

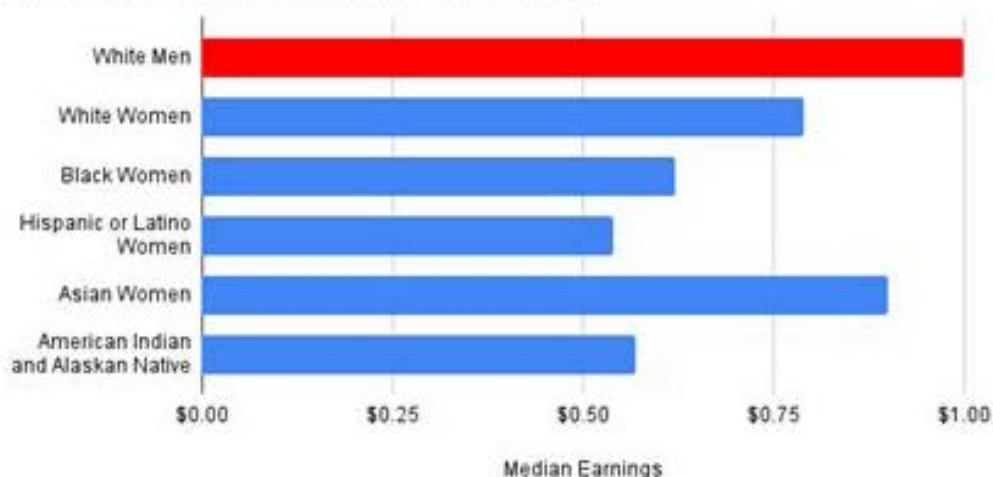
The She-Cession: For Now, or Forever?

DAPHNE KASS

“Feminism has never been about getting a job for one woman. It’s about making life more fair for women everywhere. It’s not about a piece of the existing pie; there are too many of us for that. It’s about baking a new pie.” -- Gloria Steinem¹

In November 2020 the American people elected the first female vice president. A month later the American Economy lost 140,000 jobs. According to CNN, all of them were held by women.²

Figure 1: Comparing 2018 median earnings of full time, year-round workers by race/ethnicity and sex

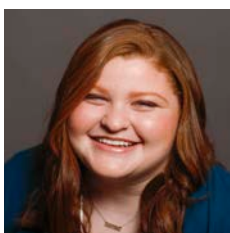


Credit: Center for American Progress

This moment of incredible progress for women was tarnished by enormous losses in the female labor force due to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We have been left to wonder why the pandemic exacerbated gender inequality in the workforce and what policies are necessary

¹ Gloria Steinem, “Wrong Woman, Wrong Message,” Los Angeles Times, September 4, 2008, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-sep-04-oe-steinem4-story.html>.

² Annalyn Kurtz, “The US economy lost 140,000 jobs in December. All of them were held by women,” CNN, January 8, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/08/economy/women-job-losses-pandemic/index.html>.



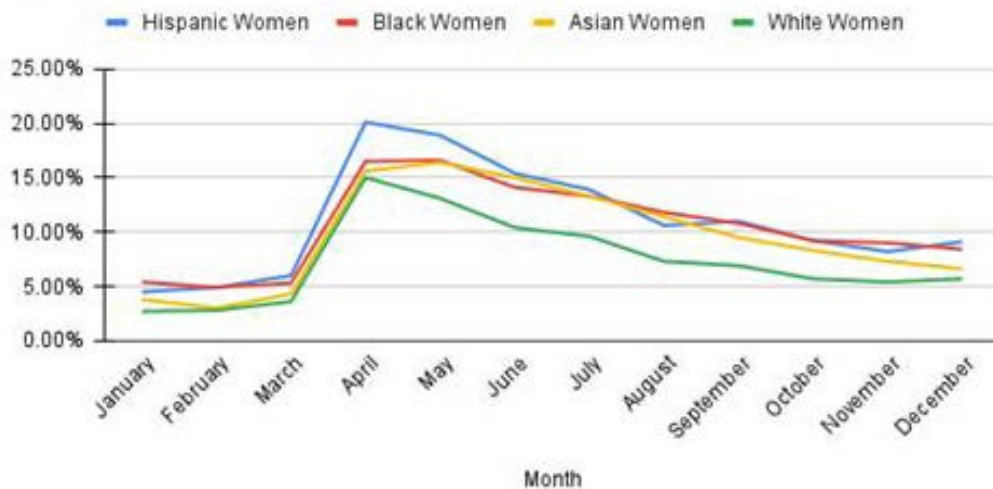
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to combat this injustice. While there were numerous factors that led to the she-cession --the term coined by Dr. C. Nicole Mason referring to the recession in which more women have been affected³ -- it is evident the US lacks the social infrastructure to support and work towards gender equity.

The new administration, therefore, needs to take advantage of this moment in time and implement policies that will support American women and their families and empower them to pursue any path they desire in life. The United States should invest in a social infrastructure that addresses persistent inequalities because gender equality will benefit the US economy and society.

