

EconoFact Chats: COVID, Frontline Workers and Women in the Workforce

Pamela Meyerhofer, Montana State University

Published on 27th March 2022

Michael Klein:

I'm Michael Klein, executive editor of EconoFact, a nonpartisan, web based publication of The Fletcher School at Tufts University. At EconoFact, we bring key facts and incisive analysis to the national debate on economic and social policies, publishing work from leading economists across the country. You can learn more about us and see our work at www.econofact.org.

Michael Klein:

The impact of the COVID recession differed widely across groups of people. For example, some people have called this a 'she-session' since unlike most downturns, women lost jobs at a higher rate than men. Also, aside from the terrible toll on illness and mortality, the effects of the pandemic on work differed a lot between people who could work at home, and those who had to continue in jobs that required face to face interactions, or perhaps we should call them masked to masked interactions. A subset of this group is essential frontline workers, those whose work is vital for core social and economic functions, and who have to provide their services in person.

Michael Klein:

Who are these essential frontline workers? Did the set of essential frontline workers shift during the course of the pandemic? What was their experience during COVID? To address these questions, I'm pleased to be speaking with Pamela Meyerhofer of Montana State University. Pamela's research focuses on the decisions made by women about work and family, and how policies affect these choices. She co-authored an EconoFact memo on frontline and essential workers. Pamela, thanks for joining me today.

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Thank you, Michael, for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Michael Klein:

Pamela, the pandemic really highlighted the role of essential workers and frontline workers. Let's start out with some definitions. What kind of jobs are considered essential?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

This was a really important question early in the pandemic. Something that we hadn't really thought about before we needed to define them. So a group at the Department of Homeland Security put together a list of industries that conduct a range of operations and services that they call 'typically essential to continued critical infrastructure viability.' And so these are the healthcare industries that we think of healthcare, food, police, firemen, things like that.

Michael Klein:

How big a proportion of the overall workforce are these essential workers?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Because we're looking at these really large industries, it's actually a majority of the labor force. It works out to about 82%. So these essential workers are pretty much the same as your average worker, since it's almost all of the working population.

Michael Klein:

So if you're in that other 18%, you feel kind of badly that you're not essential.

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Yes, definitely.

Michael Klein:

Pamela, what about essential frontline workers? Who are they?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Great question. Because essential is such a large group, we wanted to look more specifically at the workers who were providing in-person labor and taking on the biggest risk at the beginning of the pandemic. So we use what we call frontline workers. And so these are workers in jobs that cannot be done remotely. Again, this is nurses and doctors. It's also things like janitors, maintenance workers, retail cashiers, truck drivers, that can't be done remotely.

Michael Klein:

What proportion of essential workers are frontline workers?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

About two thirds of essential workers are frontline workers, which makes them about half of all workers.

Michael Klein:

What are the characteristics of the people who have been defined as essential frontline workers? Do they tend to have more education or less than the rest of the workforce? And are they better paid or not as well paid?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Frontline workers are a really different group from the overall workforce. They're less educated. They're more likely to be high school dropouts or only have a high school degree. It's also a larger share of minorities like hispanics and immigrants. Also, it's actually less women than the overall labor force because some of these frontline workers are things like transportation and agriculture that are male dominated areas. And on average, these workers are paid less than the overall labor force.

Michael Klein:

Some of the people who are classified as essential frontline workers had jobs in industries that shut down or nearly shut down in the early months of the pandemic, right?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Absolutely. This is a big challenge in identifying those workers because airline industries are absolutely essential to the functioning of society, but airlines were under extremely reduced demand because of stay

at home orders and other things like that. Same thing with food preparation is an essential industry, but a lot of restaurants were closed or working limited hours or with limited staff. And so we had to take that into account. When we did, actually, the demographics were pretty similar if we excluded those people who were less likely to actually be working.

Michael Klein:

You mean the demographics of the essential frontline workers before and after the shutdown?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Yes. So even if we don't include those shutdown workers, they're still lower educated, larger share minority and lower wage workers.

Michael Klein:

So one of the striking effects of the pandemic was that children had remote schooling, but this shifted over time as the pandemic waned, vaccines became available, and also because of parental pressure, children started to go back to school. So over time, teachers would've become frontline workers too. Right?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Exactly. So in March of 2020, teachers were not defined as essential workers because they were working primarily remotely. But as we moved into the fall of 2020 and into 2021, a lot more education was happening in person or mixed. So the federal government updated their guidelines in December of 2020. And the major change is that educators were now considered essential workers.

