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ECONOMY

The Economic Fallout Of The Pandemic Has Had A Profound Effect On Women

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NPR's Lulu Garcia-Navarro asks Economic Policy Institute Senior Economist Elise Gould about the pandemic's economic effects on women and minorities.

LULU GARCIA-NAVARRO, HOST:

The most recent economic data puts it plainly - the pandemic has throttled the American economy. And while it's been hard on all of us, the economic fallout is being dubbed a she session. Women have been profoundly affected, with female unemployment hitting the double digits this past year for the first time since 1948. And unemployment among Black and Latinas is significantly higher than that of white women and men. We're joined now by Elise Gould. She's senior economist at the Economic Policy Institute, and she's going to talk to us about this.

Thank you so much for being with us.

ELISE GOULD: Thank you for inviting me.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: So let's start with the why. You know, why are women suffering more economic hardship, more job losses?

GOULD: This recession is very different from other recessions in that we are seeing different kinds of sectors hit leisure and hospitality more than in other sectors. That is a sector that is disproportionately borne by women and particularly Black and Hispanic women. And lower-wage jobs are hit. Those are also disproportionately jobs filled by women.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: And we should mention, of course, that we can't talk about women without talking about race. The pandemic, as I mentioned, has been much more devastating for Black and Hispanic women. Is it, again, about the types of jobs that these women hold?

GOULD: Well, I think when we talk about the pandemic, we can't just talk about the labor market. We also have to talk about the pandemic itself and what we know has happened for Black and Hispanic workers and their families - that they have both been decimated by job losses but also been disproportionately impacted on the health front. And so when you think about the labor market, there's three different things that have happened to people over the last year. One is they have been able to keep their jobs. They are safely working from home.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: And those are mainly white-collar people.

GOULD: Right. They are disproportionately white. They're disproportionately higher-wage. Another group are those people who are on the front lines. And we are seeing very high levels of COVID in families that have those workers. Also, some of those families are more likely to be multigenerational families. They're living with more vulnerable family members.

And then there's the third group. And that's what we're really talking about today. Those are those people who have lost their jobs. So workers across the economy, but disproportionately, again, lower-wage workers, women, Black and Hispanic workers have lost their jobs at greater numbers. And the recovery has really yet to reach them yet. So this is not a single story. This pandemic recession has affected people in a myriad of different ways.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: And again, revealed what is underlying the American economy, which is these stark inequalities and how things affect different groups differently. I am going to ask about women again, though, because caregiving must play a role in this.

GOULD: Yeah, and you're absolutely right when you mention that this is uncovering many disparities that were already underlying the U.S. economy. As you say, for mothers, disproportionately, for parents, those with caregiving responsibilities - it's not like things were so easy for them beforehand. Many...

GARCIA-NAVARRO: No.

GOULD: Disproportionately, many women were already facing many difficulties balancing, let's say, family and other caregiving responsibilities not just for parents, but also women, disproportionately, who have to care for other family members - elderly parents or in-laws or spouses. And we do not have the kind of safety net in this society in the United States that supports women in those roles. And so then it's not surprising when the pandemic hits and you have women not just leaving the labor force, but really being pushed out of the labor force. One group that has had the biggest employment hit is unpartnered mothers.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: So what do you think the long-term implications of this might be in terms of when women are able to reenter the workforce and the economy opens back up? What will that look like?

GOULD: The more quickly we can get on the other side of the pandemic, the less likely there will be long-standing effects. And that's why I think policymakers need to act now trying to deal with the pandemic itself. But families really need that relief now. When we talk about those parents who aren't able to work, we need to make sure they have unemployment insurance benefits, make sure they have that safety net when there's many people that are falling through the cracks in the system. And that's what those stimulus checks will provide as well.

We could consider making some of those checks more permanent with a child allowance. There are millions of children in this country that are in poverty, that are

going without food. And we could really take some steps to improving that. I think that when we think about the long-term impacts - are, again, how quickly we can get back to pre-pandemic levels and how seriously we're going to take on some of these policy issues that the pandemic uncovered - things like paid sick days, right? We shouldn't have people going to work sick, sending their kids to school sick. That should never be happening. Let's fix that. And that will disproportionately help women who have those caregiving responsibilities.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: I mean, because we've talked about the underlying problems of the U.S. economy in the before times that this has exposed, I guess the question then becomes, are we going back to that normal?

GOULD: I think the before times are certainly better than the now. When we think about, let's say, what the unemployment rate is now for white workers - let's say it's 6% in the latest data. In the before times, the Black unemployment rate back in February was 6%. We would never say now that white workers are doing so well; let's celebrate this 6% unemployment rate. But back in February, some policymakers were saying that, and some journalists were saying that. So we need to get through this, but we need to do a whole lot more to make the economy more equal and more just for all workers.

GARCIA-NAVARRO: Elise Gould - she's a senior economist at the Economic Policy Institute.

Thank you very much.

GOULD: Thank you.

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