Gender equity policies in the United States need to be updated because there has been minimal progress in recent years. While the election of Vice President Harris is momentous, it is not indicative of the general movement towards gender equity. Women, particularly women of color, still earn significantly less money. The left-of-center Center for American Progress states that according to “most recent Census Bureau data from 2018, women of all races earned, on average, just 82 cents for every \$1 earned by men of all races.”

Figure 2: 2020 unemployment rate, by race or ethnicity, for women ages 20 and over



Credit: Center for American Progress

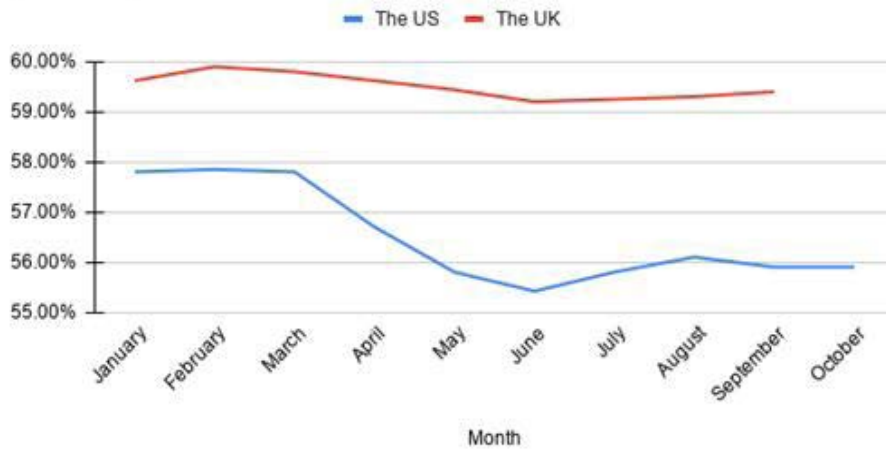
So despite the fact that a Black and South Asian woman was elected to the second highest office in the US, there is still a significant wage gap. The Center for American Progress adds that the primary causes of the wage gap are differences in industries or jobs worked, differences in years of experience, differences in hours worked, and discrimination.⁴ All of these factors have led to the enduring wage differences for men and women.

Moreover, there has been very little progress in recent years. According to The Hamilton Project of the liberal Brookings Institution,

3 Alisha Haridasani Gupta, “Why Some Women Call This Recession a ‘Shecession,’” *New York Times*, May 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/09/us/unemployment-coronavirus-women.html>.

4 Robin Bleiweis, “Quick Facts about the Gender Wage Gap,” March 24, 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2020/03/24/482141/quick-facts-gender-wage-gap/>.

Figure 3: Female Labor Force Participation Rate in 2020
(Percent)



Credit: Peterson Institute for International Economics

between 1962 and 2000, women’s labor force participation—defined as the percentage of women ages 16 and older either working or actively looking for work—increased dramatically, from 37 percent to 61 percent...However, beginning in 2000, the positive trends slowed and even reversed: women’s participation fell from 60.7 percent in 2000 to 57.2 percent in 2016.⁵

While policies influenced by the women’s rights movement resulted in significant progress, it is clear that to get further, current policies are insufficient. Failure to support women in the labor force were then exacerbated by the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Policies to help women in the work force need to be improved because their failures led to the she-cession. While the response to the pandemic was devastating for the entire American economy, it was particularly bad for women. According to the Center for American Progress, “Over the course of the first 10 months of the pandemic, women—particularly women of color—have lost more jobs than men... Overall, women have lost a net of 5.4 million jobs during the recession—nearly 1 million more job losses than men.”⁶ Women and particularly women of color experienced the brunt the economic loss during 2020. The primary reason is that the industries hit hardest by the pandemic are ones dominated by women. “As Americans stopped traveling and staying at hotels,” the Center for American Progress explains, “attending live entertainment, and eating out at bars and restaurants, employees in the leisure and hospitality industry—53 percent of whom were women—saw the greatest job losses, accounting for nearly 2 in 5 jobs lost in the recession.”⁷ As female dominated industries struggled, the US economy experienced a tragic loss of female involvement in the labor force. Moreover, women of color

5 Diana Boesch, “When Women Lose All the Jobs: Essential Actions for a Gender-Equitable Recovery,” February 1, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/es_10192017_decline_womens_labor_force_participation_blackshanzbach.pdf.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

lost significantly more jobs.

However, this loss was not inevitable. “Between January-March and April-June, 2020, the average female labor force participation rate, the percent of women either employed or actively looking for work, in the United States fell dramatically from 57.7 percent to 55.4 percent. By contrast, over the same time period, female participation in the UK labor force fell only slightly, from 59.8 percent to 59.2 percent,” Reports the Peterson Institute for International Economics.⁸

In summary, the US lost significantly more female jobs than the UK despite the similarities as nations. So rather than blaming the response to the pandemic, it is important to look at the underlying policies that both caused the she-cession and led to the stagnation of progress in female labor force participation since 2000. Once the problem is understood, progress can be made.

