

WORKING & THE ECONOMY

Experts Point to Lack of Child Care to Explain COVID-Era Loss of Women in Maryland Workforce

By Elizabeth Shwe

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Photo by Kohei Hara/Getty Images.

While Maryland saw a net gain of 13,000 men entering the labor force from January 2020 to June 2021, the number of working women fell by 57,000 in the same time frame, according to the Maryland Department of Labor.

These numbers show that more men returned to work or began seeking work by June 2021, while many women had not, Jim Rzepkowski, the assistant secretary for the Division of Workforce Development and Adult Learning at the Maryland Department of Labor, told state lawmakers at the Joint Committee on Children, Youth and Families on Wednesday.

Experts point to the disparate burden on women to take up the child care role as children attended school from home and child care centers closed their doors during the pandemic. More women than men left work to take care of their children, often without paid sick leave, said Usha Ranji, the associate director for women's health policy at the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Mothers who are Black or Hispanic are more likely to be the ones staying home if their children cannot go to school. Among mothers who are Hispanic, nearly two thirds lose pay when they miss work due to a child's illness, she continued.

"It's just really clear that women play an outsized role when it comes to health care for their children," Ranji said.

The decline of women in the labor force is also occurring in the background of an already stark gender gap. To equal the lifetime earnings of a 60-year-old white man, a white woman would have to work for 71 years, a Black woman for 79 years and a Hispanic woman for 108 years, according to an analysis by the Maryland Commission for Women.

During the course of the pandemic, more than half of low-income working mothers took unpaid sick leave, while 35% of working mothers above the federal poverty level took unpaid sick leave, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation

And women of color are disproportionately represented in the poorly paid workforce, which includes child care, retail and restaurant industries — all of which have not fully recovered from the pandemic, said Kathryn Menefee, a Georgetown Justice Fellow for the National Women's Law Center.

Nearly all child care workers are women, 18.9% of whom are Black women and 17.9% Latinas, Menefee continued. Especially because children under 12 cannot get vaccinated, child care centers are still facing high safety costs. As of last month, 12.1% of child care jobs nationwide are still lost, she continued.

Menefee said the U.S. needs a national paid family and medical leave program, which would reduce the number of working families in Maryland facing economic insecurity by 85%.

Maryland offers paid parental leave for state employees, and the [Time to Care Act of 2021](#) would have allowed all workers to take up to 12 weeks of paid leave following the birth or adoption of a child and to care for a family member or oneself. However, this bill did not pass and will be reintroduced in the next legislative session, said Del. Ariana B. Kelly (D-Montgomery), the House chair of the joint committee.

Throughout the pandemic, the share of women who received unemployment insurance benefits rose by 49% while the share of men receiving benefits fell to 39%, according to Rzepkowski. This suggests that more women are unemployed than men in Maryland.

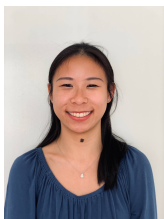
However, Sen. Mary Beth Carozza (R-Lower Shore) contended that there are high-paying jobs that employers in health care, public safety and hospitality industries are “desperately trying to fill.”

“As we have a discussion about women in the workforce, we have to include the fact that we have these severe workforce shortages in key areas, tied to health care and public safety,” Carozza said.

Rzepkowski of the Maryland Department of Labor also reported that there is currently no shortage of jobs in Maryland.

Rather than the lack of job openings, many women who would like to reenter the workforce are having difficulty doing so because of lack of access to child care, Menefee said. Removing this barrier that keeps women from accessing high-paying jobs is important, Sen. Mary Washington (D-Baltimore) echoed.

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