

# BEARING THE COST

## HOW OVERREPRESENTATION IN UNDERVALUED JOBS DISADVANTAGED WOMEN DURING THE PANDEMIC

### REPORT FACT SHEET

Women are a critical part of the U.S. labor force and contribute significantly both to their families' economic security and the U.S. economy. Yet women, especially women of color, have experienced longstanding disparities in the labor force that exacerbated the problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Women have persistently lower wages and fewer workplace benefits than men, disparities that are even more significant for Black, Hispanic, and some subsets of Asian American and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander women. Women-dominated jobs, including care work, have been devalued. Decades of underinvestment in social safety net policies like childcare and paid leave and declining unionization rates left women with few supports to manage work and their unpaid family caregiving responsibilities amid the pandemic.

### The COVID-19 Pandemic's Disproportionate Impact on Women

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, these preexisting vulnerabilities worsened its impact on women's employment. For the first time since data began being collected in 1948, women lost more jobs than men during the depths of the COVID-19-related economic crisis. Women had varied experiences during the pandemic depending on their ability to telework, whether they lost their job, or were essential workers — many of whom experienced higher health and safety risks.

- Women lost 11.9 million jobs compared to 10.1 million jobs lost by men from February to April 2020.<sup>1</sup>
- 4.4 million women left the labor force between February and April 2020, compared to 3.9 million men.<sup>2</sup> In April 2020, women's labor force participation rate was at a 35-year low.<sup>3</sup>
- Mothers' work hours declined by an estimated 3.5 hours per week between February and April 2020, greater than the 2.5 hours per week decline for fathers' work hours.<sup>4</sup>

Women of color experienced the most significant employment impacts across nearly all groups during the pandemic. For Black and Hispanic women, these impacts were exacerbated by historic discrimination and occupational segregation, making them more vulnerable to job losses, less availability of remote work, and access to workplace benefits.

- Black and Hispanic women had higher and more persistently elevated unemployment rates in 2020 compared to white women.<sup>5</sup> This is a continuation of patterns that existed before the pandemic, including that workers of color, especially Black workers, are the first to experience unemployment during a recession and the last to transition back into employment.<sup>6</sup> The preexisting vulnerabilities of Black and Hispanic working women are due to longstanding labor market policies and practices, rooted in a history of racism and xenophobia, that systematically devalue and disadvantage women of color.
- American Indian and Alaska Native workers had an unemployment rate (not seasonally adjusted) of 28.6% in April 2020, up from 6.1% a year prior.<sup>7</sup>
- Asian women's unemployment rate (not seasonally adjusted) peaked at 16.6% in May 2020, but subgroups of Asian women experienced different vulnerabilities pre-pandemic, leading to varying experiences during the pandemic.<sup>8</sup>



Older women and women with disabilities also experienced greater negative outcomes than other workers.

- 41% of midcareer and older women ages 40 to 65 reported losing their jobs or income during the pandemic and many retired early.<sup>9</sup>
- Women with disabilities had a higher unemployment rate than men with disabilities in 2020 — an annual average of 13.2% compared to 12.0%.<sup>10</sup>

## Why the COVID-19 Pandemic More Severely Impacted Working Women

During the pandemic, two primary factors contributed to women experiencing more negative employment impacts.

1. Women — who have always performed the majority of unpaid family caregiving — coped with greater challenges managing work and care, with children home from school and disabled and older family members losing access to critical care services, which often disrupted their employment and work hours.
  - Mothers, in particular, were significantly impacted by these changes and the declines were even more severe for unpartnered (unmarried or not cohabitating) mothers. The drop in employment between September 2019 and September 2020 was significantly worse for Black (10.5 percentage points) and Hispanic unpartnered mothers (10.7 percentage points) compared to white unpartnered mothers (5.8 percentage points).<sup>11</sup>
  - 61% of caregivers for older adults or children with special needs were women in 2019. Like mothers of younger children, they too were at greater risk of negative work impacts during the pandemic due to the need to juggle caregiving with paid employment.<sup>12</sup>
2. Women were overrepresented in industries that experienced the pandemic's worst job losses. This occupational and industry segregation — the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of women in certain jobs and sectors — resulted in women and women of color experiencing a disproportionate number of job losses in many sectors that exceeded their share of the workforce.<sup>13</sup> For example:
  - Women were 51.2% of workers in leisure and hospitality in 2019, but they represented 54.2% of jobs lost in that sector between 2019 and 2020.<sup>14</sup>
  - Women were 74.8% of workers in education and health services in 2019, but 78.8% of jobs lost in that sector.<sup>15</sup>