Policy Solutions to Improve Gender Equity in the Work Force

“The first problem for all of us, men and women, is not to learn, but to unlearn,” Gloria Steinem has said.⁹ The United States needs to improve gender inequities in the workforce because helping women accomplish their goals will benefit the US economy and society. The Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution states that “estimates suggest that the economy is \$2.0 trillion, or 13.5 percent, larger than it would have been had women’s participation and hours worked remained at their 1970 levels.”¹⁰ Women are an essential part of the American economy and a source of potential growth for the country as a whole. “In order to facilitate economic growth in the United States, policies should be directed toward enabling and encouraging women to participate in the labor force,” Declares the Hamilton Project.¹¹

Numerous sources have outlined comprehensive plans for policy changes to accomplish this goal. The Center for American Progress proposes some short-term solutions. As well, the authors break down their proposal into three categories: Creating a robust care infrastructure, ensuring fair and equal wages and quality benefits, and creating stronger workplace protections.¹²

A robust care infrastructure is needed because the lack of comprehensive childcare limits female access to the workforce. The lack of comprehensive childcare during the pandemic further exposed this gaping flaw in the American social system. The US is significantly behind other comparable nations in terms of childcare. It is time that this country makes child-care affordable and effective. This includes providing federal assistance to help families pay for care as well as funding to ensure care-workers have fair pay, workplace benefits, and protections.¹³ Additionally, all workers need access to permanent, comprehensive paid family leave, medical leave, and earned paid sick leave¹⁴ so that everyone can have the time off that they need, and women are not penalized for being perceived as needing more paid leave. While effective policies for equal wages, equal benefits, and workplace protections are an ongoing policy process, these

8 Simeon Djankov and Eva Zhang, “Female labor force participation has been more resilient during the pandemic in the UK than in the US,” December 15, 2020, <https://www.piiie.com/research/piie-charts/female-labor-force-participation-has-been-more-resilient-during-pandemic-uk-us>.

9 Gloria Steinem, “A New Egalitarian Life Style,” August 26, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/08/26/archives/a-new-egalitarian-life-style.html>

10 Sandra E. Black, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Audrey Breitwieser, “The Recent Decline in Women’s Labor Force Participation,” October 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/es_10192017_decline_womens_labor_force_participation_blackshanzbach.pdf.

11 Ibid.

12 Diana Boesch, “When Women Lose All the Jobs: Essential Actions for a Gender-Equitable Recovery,” February 1, 2021, accessed April 25, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/es_10192017_decline_womens_labor_force_participation_blackshanzbach.pdf.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

changes are achievable.

Second, policymakers need to push for fair and equal wages, quality benefits, and to create strong workplace protections because the current policies are insufficient in order to help women. These goals will require a more extensive and lengthy process of policy reform.

“We’ll never solve the feminization of power until we solve the masculinity of wealth.” -- Gloria Steinem¹⁵

Biden’s Plan for 2021 and beyond.

President Biden’s current policies for gender equity are insufficient. His 2020 platform states:

As President, Biden will pursue an aggressive and comprehensive plan to further women’s economic and physical security and ensure that women can fully exercise their civil rights.¹⁶

The platform then expands into various categories, including improving economic security, expanding access to health care and tackling health inequities, helping women navigate work and families, ending violence against women, and protecting and empowering women around the world. Meanwhile, since entering office he has yet to live up to these goals.

As well, Biden’s current policy strategy for women is insufficient because it focuses primarily on paid leave. Biden has taken two significant steps towards helping women, however. The first was by forming a White House Gender Policy Council. “According to the Biden transition team, ‘the council will help guide and “coordinate government policy that impacts women and girls’ across a variety of issues, including racial justice and economic security, and work in cooperation with other White House policy councils,” the Hill reported.¹⁷ While this seems like a good measure, thus far minimal action has come from the council.

The second step Biden proposed towards helping women is his “American Families Plan.” This proposal has a lot of positive improvements like paid leave, affordable childcare, and cheaper education.¹⁸ However, to date, these changes remain in the planning stage.

During Biden’s campaign, he pledged to build America back better. The she-cession set back women in the workplace, but the country was already failing to give women equal opportunities. The she-cession will dictate the path of the next generation of women. Either policymakers will step up to fight for gender equity, or the nation’s women, families, and economy will suffer. Now is the time to build back better, the young people of this country are watching.

15 Gloria Steinem, “A New Egalitarian Life Style,” August 26, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/08/26/archives/a-new-egalitarian-life-style.html>

16 “The Biden Agenda for Women,” Battle for the Soul of the Nation, Biden Harris Democrats, <https://joebiden.com/womens-agenda/>.

17 Aris Folley, “Biden, Harris announce formation of White House Gender Policy Council,” January 19, 2021, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/534893-biden-and-harris-announce-formation-of-white-house-gender-policy>.

18 “Fact Sheet: The American Families Plan,” Statements and Releases, The White House, April 28, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/28/fact-sheet-the-american-families-plan/>