

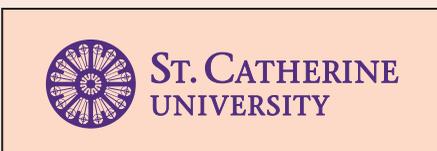
TABLE OF EXPERTS

PANDEMIC IMPACT ON WORKING MOMS

BY HOLLY DOLEZALEK,
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



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The Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal held a panel discussion on the novel coronavirus pandemic's impact on working moms. Panelists included Carrie Esler, senior director, RSM-US; Tami Diehm, president and shareholder, Winthrop & Weinstine; Sucharita Sinha Mukherjee, professor of economics and department chairwoman, College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University; and Kristine West, associate professor and director of the Minnesota Center for Diversity in Economics, St. Catherine University. Kathy Robideau, market president and publisher for MSPBJ, served as moderator.

**MODERATOR**

Kathy Robideau
Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal

Kathy Robideau was promoted to market president and publisher of the Minneapolis/St. Paul Business Journal in February 2016. Robideau led the Business Journal's advertising team since 2010. Prior to that, she was chief operating officer of Winter Park, Fla.-based Nurse Staffing. She is a member of The Itasca Project, Make-A-Wish Minnesota and serves on the Minneapolis Regional Chamber of Commerce board. She attended the University of Cincinnati and is a graduate of Capella University.

**PANELISTS**

Tami Diehm
Winthrop & Weinstine

Tami Diehm serves as president and shareholder of Winthrop & Weinstine. In her dual role of firm president and practicing attorney, her ultimate goal is to find the right path forward, making it easier and more efficient to do business. She sees her role of firm president as that of a coach, motivating team members and helping each individual unlock their potential. Her practice areas include real estate and development transactions, campaign finance and election law, franchise transactions, mergers and acquisitions, and environmental law. She serves as chairwoman of the board of directors for Aeon and board member emeritus of LegalCORPS.



Carrie Esler
RSM-US

Carrie Esler has 20 years of experience in public accounting and has focused her career on providing audit and accounting services to insurance, health care and nonprofit organizations. She is responsible for all aspects of audits, including planning, implementation and reporting. She works with the engagement team and clients throughout the audit to ensure efficiency and effectiveness. She manages audit fieldwork, reviews engagement workpapers, and reviews deliverable reports related to the audit. She has served a variety of clients in the insurance and health care industries, including HMOs and other health insurers, workers' compensation funds, pharmacy benefit managers, public entity risk pools, clinics, pharmacies, and nonprofit entities. Esler is also experienced in acquisitions of pharmacies and physician practices.



Sucharita Sinha Mukherjee
College of Saint Benedict and
Saint John's University

Sucharita Sinha Mukherjee is a professor of economics and chairwoman of the department of economics at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. In addition to teaching classes in economics, she also teaches gender studies and Asian studies classes. Her areas of interest and specialization include development economics, Asian economics and feminist economics. Sinha Mukherjee recently wrote an article featured in the College of Saint Benedict magazine titled, "She-cession, American Women and Covid-19: The Pandemic Reveals an Urgent Call to Action." She has been published nationally and internationally. She has a Bachelor of Science in economics from St. Xavier's College in India, a Master of Science in economics from the University of Calcutta in India, a Master of Philosophy in development policy from the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, and a doctorate in economics from the University of California, Riverside.



Kristine Lamm West
Minnesota Center for Diversity in Economics,
St. Catherine University

Kristine Lamm West is an associate professor of economics at St. Catherine University. Her research spans labor economics, program evaluation and the economics of education. Recent projects investigate topics ranging from K-12 teacher compensation to the impact of all-day kindergarten on maternal labor supply. Her research has been published in The Journal of Human Resources, Industrial Relations, Economics of Education Review, and Education Finance & Policy. Lamm West is also director of the Minnesota Center for Diversity in Economics. MCDE works to ensure that people from all backgrounds lead and influence economic research and decision-making, and promotes and supports gender and racial diversity in economics at every stage of the educational and career pipeline.

Kathy Robideau: Recently, Vice President Kamala Harris said, "The exodus of women from the workforce is a national emergency." Then there was the Worcester Business Journal calling it the "shecession." Tami, what are you seeing in your organization or the Twin Cities as a whole?