Understanding and addressing occupational segregation is a critical step to recover from the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on women, particularly women of color.

## The Causes of Occupational Segregation

There are many factors that contribute to occupational segregation that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Social norms and stereotypes** can pressure workers into jobs stereotypical to their gender or race/ethnicity. For example, the belief that women are better at “caring” occupations, or that men are better at dangerous or more physically demanding work.<sup>16</sup>
- **Educational attainment, sorting, and training gaps** can create barriers for women entering certain occupations, especially as they are less likely to study math or science or participate in vocational training programs and registered apprenticeships.<sup>17</sup>
- **Uneven family caregiving responsibilities** that are disproportionately performed by women limit the time they can spend on paid work and the types of jobs they can accept.<sup>18</sup>

- **Networks and mentors**, especially of the same gender or race/ethnicity, can help women get referrals for job openings, hiring, or promotions, but these are limited in non-traditional jobs for women.<sup>19</sup>
- **Wealth gaps** and limited access to capital create barriers for women to start their own business.<sup>20</sup>
- **Workplace discrimination** can deter women, especially women of color, from applying for a job, deter a hiring manager from selecting women, and impact women's evaluation and promotion.<sup>21</sup>
- **Workplace culture and harassment** can include hostile work environments for women and a workplace with policies that are unfriendly to workers with family caregiving responsibilities.<sup>22</sup>

## The Consequences of Occupational Segregation

Occupational segregation creates many inequities in the labor market, including lower wages — especially for women and workers of color — wider gender and racial wage gaps, and reduced economic growth.

- Occupational segregation leads to the devaluation of jobs dominated by women, especially women of color.<sup>23</sup> This is especially true in care work, such as child care, domestic workers, and home health aides, which pay below average wages.<sup>24</sup> And, as more women enter an occupation, the wages drop.<sup>25</sup> Women-dominated jobs are also less likely to include benefits like health care and retirement.<sup>26</sup>
- Occupational segregation contributes to gender and racial wage gaps. **Black women lost \$39.3 billion, and Hispanic women lost \$46.7 billion, in wages compared to white men due to differences in industry and occupation in 2019.**<sup>27</sup>
- Occupational segregation inhibits innovation, makes the labor force less adaptable to changes, reduces families' earnings and their spending back in the economy, and lowers economic growth.<sup>28</sup>

## The Biden-Harris Administration's Commitment to Addressing Occupational Segregation

Addressing occupational segregation is a critical goal of the Biden-Harris Administration to ensure women do not return to the pre-pandemic status quo, but instead achieve an equitable recovery. The following initiatives and policy proposals will help improve job quality in women-dominated jobs, support workers to enter non-traditional occupations, and ensure all jobs, especially new jobs in the growing infrastructure and climate sectors, include equity from the start.

