

Opinion: Kamala Harris: The exodus of women from the workforce is a national emergency ^[1]

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EXCERPT

Kamala D. Harris is the vice president of the United States.

Last September, I had the chance to talk with culinary workers at a virtual town hall. One of those workers was M. Rocha, who used to work at a hotel on the Las Vegas Strip. When the pandemic hit last March, like so many in the tourism and hospitality industry, she was furloughed. She's still not back on the job today. She has a wife, son and elderly mother she takes care of, and they all depend on her paycheck.

M. Rocha is not alone.

About 2.5 million women have lost their jobs or dropped out of the workforce during the pandemic. That's enough to fill 40 football stadiums. This mass exodus of women from the workforce is a national emergency, and it demands a national solution.

Job loss, small business closings and a lack of child care have created a perfect storm for women workers.

Women who work in industries such as hospitality and health care are losing their jobs. Women in lower-wage jobs — those living below the federal poverty level — have been hit hardest. These workers, many of them women of color, have been undervalued and underpaid for too long. And now too many of them are out of work.

Then there are women who own and work at small businesses — the fabric of our communities. We've all felt the loss when businesses in our neighborhoods have closed this past year. In February 2020, around 5 million women were business owners. By April, 1 in 4 had closed their doors.

My first week in office as vice president, I checked in with Caitlin James, whom I had met last fall. Along with her sisters, she co-founded a juice company in Royal Oak, Mich. They've been able to keep their company up and running, she told me, but she also talked about how difficult it is for women entrepreneurs to juggle responsibilities at work and at home during the pandemic. In fact, throughout our conversation on Zoom, she held her baby in her arms.

The pandemic has touched every part of our lives. Families everywhere are shouldering a huge burden as homes have become classrooms and child-care centers, and uncertainty plagues each day. Because of that, many working women have been forced to cut their hours or leave their jobs entirely. Even those who've managed to keep working full-time are stretched. Before the pandemic, working mothers already had it tough. Now, it seems nearly impossible.

This is not acceptable. And for me, it's personal.

When I was growing up, every day and often on weekends, my mother left home to go work in the lab as a breast cancer scientist. And every day, my sister and I went to Mrs. Regina Shelton's, who became a second mother to us. My mother had two goals in her life: to raise her daughters and to end breast cancer. For my mother to go to work, she needed to know her daughters were well cared for.

Without affordable and accessible child care, working mothers are forced to make an unfair choice. We have to make sure all working mothers have the support they need — during the pandemic and after. Because here's the truth: Our economy cannot fully recover unless women can fully participate.

Studies have shown that our gross domestic product could be 5 percent higher if women participated in the workforce at the same rate as men. And every day that women are out of work, unlocking that potential becomes harder.

When we lift up women, we lift up families, we lift up communities and all of society benefits. This is true in the United States and around the globe.

The American Rescue Plan, which President Biden and I announced before we were sworn in, will tackle the most urgent needs of the American people, particularly women workers. It will get \$1,400 in checks to those who need it and at least \$3,000 to parents for each of

their children.

The plan includes unemployment insurance and housing assistance. It provides funding to help schools safely reopen and makes a big investment in child care to help providers keep their doors open or reopen them. And it will make sure that vaccines are available and accessible to everyone.

Some have said that our plan is too big. But as the president has put it, “The biggest risk is not going too big, it’s if we go too small.” The pandemic has created a perfect storm for women workers, but it’s different than a hurricane that has come and gone. It’s still raging. The longer we wait to act, the harder it will be to bring those millions of women back into the workforce.

At 5 a.m. on Feb. 5, I cast my first tiebreaking vote in the Senate to advance this plan. Now, members of the House and Senate are working on getting the bill passed — and we’re pushing them to move fast. M. Rocha, Caitlin James and women everywhere are counting on us. It’s time to get to work to get women back to work.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: work/life balance ^[4]

female labour force participation ^[5]

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