

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators and decision-makers. People with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Women make up 79 million workers in the US but in some fields they're still underrepresented and those with jobs still face issues of discrimination, gender violence, low wages, and the need for child care. Wendy Chun-Hoon is the director of the Women's Bureau, a division of the US Department of Labor started more than a century ago to bring more equality, fairness, and safety to women in the workplace. We discuss what's been accomplished over the last four years and the work left to do. We start with Wendy sharing the enduring mission of the Women's Bureau.

Wendy Chun-Hoon, Department of Labor, Women's Bureau Director:

I think the enduring mission has been about representing the needs of working women and some conditions have changed for sure and some haven't all that much. So let me say a little more. The story that I like to tell about the Women's Bureau coincides with the very first woman secretary of Department of Labor, and also the first woman in the cabinet, Frances Perkins. And she as a young person actually watching the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. Watching women jump from the building because of the working conditions that they existed under in that textile factory. Being locked in rooms, working nonstop. Young women, mostly immigrant women, to the point where the only option they had as the fire burned was to jump.

So a very enduring mission around working conditions for sure. And over time work that has led to uncovering the conditions so much so that it's influenced public policy like the Fair Labor Standards Act back in the 1930s. And fast-forward to the '60s, the Equal Pay Act. And the Women's Bureau's research throughout this time, leading to things like the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, the Family Medical Leave Act back in the '90s. So really evaluating how women are working, where they're working, what the conditions of that work is, what the wages associated with that work and the value that we place on women's work all the way through to today when we're looking at massive investments in infrastructure across America and knowing that women really are too few in that workforce and these are going to be good jobs, high paying jobs, family sustaining jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

So why don't we pick up from there because that's really a very important part of a conversation we've been having a lot at Working Nation, which is the Infrastructure and Job Act. Is around the country, communities around the country, different states, rural, urban, but there is a massive need for workers. Talk about some of those roles that women could fill, but right now they're probably not because we'll talk skilled trades where what is the number 4%, that people in skilled trade are women. So that means 96% are men. So there's room for women in those fields. So talk to me about how you're trying to make that connection.

Wendy Chun-Hoon, Department of Labor, Women's Bureau Director:

This is one of those sticky trends. Persistent inequality. I first learned about the work of the Women's Bureau when I learned of our WANTS grant program. So the Women's Bureau is a teeny tiny agency within the federal government. Small budget, but really importantly carries grant making power. I would say one of the advantages of the Women's Bureau is that we are laser focused on supporting, as I said, women in the workforce and addressing issues of equity or inequity.

So this WANTO program, women in apprenticeship in non-traditional occupations actually dates back some 30 years in legislation championed by Connie Morella. And really was all about getting more women into apprenticeships, knowing that they are pathways to good jobs and also non-traditional occupations. So fast-forward 30 years and the numbers haven't changed all that much. Maybe back then it was 2% of women in the skilled trades. Now it's four. So doubled, yes. And important strides for women of color entering into jobs in the skilled trades like you said. But again, stuck at 4% of the workforce. When we're talking about the infrastructure investments that Congress and this administration have made, we're also talking about advanced manufacturing, women are significantly more, maybe around 25, a little better than 25% of advanced manufacturing of jobs in for example, clean energy. But again, we're nearly half the workforce, so there is a lot of room for improvement. There's still a gap to close there.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And in some of those apprenticeship grants that you have given, they've been around the skilled trades, construction, manufacturing. I also noticed though data science, which seems really interesting that there is still inequity in that field as well.