Michael Klein:

So did this change the overall profile of frontline workers because so many teachers are now being classified as frontline workers, whereas they weren't before?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Yeah. So teachers are a unique group in that they're highly educated, most have a bachelor's degree or higher. It's also a very heavily female dominated area. And so that changed a lot of our demographics of frontline workers, primarily in that now, with including educators, frontline workers are more educated and more female. But overall, even with that inclusion of teachers, the average frontline worker is still less educated than the overall workforce and is more likely to include disadvantaged minorities, particularly hispanics and immigrants, and are still lower paid than the average worker.

Michael Klein:

But Pamela do the two high profile groups of frontline workers, people in healthcare and teachers, do their characteristics differ from the characteristics of the other frontline workers?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Yeah. So both teachers and healthcare workers are female dominated groups. About one sixth of all of the frontline workers are healthcare workers. And what's important is that there are two groups within healthcare workers. And so the first are the practitioners. This is doctors, pharmacists, nurses. And so these are still more female when you include nurses, but doctors are majority male. So this is a higher educated, higher paid group. When we turn to health support workers like home health aides, nursing home assistants and things like that, then we're looking at about a quarter of all healthcare workers, but

these are majority female. 86% of them are female. They're more likely to be minority and more likely to be immigrant and single mom and receive much lower wages than the practitioners like doctors.

Michael Klein:

What about teachers?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

As I mentioned before, teachers are more female. They represent about one eighth of all frontline workers. And so that is a pretty large proportion. They are almost three quarters female where the overall workforce is about half female. Educators are more white and more likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher. And so their demographics are really driven by the teachers in primary and secondary schools who have above average wages overall.

Michael Klein:

So women are overrepresented in these two groups, healthcare workers and educators. Pivoting a little bit, I'd like to discuss the effects of the COVID recession on women, and more broadly women's experiences in the labor force. First, the COVID recession was different in its effect on women versus men as compared to other recessions, right?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Exactly, Michael. Most recessions affect men more than women. For example, the highest unemployment rates during the great recession were in October of 2009. And at that time, the unemployment rate for men was about 11% and the unemployment for women was just under 9%. We also have seen this in other recessions in the eighties, nineties and in 2001. So it's typical in a recession for the male unemployment rate to be higher, but this is different in COVID. And that's why it's often been referred to as a 'she-session' where women were harder hit. For example, in April of 2020, women's unemployment rate was 16% while men's unemployment rate was only 13.5%. And that difference with women experiencing higher unemployment rates remained for the next six months.

Michael Klein:

Was a lack of availability of childcare a factor in what happened to women's ability to work during the COVID recession?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Absolutely. This was the case for a lot of frontline workers, especially women, because women are more likely to bear the responsibility for childcare, whether they're married or single. As we've seen, women were substantially represented amongst frontline workers, especially in healthcare, education and retail occupations. So not only did women have those higher unemployment rates, but the women that were working were facing these disadvantages. For example, almost a quarter of healthcare support workers are single mothers compared to about 8% of the overall workforce. So that means these are workers, they're frontline workers. They have to go to work, but they don't have childcare anymore because it's set down.

Pamela Meyerhofer:

They're single moms. There isn't someone else at home that can take care of the kids. One of the additional challenges in the pandemic, especially early in March and April of 2020 is that a lot of people rely on grandparents for childcare and that wasn't an option because they didn't want to put elderly relatives at risk early in the pandemic.

Michael Klein:

Because at that time before vaccines and before people even knew how COVID was transmitted, those people were at much higher risk, of course.

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Exactly. And a lot of families, unless you've lived in the same house as your parents or grandparents, we were really isolating in our bubbles. And so if they weren't in your household bubble, you couldn't rely on people outside of your household for childcare like they would before the pandemic.

