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Coronavirus Employment Shock Hits Women Harder Than Men

Women are more likely to work in vulnerable sectors like retailing and personal care



Willie Mae Daniels makes sandwiches with her granddaughter after being laid off from her food service job at the University of Miami in March.

PHOTO: JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES

By [Sarah Chaney](#) and [Lauren Weber](#)

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Women usually fare better than men during an economic downturn. Not this time.

Growth in service professions has allowed women to overtake men as a proportion of the U.S. labor force. But it has also made them more vulnerable to job losses, because sectors with more women, such as education, leisure and hospitality, have been hardest hit by social-distancing measures.

In April, when the full force of the coronavirus-related lockdown struck, unemployment surged to 14.7% from 4.4%. Among women, the rate rose to 16.2%, compared with 13.5% for men, according to Labor Department data released last week. In February, before the pandemic, the rates were similar at close to 3.5%.

Job losses in April were particularly steep among industries in which women account for more than half of all workers.

Stefania Albanesi, a University of Pittsburgh professor of economics, found that women account for about 77% of workers in occupations that require close personal contact and cannot easily be done remotely, such as food preparation, health-care support and personal service.



Amber Monserrate, center, was laid off from her restaurant job in March and down to working one day a week, driving a school bus to deliver meals in Edgewater Park, N.J.

PHOTO: MICHELLE GUSTAFSON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

In the past, men were more likely to be unemployed during downturns because they held a dominant share of jobs in sectors like manufacturing and construction, which typically bear the brunt of a recession. Unemployment among men reached 11.1% in 2009, compared with a peak of 9.0% for women in 2010.

“Every recession is a ‘mancession’ except this one,” Ms. Albanesi said.

Among the women who lost their jobs as a result of the coronavirus pandemic was Willie Mae Daniels, who had worked as a cashier at a University of Miami cafeteria for almost nine years until the campus shut down in March.

Ms. Daniels applied for unemployment benefits and relies on her son’s pay from a part-time job at a supermarket to help support their household, which includes her three children and two granddaughters. She hopes to regain her job when the

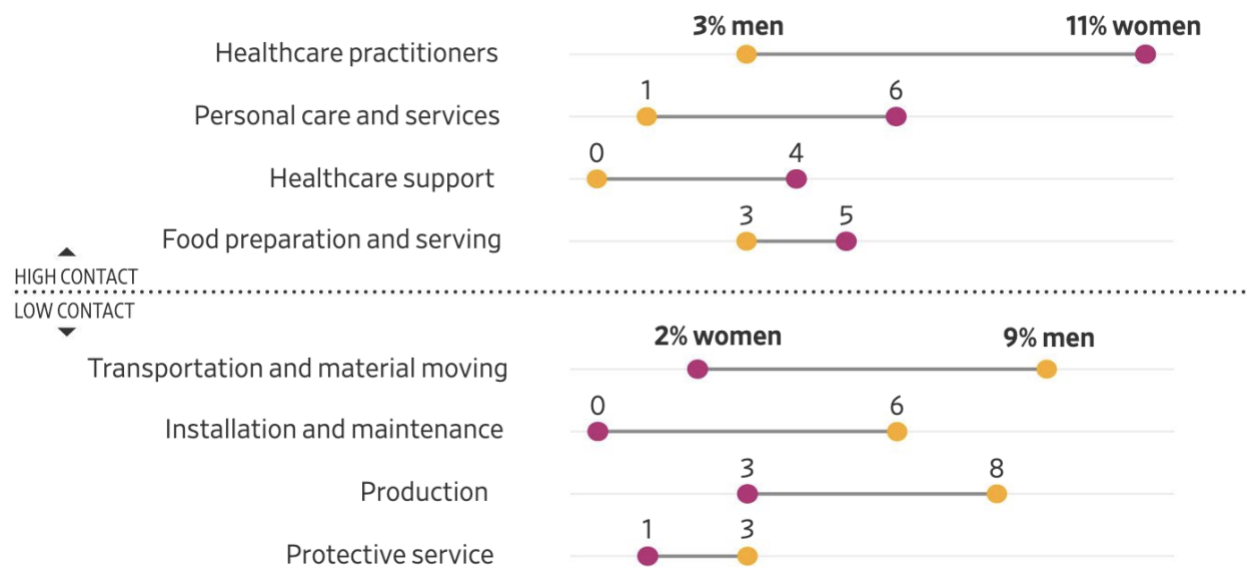
fall semester begins in August, but so far there is no word on when the campus will reopen.

“I pray to God everything will work out, not just for my family, but for everyone in the world,” she said.

Females at the Forefront

Female workers are more likely to hold jobs that require close personal contact and cannot be done remotely.

Inflexible* occupations by gender and level of contact



*The distinction between flexible and inflexible occupations is made according to whether the occupation can be carried out at a workers' home.

Source: An analysis led by University of Pittsburgh professor Stefania Albanesi
Maureen Linke/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The hit to female-dominated jobs carries far-reaching economic consequences for American families.

In a typical recession, married women who haven't been working will take jobs to replace their husbands' lost income, Ms. Albanesi said. But that is less likely to

happen now, because many occupations dominated by women either aren't hiring or are laying off workers.

As a result, she said, "we can expect a much bigger drop in consumption and income for households than we do during a normal recession."

Black and Hispanic women have been hardest hit during the current downturn. The unemployment rate among black women aged 20 and over was 16.4% in April. For Hispanic women it was 20.2%, and for white women, it was 15%.

About 30% of both black and Hispanic women held service-sector jobs in 2018, compared with about 20% of white and Asian women, who were more likely to be in management and financial-operations occupations, according to the latest available Labor Department analysis.



The Labor Department's survey taken in April shows record job losses for the U.S. WSJ explains the context behind the historic numbers Photo: Justin Lane/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Martha Esther Cruz, 50 years old, lost her job doing laundry at a Florida hotel in mid-March after moving from Texas, where she first became homeless because

her son couldn't pay for their home. She has filled out hundreds of job applications and has tried filing for unemployment benefits but hasn't succeeded because her internet connection keeps failing, she said in an interview in Spanish.

Ms. Cruz is now living out of her car in St. Petersburg, Fla., as she searches for another job. She turned to a local Goodwill for help with food and gas.

"Honestly, sometimes I feel really down because I think, 'Oh my God, what can I do to find a way out of this situation?'" she said. "This is tough."

Women also are likely to find themselves at a disadvantage once lockdown measures are eased and companies start rehiring staff. The reason: [Thousands of day-care facilities have shut down](#), which will make it hard for many mothers to leave home.

"You're out of a job. You're also without care for your kids, making it difficult to look for another job," said Nicole Mason, president of the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

Women also clock more hours of household chores and child care than men, especially among the unemployed. Jobless women spend more than eight hours a day on unpaid household and care work, compared with less than three hours for men, according to a study by the institute.

Julie Watkins, 39, was furloughed in May from the Helen Gordon Child Development Center at Portland State University in Portland, Ore., where she has been an early childhood educator for 18 years.

Ms. Watkins, who has two master's degrees and earned \$46,000 a year, plans to apply for unemployment benefits. If she finds another job, it would likely pay less than her current position, where she has seniority. On top of that, she would have to pay for child care for her own 4-year-old daughter.

"It's like, what kind of poor do I want to be? Working poor? Or at home with my child poor? You're stuck between a rock and a hard place."

—*Luis Melgar contributed to this article.*

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