Wendy Chun-Hoon, Department of Labor, Women's Bureau Director:

A lot of the lessons that we've learned from WANTO are applicable across ... Pick any occupation where women are underrepresented and often these are the higher paying jobs in the economy. And you'll see really common things like ways in which we don't specifically think about recruitment of women. We're not looking in the places where women would find out about those jobs. We're not speaking to them in a way that lets them know there's a career and future. In a way that they can manage a family while also working in these jobs. And even about the training. When are training hours? How accessible are they? Again, are there child and other supportive services provided along with that training? Think about female only classes or cohorts and the opportunity that creates to really again, feel like you belong in a job that you're very underrepresented in. And then all the way through to recruitment and issues about what it means to be in a safe and respectful workplace. And again, have that sense of belonging when you are one of the only. And dealing with issues often of workplace violence, gender-based violence and harassment the whole way through recruitment, training, retention, all of that matters across any number of occupations where women are underrepresented.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I also think it's always important to talk about the exposure. And you talked about how are they recruited. And I don't think enough people understand because it's not as common here as it is in other countries. Apprenticeships. Those are pay and learn opportunities. So when I spoke to people at the Chicago Women and Trades organization, that was a number one thing that they talked to me about, which is that they're getting paid to do this job and to learn, which is leading them to a higher paying job probably down the road too. These are-

Wendy Chun-Hoon, Department of Labor, Women's Bureau Director:

Absolutely. Absolutely. And it matters again how those apprenticeships are structured just like any job. And so I think it's important that we're looking in this moment where a lot of jobs that are apprenticeable. Take all the skilled construction jobs that we know women are right now, I think only 15% of apprentices, active apprentices in the United States. So a lot of room to grow there. The impact of being in an apprenticeship means that earning power is much greater compared to, for example,

other jobs that you could access without a college degree. And I think starting wages of completed apprentices or apprentices that have completed their apprenticeship is something like \$80,000. So again, starting on that earning ladder much quicker and with much more earning potential over your lifetime, which matters not just in today and whatever expenses you have today, but to your safe and healthy retirement in the future.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

A lot of women are in healthcare and childcare roles or care worker roles. How have you been working within the bureau to raise up the standard of those jobs in quality and also just dignity?

Wendy Chun-Hoon, Department of Labor, Women's Bureau Director:

Thanks for raising this enormous question. I actually came to the Women's Bureau with a whole career, I guess prior fighting for care policies and for care workers and also unpaid caregivers. So this issue has been central to my tenure at the Women's Bureau and certainly for the Biden Harris administration. So care workers are predominantly a female labor force. They are some of the lowest paid jobs in our economy, and yet they're the jobs that undergird the entirety of our economy. So we have to be addressing ... And the Women's Bureau has really focused on bringing the story to light that we need to address the fact that care workers, again, female workforce vastly underpaid and yet generate the rest of economic activity in the country.

We did a couple of recent studies to punctuate this. One showing that care workers support some \$804 billion. I hope I got that right. It's an enormous number. And without that care work, we would be out economic activity of the amount that we haven't seen since 40 years ago. So again, just this real understanding that care work supports the rest of our economy.

Thinking about things ... And this was another report that we published under our tenure here. That the cost of doing nothing, the cost of the United States not having the kinds of care infrastructure policies that our economic competitors do, like paid family medical leave, like sufficient and affordable childcare means that we have five million fewer women in the workforce today than what our potential is. That leads to \$775 billion missing from our economy every year because we're not at our full potential for women's labor force participation. So investing in care infrastructure, both care workers and unpaid caregiving has big economic impact and we're missing out. We're leaving it on the sidelines.

So this administration, certainly the Women's Bureau essential to this issue of care work and the value of care and investing in care have made enormous strides, investments in supporting care, the first big investment around ARPA, so the COVID recovery dollars were some of the biggest investments we've seen in care and led to really buoying the childcare providers, childcare placements for working parents, and I think helped us recover women's labor force participation that much quicker. But again, those investments are still insufficient.

I want to make sure that I mentioned one other. I hate to pick among our publications. The Women's Bureau is my favorite, but we initiated what we call the national database of childcare prices. It's a first ever resource that allows us to look at childcare prices county by county across the United States. You can really understand it at a granular level. And what we've learned from this first ever database is that childcare prices are ranging anywhere from 9% to 16% of a family's average household earnings. That's for one child, nine to 16% of a family's income. That's more than rent in many places. What we've learned from it is you can be in a rural county, you can be in an urban county, you can be in a small county, you can be in big county, you can be in a red county or blue county, and the cost or the price of child care is way unsustainable for almost every working family.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

That just becomes a circular issue there because without good wages for the child care workers who many times are parents themselves, then you can't have more women in the workforce doing jobs that give them a sense of dignity and purpose. You have to build up from the bottom it seems.