Michael Klein:

Pamela, as I mentioned in the introduction, much of your research focuses on decisions made by women about work and family and how policies affect these choices. I'd like to draw on your expertise now by asking about a broader timeframe, not just what happened during the pandemic period. What do we know about women in labor force over the past decades?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

The easiest statistic to look at is the female labor force participation rate. And we separate that out by men and women as well. And so men's labor force participation has always been higher than women's. But since the 1950s, there's been a general decline in male labor force participation while female labor force participation increased until about the mid nineties when it started to level off through the 2000s. We see a slight decline beginning in the recession in 2008. But now men and women, while men still have a higher labor force participation rate, those two rates are moving together now.

Michael Klein:

What explains after decades of women participating more in the labor force, the flattening out?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

There's a lot of factors that can contribute. One of the pieces that we saw highlighted in the pandemic is women have a lot of caregiving and responsibilities in the home that make it challenging to balance work and family. Also, we have traditional gender norms where in some couples, the husband will work and the wife will stay at home. And so there's still that traditional division of labor that is going to keep potentially female labor force participation below male labor force participation. In addition to all of these additional challenges in workplace arrangements and balancing work and family life.

Michael Klein:

So this is about what happened before the pandemic. Do you think that the experience of the pandemic and all the challenges it presented will have long run effects on women's role in the workforce?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Definitely. I think the pandemic has highlighted all of the many roles that women are taking on in trying to do caregiving and labor work at the same time. And we've seen a change in demand for work both in the labor shortage that we're seeing in the retail and hospitality jobs, where people are less willing to do those lower wage jobs at that pay. And we've also seen as the market starts to recover, employees are demanding remote work continue in some capacity. And so that flexibility would help working mothers as long as it's accompanied by adequate childcare.

Michael Klein:

Could policies change this outcome. Government policies? And if so, what kinds of policies?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Yeah. There's a couple of policies that would make a big difference. One is more flexible work arrangements in terms of remote work and part-time work would likely increase female labor force participation. On top of that, the US is woefully behind on family policies like paid parental leave, childcare subsidies and universal pre-K. The US is actually the only OECD country without a federal paid family leave program. And so we do have one program that was passed in 1993 called the Family Medical Leave Act that provides 12 weeks of unpaid leave. However, to be eligible, there's a lot of restrictions in the type of work that you do and who you work for. So, only about half... just over half of Americans even qualify for that unpaid leave. Several states have now instituted paid family leave laws and a national policy has been discussed and debated, but we don't have it.

Michael Klein:

Do you think that there's a popular move towards these kinds of policies, given the experience during the pandemic, and what we've seen and more generally all the disruptions to the labor force that we've seen over the last two years?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Definitely. Even before the pandemic, paid family leave has a lot of support amongst Americans; bipartisan support. And so I think the pandemic highlighted those challenges of expecting parents to be able to continue working from home while they had kids running around and being able to see how intractable that was. And so policies like paid family leave and childcare subsidies makes it possible for working parents to work full time and have adequate childcare. Another interesting fact about paid family leave is that it encourages fathers to increase their time on childcare, not only just after the birth, but it changes their norms and they tend to become more involved in raising the child. And so that takes some of the unpaid caregiving off of the woman's plate and would allow her to engage in the labor force more.

Michael Klein:

And we're talking about government programs, but you also mentioned labor shortages. Do you think there's going to be incentives for companies to start offering this, even absent a federal mandate or a state mandate?

Pamela Meyerhofer:

I think there is. There's already a movement. The challenge right now is that it's the most advantaged workers that have access to that. Those who have...are working for tech companies, have bachelor's degrees and have these really well paid positions tend to be the companies that offer paid family leave. What these state policies are doing is expanding that access to lower wage workers. A lot of these, most of these paid family leave policies don't pay 100% of the wages. And so what a lot of companies are doing is they're filling in that blank. So if the state is going to pay 60% of your wages, your company will fill in the other 40%. And so that's an easy way for companies to start providing paid family leave without taking on that whole bill.

Michael Klein:

So, it remains to be seen what the shakeout of the COVID period has been, especially now that we're in a period of high inflation and a lot of economic stress. So it'll take a little while to figure out what's going to happen in the long run, but as you've pointed out, Pamela, these are really important issues, and they're

linked to many other important topics like income inequality and the possibility for people to improve their economic situations. So, thanks very much for joining me today. I really enjoyed our conversation.

Pamela Meyerhofer:

Thank you for having me.

Michael Klein:

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Thanks for listening.