- **Improve Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Equity** by elevating women and women of color in leadership positions across the administration and promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in hiring across the federal workforce.
- **Increase Access and Equity in Education and Training Programs** through increasing affordability of higher education and expanding access and funding for women to enter Registered Apprenticeships.
- **Support Workers with Caregiving Through Work-Family Policies and Workplace Flexibility**, including making high-quality childcare affordable and accessible; increasing funding for home- and community-based care; supporting paid family and medical leave, paid sick leave, workplace flexibility, overtime protections, and predictable scheduling.
- **Increase Women's Access to Capital** by increasing resources and support for women entrepreneurs.
- **Address Discrimination by Employers** by investigating and prosecuting complaints, enforcing non-discrimination laws with federal contractors and subcontractors, and educating workers of their rights.
- **Address Workplace Harassment** by preventing harassment within the federal workforce and armed services and ending the use of forced arbitration agreements that contribute to hiding employer abuse.
- **Improve Job Quality**, especially in women-dominated jobs, through the Good Jobs Initiative, raising the federal minimum wage, expanding access to workplace benefits, ensuring safe and healthy working conditions, strengthening workers' collective bargaining and unions, and combating misclassification.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Employer Statistics survey, Series IDs: CES0000000001, CES0000000010, 2020, (Washington DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, March 3, 2022).
- <sup>2</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Series IDs: LNS11000002; LNS11000001, 2020, Raw data (Washington DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, March 3, 2022).
- <sup>3</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey. Series ID: LNS11300002, 1985-2020. Raw Data. (Washington DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, March 5, 2022).
- <sup>4</sup> Landivar, Liana Christin, Leah Ruppner, William J. Scarborough, and Caitlyn Collins. “Early signs indicate that COVID-19 is exacerbating gender inequality in the labor force.” *Socius* 6 (2020): 2378023120947997. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2378023120947997>; Collins, Caitlyn, Liana Christin Landivar, Leah Ruppner, and William J. Scarborough. “COVID-19 and the gender gap in work hours.” *Gender, Work & Organization* 28 (2021): 101-112.
- <sup>5</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Series IDs: LNS14000029, LNS14000032, LNS14000035, 2020, Raw data (Washington DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, March 3, 2022).
- <sup>6</sup> Ivii Cohen, Patricia. “Black women were half as likely to be hired for state or local jobs than white men, a report says.” *The New York Times*. March 18, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/18/business/black-women-hiring-discrimination.html>; Jones, Aquil, and Joseph Tracy. “Spotlight: Black Workers at Risk for ‘Last Hired, First Fired’.” *Southwest Economy Second Quarter* (2020). <https://www.dallasfed.org/research/swe/2020/swe2002/swe2002e.aspx>.
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Series ID: LNU04035243, 2019-2020, Raw data (Washington DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, March 3, 2022).
- <sup>8</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Series IDs: LNU01332342, 2020, Raw data (Washington DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, March 3, 2022).
- <sup>9</sup> “Women, Work, and the Road to Resilience: Working Women at Midlife and Beyond.” AARP (2021). [https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys\\_statistics/econ/2021/midcareer-older-women-workers-report.doi.10.26419-2Fres.00488.001.pdf](https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys_statistics/econ/2021/midcareer-older-women-workers-report.doi.10.26419-2Fres.00488.001.pdf).
- <sup>10</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Economic News Release, Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics News Release, (Washington DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, February 24, 2021). [https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/disabl\\_02242021.htm](https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/disabl_02242021.htm).