Wendy Chun-Hoon, Department of Labor, Women's Bureau Director:

Absolutely. I think COVID did help to bring this understanding much closer for everybody. Not just those of us who are oftentimes the caregivers in our own families. Mostly women. And what it means is we've had some really interesting and path-breaking discussion. Again, the Women's Bureau was central I think to some of this conversation within the real vision of the Biden-Harris administration around an inclusive economy. Where I think the breakthroughs have been are we have had a robust conversation about built infrastructure. So all the investing in America agenda, bipartisan infrastructure law, the CHIPS and Science Act, and central to that, people are talking about care and not just you and me, but companies who are looking to recruit their workforce of the future are necessarily talking about child care.

The president made a big deal executive order going on a year and a half ago that was all about investing in care and caregivers. And one of the really important things in that executive order was a significant conversation about investing in supportive services. So these are all the kinds of dollars that support child care, adult elder care for job seekers. Things like tools and equipment when you can't otherwise afford those. Things like mentoring. But really specifically within that executive order, expecting that government dollars across the board, not just infrastructure investments, be used to support increases in access and affordability and quality and wages of care and care workforce.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And one of the things that's very important in there too is in this competitive work environment right now, businesses are competing with every industry out there. They're looking for skilled workers of all kinds. So offering that wraparound, that support services, as you have rightly said, is something that businesses are looking at now. Employers are saying, "I need people with skills. I'm going to offer this as an incentive." It's not just healthcare. Let's figure out childcare too. I think it's good for the worker, but it's also good for the employer.

Wendy Chun-Hoon, Department of Labor, Women's Bureau Director:

Absolutely. Central in fact to bottom line profits.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And one of the other things ... And you made a mention of it earlier, was the sexual harassment and gender-based violence in a workplace. And that can be a very much of a deterrent for a woman maybe getting into a certain kind of field because they feel there's not safety. What has the administration done? What has your bureau done to help address that?

Wendy Chun-Hoon, Department of Labor, Women's Bureau Director:

What we've done to address and prevent gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work ... And I want to say something about that in a second. Really will be one of the defining legacies under the Biden Harris administration and also for the Women's Bureau. I should say the president's commitment to put in place a gender policy council is the first ever. And under that gender policy council, the White

House initiated a whole of government action plan to address gender-based violence. And so the Women's Bureau really could bring all of our superpowers to bear to influence that whole of government plan to come back and work in partnership with survivors, community-based organizations, businesses, unions, and then the whole department of labor to make sure that when it comes to addressing and preventing gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace, in anywhere that we work, anywhere, workers are paid anywhere we take rest breaks, anywhere we are traveling for work. Online work that takes place now. Anywhere workers are changing and getting ready for work to and from work. That's what I mean by the world of work. That all of that now becomes part of a whole of government action plan.

What the Women's Bureau has brought to this conversation, again, is not just influencing a first ever national action plan for the United States for just gender-based violence. But to then implement robustly across Department of Labor, starting with a first ever grant program that we initiated, launched at the Women's Bureau. Meaning Department of Labor's first ever grant making specifically designed to address investing in community-based organizations and survivor-led efforts to prevent gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work. It meant that we sponsored a first ever national summit from the Department of Labor on the main stage, Department of Labor, highlighting what's working across survivor-led strategies at unions in workplaces, in local government to prevent gender-based violence and harassment.

