflexible and/or demanding, balancing work with family responsibilities can be tricky. Transportation issues are endemic for rural-low income families as some do not have vehicles or do not have a driver’s licenses or they have vehicles that are past their prime and in constant need of repair. A mother who worked with disabled individuals had difficulty with her supervisor when she was having transportation issues. “*She (supervisor) told me I had to ...find another way to work or I had to take the time off. I walked or I rode my bike. But there was a couple days that I did have to miss due to the weather, but, that was my own fault until we got it straightened out.*” [NY213] An understanding supervisor who trusts and respects the problems facing the rural mother can be an asset when an employee is faced with transportation issues. “*They were all understanding, ‘cause they all know that I was honest enough that they didn’t have to worry. They knew that if the car broke down, I was tellin’ the truth.*” [MD209]

Semiautonomous system jobs require more skills and more training than do jobs in the previous two systems. Work is less supervised and is more complex. The pay is likely higher except for those jobs that require

the least amount of training. One mother who had been working as a diet technician was concerned that she had not gotten a raise in quite some time [OH121].

Semiautonomous work system jobs allow the worker some measure of flexibility. Their hours may be more standard, but not necessarily so. They do earn higher wages, and have some possibility for advancement. These jobs can also be quite demanding, with different kinds of constraints than the other two work systems. For example, workers may need to get additional training or continuing education. When asked how she was able to combine work and family life, one mother who worked in a school resource center explained how difficult it could be. *"It's been very hard....Sometimes I feel like a pressure at work, because I have to stay late for meetings, or go to trainings that I get off late, and I feel bad, because I know my kids are at home, and I'm not here to pick them up after school, or feed them when they get home...And I feel pressure that I should be home with my kids. You just got to attend the meetings, and that's part of your job description. That's all."* [CA215]

High-skill autonomous work systems offer the worker more flexibility, the potential for advancement and higher wages. Few of the rural mothers had jobs that were part of this system, and all were in the field of education. The realities of the rural job market meant that even those in the educational field were working for low wages or were working part-time. For example, one single mother of seven was an elementary school teacher. She liked that her schedule matched her children's schedule, but she was struggling. *"But I like teaching because I got my summers off, I get the same vacations as the kids....I like teaching, but obviously, you know, it doesn't pay the most."* [MN 125]

The choice to work part-time can be a conscious one, even knowing the drawbacks. For some, the flexibility of part-time work can overcome the drawbacks. A single mother who has multiple sclerosis told us why she preferred to do substitute teaching. *"I think I'll substitute and do it more often. ... Substituting is about \$40 to \$50 day, and I can choose how many days a week I want to do that. ... Because substitute teaching is from 7:30 to 2:30 in the afternoon, I still have all the rest of the afternoon, the evening, to be able to clean my house, take care of my son, because he's in school during this time. It's not like he's missing out on his mother because he's in school at that time."* [MA105] Less than full-time work may also be a stepping stone to a full-time position in an autonomous work system occupation. A mother who had recently graduated from the state university got a job in the local school system as a part-time teacher for children with learning disabilities. *"During the regular school year I work thirty-five hours a week, and during the summer I work twenty-five hours a week. And in terms of the money, in the school year I can get a salary. I got a raise so it's \$14,000 next year."* When asked about what she sees for her self in the future she responded: *"I like (my job). I see it as my future. I see my future in this job, and I see myself building myself up, and getting certified, and keeping this as a career. It's much better. I don't make a lot of money, but I like my kids. ... I like my job."* [MA102]

Part-time jobs, no matter who the employer is, tend not to have benefits such as health insurance. One mother who worked as a substitute teacher, then as a teacher's aide, told us: *"At my other job there were no health benefits. At this present time, I have no health insurance. I was sick the other night and I can't go. I can't take care of myself in terms of being unhealthy. My daughter is four years old; she hasn't seen a dentist because I have to go through (Medicaid)."* [MA102]

Most of these women get help from family and friends no matter what kinds of jobs they have. We were told by many women that their families and friends help with child care when needed, especially with sick children. Some mothers use neighbors for after school care. Mothers with older children who do not need a babysitter are able to leave their children alone between the end of the school day and the time they get home from work. If transportation becomes an issue, relatives and friends will either lend a car or give rides. Friends and relatives also help with car repairs, either doing them or helping to finance the repairs.