Tami Diehm: Retention of women has historically been a challenge for the legal profession and the pandemic is going to make retention – and also advancement – of women even more difficult. At our organization, we have seen women ask for more flexibility in their schedules, additional time off and, in some cases, a reduction from full-time employment to part-time in order to balance the demands of work with increased responsibilities at home. In each of these instances, we've been able to accommodate the request, but I worry about the long-term career impact of women stepping away, even temporarily.

I also worry about the impact on our profession of women who will choose to exit private practice or frankly, the entire legal employment marketplace.

Robideau: Kristine, why is the pandemic so different from past recessions that tended to impact men more than women?

Kristine Lamm West: This really is a different economic decline than what we've seen in past recessions.

Traditionally, we think of women as somewhat more insulated from recessions than men because industries like construction, which ebb and flow with economic growth, tend to be more male-dominated, whereas industries that tend to be more female-dominated, such as caregiving occupations, are actually somewhat countercyclical.

That's been totally flipped on its head. I can think of at least three reasons why: 1) Women are overrepresented in jobs that require more close contact – jobs where it's harder to do work remotely. 2) Women play a disproportionate role in the home, and school and child care closures have made the opportunity cost

of work just astronomical. 3) Then there are gender disparities that predate Covid-19, such that in heterosexual households where a man and a woman both work, it's sometimes economically rational for the woman to step back from work because she has a lower salary for big systemic reasons.

It's not that women have set themselves back, it's that society has created a situation where women find themselves having to make difficult decisions and then systematically they add up to this "shecession."

Robideau: Carrie, what has RSM's experience been during this pandemic?

Carrie Esler: Since 2014, RSM has supported employee network groups that provide opportunities for volunteerism, professional development, mentorship and networking for everyone at our firm, including our Family First group and our STAR women's group, creating that community with other people to network with each other and serve as a support system.

Now those support systems have become much more important. With the pandemic, there is a lot more emphasis on the mental health benefits that we've already had but are expanding. We use a platform called Modern Health that provides everything from job coaching to clinical mental health resources.

Robideau: Sucharita, how might public policy support women in the U.S. labor market?

Sucharita Sinha Mukherjee: Well, one of the obvious ways would be extending and providing child care support. We are one of the only countries in the world that does not have federal support for paid child care leave. We have some provisions for unpaid leave as part of the Family Medical Leave Act, but that leaves out most individuals in low-wage jobs and part-time work.

In addition, as we talk about raising the minimum wage at the national level, we also have to remember that a large percentage of minimum-wage workers are women. Universal pre-K is another thing that can certainly help. Finally, given that more women are in retail and hospitality jobs and are care workers, we need to do something about the pay structure and benefits people receive in those sectors.

Robideau: I was just on a call with St. Paul City Councilmember Rebecca Noecker, and Minnesota is one of the top three [states] for highest [cost of] child care in the country. Kristine, what can we learn from this to construct better policies?

Lamm West: We need to start thinking about child care as economic policy. It's not just a women's issue, it is core to our economic health and vitality.

The way we talk about it – that we "allow" women to go back to work – we need to stop saying that and start saying that child care allows all of us to work and our whole economy to function and thrive. We also need to start recognizing that people are caring for elder adults, grandparents, vulnerable adults, and doing all of this home production. I don't call it staying home when a woman decides to step out of the labor force, I say she's switching her paid work to home production.

It's so critical that we talk about that as the foundation of what makes our economy able to function. Economics is not just about money, it's about well-being, and child care policy is fundamental economic policy.



Robideau: Carrie, what benefits has your firm offered to accommodate the added pressure on working moms since the pandemic began?

Esler: As an example, RSM now provides a milk delivery service for new mothers, and that's been huge. That didn't exist when I had young kids.

Another benefit that plays a key part of our support for caregivers is extended care cash. If we have to work outside of our normal working hours and we need caregiving services, we can extend our daycare hours or hire someone to come in and help get our work done. We have



that option. We also receive tuition discounts for tutoring for our kids, backup day care, elderly care services, and pet sitting services through certain platforms.

RSM provides its employees with these benefits so that the burden is not on us to be the only person who's managing all of these things. That makes a huge difference in trying to balance work and life, so you can be mentally there for your children and then mentally there for work.