It meant that we worked really closely with colleague agencies like OSHA, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and EEOC, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, again across government to really see and understand and start to address gender-based violence and harassment as a workplace health and safety issue. It absolutely is. When you are one of a hundred women and let's say women of color on a construction site, which is often the case, there is no doubt that you are dealing with power imbalances which lead very much and become a risk factor for gender-based violence and harassment. This is whole cloth new effort that's really being informed by some of the best practices out in the field and bringing those to the scale of government through a convener like the Women's Bureau, where we're able to address those strategies and replicate them at a much, much bigger level.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

You mentioned already earlier that you came into the role as director at the Women's Bureau with some ideas, some goals. Where is your passion? Where did you get your passion? What was your role before you came in?

Wendy Chun-Hoon, Department of Labor, Women's Bureau Director:

I think it's a little unusual. I came into my service and federal government serving as the director of the Women's Bureau as an activist. I was working in grassroots campaigns to win paid family medical leave, paid sick and safe days, things like childcare before coming to the Women's Bureau. So I bring with me into this role a really strong sense of workers' voices and workers at the center of creating strategy and organizing both inside government and outside government to make change.

I remember the first worker I spoke with as I was coming into this role. Her name was Susie. She's a home care worker in Texas. And older woman, woman of color, working in a home care job that didn't pay her much. She did not have paid sick days. She was working in the middle of COVI, taking care of other people. She had a spouse and a mom at home that she was providing unpaid care to when she went home and all of it in this pretty tenuous situation of low wages and no protections in COVID. And it's Susie who I brought with me into this job. And really probably also identifying myself as a woman of

color and seeing the connections between what it means to be a woman, what access to which jobs we have, how that work is rewarded or not rewarded. Being a woman of color, being possibly immigrant, being LGBTQ, identified myself. And seeing all those connections and knowing that we have to center the most marginalized in order to get to the right strategies.

For me, Susie, and also probably my own experience became the roadmap for how to lead the Women's Bureau in this moment and to see the disruption that COVID created and to be able to drive a strategy through that disruption that would hopefully change some of these structural inequities. One of the reports that I commissioned early was a report called Bearing the Cost. And it really was looking at who bore the cost of the pandemic. And it was women of color working in lower wage jobs that were the jobs that were on the front line, the first jobs to go in the pandemic, and the ones who pay the most consequence in terms of their current day earnings and lifetime earnings as a result of being out of work.

The top line from that report, which we keep updating because it's so important to say out loud, is that black women, compared to white male counterparts, black women lose out on \$43 billion a year annually. Hispanic women lose out on \$53 billion a year annually compared to white male counterparts because of the jobs that we work in and how those jobs are rewarded or not rewarded. And so really, Susie and then Bearing the Cost report became our roadmap that we operated as the Women's Bureau buy in the context of the Biden Harris investing in America and all the infrastructure dollars to make sure that the north star of those investments was going to be creating good paying jobs, union jobs under, as the president says, the most pro-worker, pro-union administration ever, but really specifically to make sure that women, women of color got access and gain access to these jobs that we're creating.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Your time as director is coming to an end. What is next for you?

Wendy Chun-Hoon, Department of Labor, Women's Bureau Director:

I think for me, the fight never ends. I will take that spark that I've certainly felt in this role as the director of the Women's Bureau in this moment and take that spark to the next fight. I think that I have felt really honored to work under the most pro worker, pro union president, Secretary Su, and what that means in terms of an inclusive economy with women at the center. I've seen breakthroughs that I wasn't expecting. I've seen some disappointments. Congress not passing the kinds of care investments that we need. And I will take both the good feeling of all those breakthroughs and all the potential that is right in front of us over the next decade and also the work that's left undone with me to anything I do next. And I know that the Women's Bureau is also going to keep up that fight to really serve its enduring mission and the legacy that the Women's Bureau is, which is to represent the needs of working women. 79 million working women.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Wendy, thank you for what you've done and what you're going to do.

Wendy Chun-Hoon, Department of Labor, Women's Bureau Director:

Thank you so much, Ramona. This was a pleasure.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Work in Progress Episode 347: Wendy Chun-Hoon, Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor

That's Wendy Chun-Hoon, the director of the Women's Bureau, a division of the US department of Labor. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.