Changing jobs

As is evident from the data presented in Table 1, job changes were common among these rural mothers who worked in the service sector. They changed jobs because they wanted better wages, better hours, or different working conditions. Some job changes were compulsory when the woman was fired. Finding a new job may not be particularly easy for mothers living in rural areas. For example, one mother was working as a certified nursing assistant at a nursing home about 50 miles away from where she lived. She was trying to find another job closer to her home. *"I don't really want to travel ... more than a half an hour because I did that for two and a half years, and that was just hard. It was really hard being gone for ten hours a day and only getting paid for eight,"* The mileage she was putting on her car took its toll and it began to break down on a regular basis, requiring her to make lots of repairs. In the end, she lost her job because her car made her an unreliable employee. *"I was looking for work before I lost the job, because I was trying to get closer to home so I wouldn't be without a job."* When asked how

her job search was going, she responded: *“It’s hard. It really is hard. A lot of places have a lot of second and third shifts. And it’s kind of hard to do when you have a five year old. ... I’m looking for a first shift...”* [NH 210]

While most of the mothers who changed jobs, appeared to stay with a particular work system, a few moved to different types of positions – and a different work system – for very particular reasons. Moving into a *semiautonomous* work system job could mean more job stability than an *unrationalized, labor-intensive* system job. When hours fluctuate, pay will also fluctuate. Depending upon the mother’s support systems, fluctuating income could likely be a problem. One mother who had been delivering newspapers (an *unrationalized, labor-intensive* job) began working as a security officer (*semiautonomous* job). She had been living with her aunt and uncle, who helped take care of her son. *“The newspaper route was good money, but ...couldn’t depend on it....It wasn’t regular, and it changed. Sometimes the check would be big and sometimes almost nothing....I’ve gotta know what I’ll make, and when. And the hours, they worked if we lived with my aunt and uncle, but I went to work about 3:00 a.m. and that wouldn’t be possible when it’s just my son and me. I would have to wake him up and take him with me.”* When her aunt and uncle wanted her to move out, she needed to find a job with more reasonable hours and more stable income. *“...I started with the security company in September...I’m assigned to the courthouse. It’s regular hours...and regular pay. It’s not really more money, but I know when I’ll get paid and how much. It’s regular....I need to know how much money I’ll make, so I can pay the bills.”* [CA122]

As with the mother above, a decision to change jobs is often done for the sake of their children. One mother had been working as a dietary manager but found it difficult to manage the demands of the job and her family life. She said of her job: *“He (the manager) wanted me to give 110% of my time to my job, and I’m not saying you shouldn’t do a good job, and you know, do the best you can, but I also think family’s important. And he wanted me to work nights and weekends and with all of my kids it’s just (difficult).”* She decided to become a licensed child care provider. *“I’m home more for the kids. I don’t have to worry about, am I gonna get home before school’s out, are they gonna let school out and I’m at work, or... I don’t have any of those worries, because I’m here, so if the school (is) out I’m (here).”* [NE 106]

Discussion and Conclusions

These mothers who worked in service occupations and lived in rural areas of the United States faced a variety of constraints, but also had support from family and friends. Using Herzenberg, et al.’s (2000) framework of work systems has allowed us to view not only the work system of the particular service occupation and how the mothers handled the job requirements and constraints, but also how they blended work and family life.

The majority of these mothers worked in the two most restrictive work systems. The challenges they faced in the workplace were common for these restrictive work systems, i.e., low wages, non-standard hours, few if any employee benefits. Employers who are willing to accommodate mothers who are juggling work and family obligations find they have loyal employees. Many of these women were able to accommodate these challenges because they had a support system of family and friends who would help when help was needed. Help with child care and transportation appears to be the most common.

These rural women are correctly called the working poor. The reality of the job markets in rural areas of the United States constrains the choices of mothers who are trying to support their families. Lack of educational or training opportunities and the necessity of supporting their families now keep many of these women from fulfilling their dreams to be more successful and earn more money. The support systems they have in their localities keep these women from moving away to seek better jobs.

Service occupations related to food service, child care, and health care are very common in rural United States. The wages earned in these occupations, and the working conditions, often make it difficult for mothers in these jobs to support their families. They do it, however, because they often have few choices open to them. But most do not manage without the support of their families and their friends.

Low income rural mothers in service jobs find their variable, and sometimes unpredictable, work schedules clash with their family responsibilities. Employers, social service providers, and community planners in rural communities should begin to recognize the systemic barriers to sustained employability of low-income mothers and find ways to ameliorate the difficulties of balancing work and family responsibilities. Child care and transportation are two types of support that the community could play a part in supporting employment. Greater sensitivity on the part of managers for the hardships that variable schedules and fluctuating wages can pose for working mothers might make a difference in their employment practices. Recognition of the role that extended family members play in supporting working mothers could help community agencies better support families. Transition to work can be challenging, and training in interpersonal skills and other job “soft skills” can help make new workers better

workers. Partnerships between employers and social service and educational agencies could support of such training.

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