West: I would encourage you and others who are doing these sorts of policies to watch and see who's taking advantage of it. Economists love unintended consequences. We talk about maternal leave and then we realize that it actually needs to be parental leave so that you change the dynamic in the home, and you don't ingrain from the outset this idea that, of course women are going to stay home, have to take on more caregiving responsibilities, and start that statistical discrimination early on. That's important to keep in the back of our minds as we weed through different policy options.

Robideau: Tami, you are the first female president in your firm's history. What are you hearing and seeing as the practical challenges that working moms are facing during the pandemic, and how is Winthrop responding to that?

Diehm: Even in the best of times, working moms face competing demands and struggle with fatigue and feeling like

they can't possibly keep everyone happy. The pandemic has really magnified these issues.

We've done a number of things to support our working parents, and particularly working moms, some of which I've already touched on. These include increased flexibility. When people have asked if they can make changes to their work schedules or workload, we have absolutely accommodated these requests, more so than we might have in the past.

Second, like Carrie mentioned, we've worked hard to expand our support network and to create more awareness and flexibility in some of the policies we've had in the past. For example, we've always had a backup emergency daycare plan. In the pandemic, with a lot of child care centers closed, we still had employees asking about backup daycare options, and we were able to explore some creative alternatives to provide support.

We've also taken the opportunity to examine our internal policies related to advancement. For example, our associate attorneys are eligible for a discretionary bonus, but bonus eligibility has historically been tied to a certain level of production. In 2020, we waived the performance "floor" that was required to be considered for a bonus. While the policy change was not specifically intended to support working moms or working parents, when we looked at the practical impact of the policy change, we realized that working par-

ents with young children were clearly the ones who benefited from this flexibility in our standards.

Robideau: Sucharita, what lessons have we learned from the pandemic about the importance of women leaders, women-led organizations, and organizations focused on women?

Sinha Mukherjee: For the first time in January 2020, female and male labor force participation in the United States was at near parity for the working-age cohort, and then we saw this massive exodus. The exodus from the labor force has been happening for a while, but we haven't really paid attention to it as a society because things seemed to be going okay, or we were too focused on the stock market, which almost all economists would agree is not a good indicator of the labor market or economic well-being, in general.

So, I think now is a wonderful opportunity for our leaders to implement policies that benefit women because they really benefit all of us. You need children to replenish society, to be future taxpayers, leaders and innovators. I think it's very important to talk about the home production sector, unpaid work, as equally important as work that gets paid, because it requires effort and skills. It's important too for organizations, especially if they have a large percentage of women in them, to push for these things to become normal and natural.

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Mainhia Thao '18
Fulbright Award Grantee, Laos

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We are becoming a society where there are more elderly than young, and again, women disproportionately bear the responsibility for the care of elders. All work is important, and if it's not directly paid by an organization, as a society we need to take responsibility for it, irrespective of the politics.

Robideau: A month ago, several women celebrities took out a full-page ad in The Wall Street Journal calling on President Joe Biden to pay moms for "unseen and unpaid" labor.

Sinha Mukherjee: Yes, and it's not as if the United States has never provided support to working mothers. During the Second World War, when women had to go and work in the factories as men were away at war, we did recognize that this support was essential.

Other organizations and corporations here in Minnesota have been taking up the issue of family support and child care pretty seriously for a while. They know that we need to retain women, who now graduate from college in larger numbers.

We've seen the myth of women not being good in STEM dissipate, and we have all realized that that has more to do with issues of confidence in young girls rather than matters of skill. So, it's not that they're intellectually behind in disciplines.

The female labor force is an important resource that we have, and we are squandering that resource instead of building on it. It's important that we look at this, not as

a man-woman or gender issue, but rather a societal issue. I think women-led organizations can talk about it from a common perspective. This is not political; it just makes sense.

Diehm: I so agree that having women in a leadership role changes the conversation. As leaders, we each bring our own personal experiences to the table, and having women serve in leadership roles is one of the most important steps to bringing about the change we need to see.

I remember having school-age children and struggling to balance early morning meetings with dropping my kids off at school. Now, as a leader, I use my past experience and remember that something as small as being thoughtful about setting a meeting time can make a huge difference for working parents. Unless and until we see more women in leadership roles to set those examples, I think meaningful change will be hard.

Robideau: Kristine, I want to talk about socioeconomic status. How has the impact on women differed in this bias?