- <sup>11</sup> Barroso, Amanda and Rakesh Kochhar. “In the pandemic, the share of unpartnered moms at work fell more sharply than among other parents.” Pew Research Center (2020). <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/24/in-the-pandemic-the-share-of-unpartnered-moms-at-work-fell-more-sharply-than-among-other-parents/>.
- <sup>12</sup> “Caregiving in the U.S. 2020.” National Alliance for Caregiving and AARP (2020). <https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/ppi/2020/05/full-report-caregiving-in-the-united-states.doi.10.26419-2Fppi.00103.001.pdf>.
- <sup>13</sup> “Bearing the Cost: How Overrepresentation in Undervalued Roles Hurt Women During the Pandemic.” Table 1. U.S. Department of Labor (2022). URL.
- <sup>14</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Table 39, Median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers by detailed occupation and sex, 2021, Raw Data (Washington DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, January 20, 2022), <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat39.htm>.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Anker, Richard. *Gender and Jobs: Sex Segregation of Occupations in the World*. International Labour Organization, 1998; Palffy, Patricia, Patrick Lehnert, and Uschi Backes-Gellner. *Social Norms and Gender-Typical Occupational Choices*. Universität Zürich, IBW-Institut für Betriebswirtschaftslehre, 2021. [http://repec.business.uzh.ch/RePEc/iso/leadinghouse/0183\\_lhwpaper.pdf](http://repec.business.uzh.ch/RePEc/iso/leadinghouse/0183_lhwpaper.pdf).
- <sup>17</sup> Das, Smita, and Aphichoke Kotikula. “Gender-based Employment Segregation: Understanding Causes and Policy Interventions.” *Jobs Working Paper*. Washington, DC: World Bank (2019). <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/c483621554129720460/pdf/Gender-Based-Employment-Segregation-Understanding-Causes-and-Policy-Interventions.pdf>.
- <sup>18</sup> Evans, John M. “Work/Family Reconciliation, Gender Wage Equity and Occupational Segregation: The Role of Firms and Public Policy.” *Canadian Public Policy/Analyse de Politiques* (2002): S187-S216. [https://econpapers.repec.org/article/cppissued/v\\_3a28\\_3ay\\_3a2002\\_3ai\\_3as1\\_3ap\\_3a187-216.htm](https://econpapers.repec.org/article/cppissued/v_3a28_3ay_3a2002_3ai_3as1_3ap_3a187-216.htm).
- <sup>19</sup> Das and Kotikula. “Gender-based Employment Segregation: Understanding Causes and Policy Interventions” (2019).
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Foster, Murray-Close, Landivar, DeWolf. “An evaluation of the gender wage gap using linked survey and administrative data.”; U.S. Census Bureau, Center for Economic Studies, 2020. <https://www2.census.gov/ces/wp/2020/CES-WP-20-34.pdf>; Levanon, Asaf, Paula England, and Paul Allison. “Occupational feminization and pay: Assessing causal dynamics using 1950–2000 US census data.” *Social forces* 88, no. 2 (2009): 865–891. <https://statisticalhorizons.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/88.2.levanon.pdf>.
- <sup>24</sup> Gould, Elise, Marokey Sawo, and Asha Banerjee. “Care workers are deeply undervalued and underpaid: Estimating fair and equitable wages in the care sectors.” *Working Economics Blog*, Economic Policy Institute. July 16, 2021. <https://www.epi.org/blog/care-workers-are-deeply-undervalued-and-underpaid-estimating-fair-and-equitable-wages-in-the-care-sectors/>; Wolfe, Julia, Jori Kandra, Lora Engdahl, and H. Shierholz. “Domestic workers chartbook.” *Economic Policy Institute* (2020). <https://www.epi.org/publication/domestic-workers-chartbook-a-comprehensive-look-at-the-demographics-wages-benefits-and-poverty-rates-of-the-professionals-who-care-for-our-family-members-and-clean-our-homes/>.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, Christine L. “The glass escalator: Hidden advantages for men in the “female” professions. “Social problems 39, no. 3 (1992): 253-267. URL; Levanon, Asaf, Paula England, and Paul Allison. “Occupational feminization and pay: assessing causal dynamics using 1950–2000 US census data. “Social Forces 88, no. 2 (2009): 865891.

<sup>26</sup> Hodges, Leslie. “Do female occupations pay less but offer more benefits?” Gender & Society 34, no. 3 (2020): 381-412. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0891243220913527>.

<sup>27</sup> “Bearing the Cost: How Overrepresentation in Undervalued Roles Hurt Women During the Pandemic.” U.S. Department of Labor (2022). URL.

<sup>28</sup> “Fact sheet: Occupational segregation in the United States.” Washington: Washington Center for Equitable growth (2017). <https://equitablegrowth.org/fact-sheet-occupational-segregation-in-the-united-states/>.