Lamm West: It's not a single story. When we cite aggregate statistics and look at labor force participation at large, we miss the important nuances and patterns.

In December, a lot of news outlets covered the fact that the decrease in employment was entirely due to women's job loss. That was striking and fascinating, but not a lot of headlines actually dug deeper and showed that it wasn't only men's employ-

ment that went up – so did white women's, even though the overall trend for women was down. Which just goes to show that it was women of color who bore the brunt of this dislocation from the labor force. We have to pay attention to these trends, by gender and by gender and race and also by class. If we don't, we can't then feign surprise when inequality worsens in the coming months and years.

Robideau: Sucharita, you recently wrote an article in Saint Ben's magazine about the disproportionate effect the pandemic has had on women. Can you talk a bit more about that?

Sinha Mukherjee: The labor market in the United States is segregated by gender as well as race, and we can see those factors compounding in intersectionality.

Increasingly, we've been realizing that the gender wage gap is not because women have less education. The largest driver of the gender wage gap is the fact that men and women are separated into different kinds of jobs. Women are disproportionately more employed in lower-wage positions, both across jobs and within jobs. For example, there are more females working in the area of law than males but in a law firm, there may be more women who are working as paralegals than lawyers. Even among lawyers, there may be more women who focus on family law rather than corporate law or criminal law, the latter being higher paid specializations.

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sion of race, Black and Hispanic Americans have lower rates of high school and college graduation because of, again, structural factors. These can include issues like accessing education, being first-generation learners and a lack of social support to overcome some of those barriers.

College education is actually the biggest divider in the labor market. People who do not have a college degree probably end up having lower-paying jobs than those who do. While a larger percentage of bachelor's degree recipients in the U.S. are females than males, Black and Hispanic females lag behind their white and Asian counterparts.

When you bring race and gender together, you find many women of color have a double discrimination, and people of color, in general, are more likely to be in occupations like hospitality or travel or retail, which have lost jobs in large numbers. Women of color are also a disproportionate share of care workers. Not only have they been affected by the pandemic directly, in terms of losing their lives, but they are also losing their jobs.

Robideau: Let's shift gears here and talk a little about retention. Tami, have you given any thought to this?

Diehm: By stepping back and stepping away, women also take the risk of not advancing at the same speed as their male counterparts. It's important to attract and retain women, but retention itself is not enough – it must include opportunity for advancement.

In the private practice sector of the legal community, women enter private practice in numbers that are relatively equal to men, but they don't stay, and as you progress through the ranks into the higher levels of partnership, women continue to drop out. The number of women we hire is generally on par with men as associates, but there are fewer who become shareholders and even fewer who achieve equity shareholder status, let alone leadership positions. If we want to retain women, we need to think about the reasons women leave private practice and figure out how to not only bring them back in, but also how to support them, not just during the pandemic, but in the years to come.

Robideau: What should employers consider when managing and communicating with working moms?

Esler: In our STAR women's network, we have encouraged men to join, because we as women can't do this alone; we need

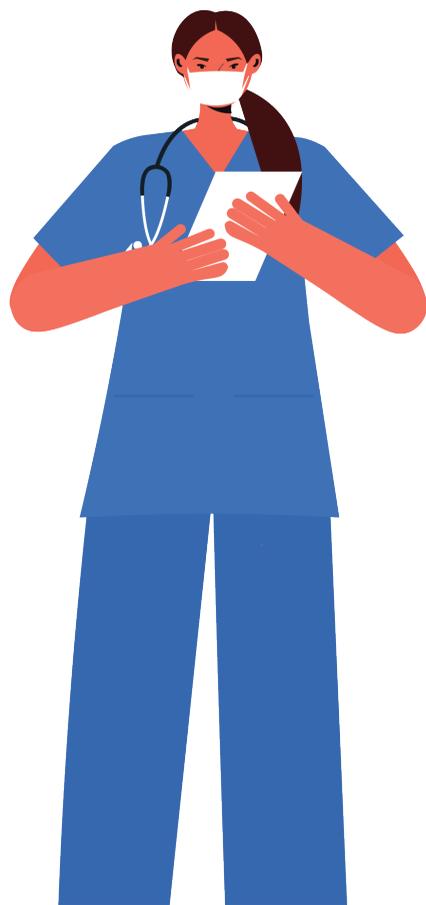
male advocates, particularly because they do represent some of the highest levels of the firm. We have training for male and female advocates in leadership to help bring women on board and to understand there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach. We need to be flexible, and communicate. For example, don't assume that just because somebody has a young child at home that they don't want to travel. That kind of assumption may cause someone to lose the opportunity to advance their career or it could limit their experiences.

One of the challenges that was put forth in an internal newsletter challenges us to ask three of our female colleagues, "How are you really doing? Are you managing your workload? Are you managing your staffing? Managing at home?" Then we listen and advocate for them where they may need some help in shuffling their schedule or workload.

You can't just assume everything's great just because they're showing up. You have to get a little deeper and understand where the stressors are coming from to truly coach somebody in a way that's meaningful to them and to their future.

West: I'm glad, Carrie, that you mentioned coaching men as well, because until the culture changes I would be very cautious about telling one of my students to be that open at work. I think there is a lot of gender discrimination still, or gendered ways that people would hear that comment. So I think coaching men that they're also expected to take time away from work to do home production, and perhaps some shaming when they don't, is a good idea.

I also think there's good research behind Carrie's perspective here, about



ask and really listen, because local knowledge is better. You're so much better off setting the bounds of what is possible and then letting individual units, managers, and workers decide within that framework what makes the most sense for each

particular case. When you make assumptions, like Carrie mentioned, about travel or about timing, you oftentimes get it wrong because you're making decisions too far removed from the local knowledge.



Robideau: What advice do you have for working moms and what advice would you give to employers who want to support working moms?

Esler: I think the advice is the same for both: communicate. Nobody knows more than themselves what they need as an employee, but there is also the need to communicate expectations from the employer perspective, as well. It's important to let people know what you need and where you're shining, too, and advocate for yourself so you can advance your career or meet your needs.

Sinha Mukherjee: What concerns me most is when I see highly skilled women withdrawing from the labor force. In most of our jobs, which kind of have a pipeline, it's really hard to go back once people drop out. In Kristine's and my profession, if you don't immediately go into the tenure pipeline, you are largely written off, because there's a fresh batch of skilled workers joining the labor force.

My advice is to make arrangements with your partner beforehand. If you're a young woman, choose your partner, let them know your career aspirations, and that it's as important as what they're doing. For women to be living their potential in the labor force it is essential to have an equal partnership at home with housework and child care.

If you're already out of the labor force, consider retraining if that's economically possible for you. Try to get back in there as soon as possible. If you have kids, especially if you have young daughters, build that in them. Let them see mom working. There's no need to insulate them from reality, because little girls are where we can make the biggest difference.

As far as employers are concerned, in my workplace, there's training about racial diversity and there are lots of conversations going on about making people aware of racial discrimination. We should have similar conversations about gender discrimination on a wide scale and con-

sciousness about the value of having a diverse work force. Employers should realize that this is an organizationwide issue.

Lamm West: I'll also echo what Sucharita said about taking time away from the workforce. I read a McKinsey report recently that suggested one in four women were considering taking time away or reducing their responsibilities at work. That's tricky, because that's a short-term calculation that has long-term consequences. Think about the costs and the benefits over your entire career, not just what you're faced with right now. I think that advice goes for individuals and for firms, as well: Support that attachment for women during this crucial and, frankly, dangerous time in their careers. We also have to see ourselves as part of this larger policy landscape and advocate for policy solutions. These are structural problems, not individual problems. The pandemic has exposed what we have known for many years now – that the gender wage gap is really a parenthood wage gap. Women starting out right off college have very similar earnings to men. But when a heterosexual couple has their first child, the earnings gap widens. All of a sudden there's this fatherhood wage bump and a motherhood wage penalty. We have to address that as a society.



Diehm: I have the same advice for working moms and employers: Be strong, be creative and be gentle. Acknowledge that this is tough stuff, but be committed to finding creative solutions on both sides. If you work as a team, people can make it through this and come out stronger. For the employees – the working moms: Be gentle with yourself. So often we put pressure on ourselves to do it all and be the best. Sometimes it's okay to just make it through the day. Employers need to be gentle too – supporting your employees through this "season" will pay dividends in the end because the loyalty you build with a great and talented group of employees will benefit your organization for years to come.