

December 8, 2020  
Special to the Salem Reporter  
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The unemployment rate for the Salem area declined by a point in October to 6.8 percent. Most of the unemployed are low-wage workers who worked in industries hardest hit by government-mandated shut-downs of the economy. And the majority of these workers are women.

For example, Accommodation and Food Services employment is 53 percent female; Health Care and Social Assistance, 75 percent; Educational Services 66 percent; and Other Services (hair salons and such) 54 percent.

In the early months of the shutdown, female unemployment rates were higher than men's rates. Over the last months rates have become more equal, as some workers in the hardest-hit industries are going back to work.

There is another explanation for lower unemployment rates and that is declining female labor force participation. What does this mean, and how might it affect Salem area women?

When people work, or look for work, they are participating in the labor force. So, the labor force participation rate is the percentage of the civilian, non-institutional population, aged 16 and older, working, or looking for work. When the unemployed give up looking for work, the labor force shrinks, and the unemployment rate declines. Some of the decline in the high unemployment rate since the beginning of the pandemic is due to women doing just that. Nearly twice as many women as men have dropped out of the labor force since the pandemic began. Why are women dropping out?

It is widely agreed that women's gradual entry into the labor force over the last century or so has been a major factor in the economic prosperity of the U.S. and Oregon. Young single women entered the labor force in significant numbers for the first time in the 1920s. Married women entered paid work in numbers during World War II. Women's labor force participation grew slowly until the 1970s and 80s, when it increased dramatically, especially for women with children.

Around the year 2000 female labor force participation rates in the U.S and Oregon began to decline. (See graph) Rates declined even among college-educated women, which is unusual because labor force participation normally increases with higher educational levels.

This decline was exclusively a U.S. phenomenon – in European countries, women's participation didn't decline. Why is that? The general consensus is that the workplace in the U.S. is not as conducive to balancing work and family life as it could be, especially for women.

The federal labor statistics agency regularly surveys Americans about the amount of time they spend each day on different activities. Survey results show that when women work, they spend 50 percent more time on household chores and child care than their working husbands. This has changed little over the seventeen years of the survey.

The shutdown of the economy due to the pandemic has increased the burden on women with children and some of them are dropping out of the labor force – that is, some of them are quitting jobs, or have stopped looking for work. Since the beginning of 2020, Oregon women’s labor force participation declined by three percentage points, and U.S. women, by two points. (Rates for the Salem area are not published, as the survey’s sample size for Salem is too small to yield reliable estimates).

The scarcity and expense of good day care is often cited as a major factor contributing to the decline in female labor force participation, and this situation has been made worse by the pandemic. In addition, school closures have increased pressures on parents and more so on women. The Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey, designed to measure household activities during the pandemic, shows that women spend more time on home teaching activities with school-age children than men.

How many working women are there in Marion County, and how many are trying to be paid workers, homemakers, and in-home teachers at the same time? There are 162,000 people in the labor force in Marion County, and of these, approximately 70,000 are employed women. Of these, 31,000 have children between the ages of newborn and 17 and some of these are single moms.

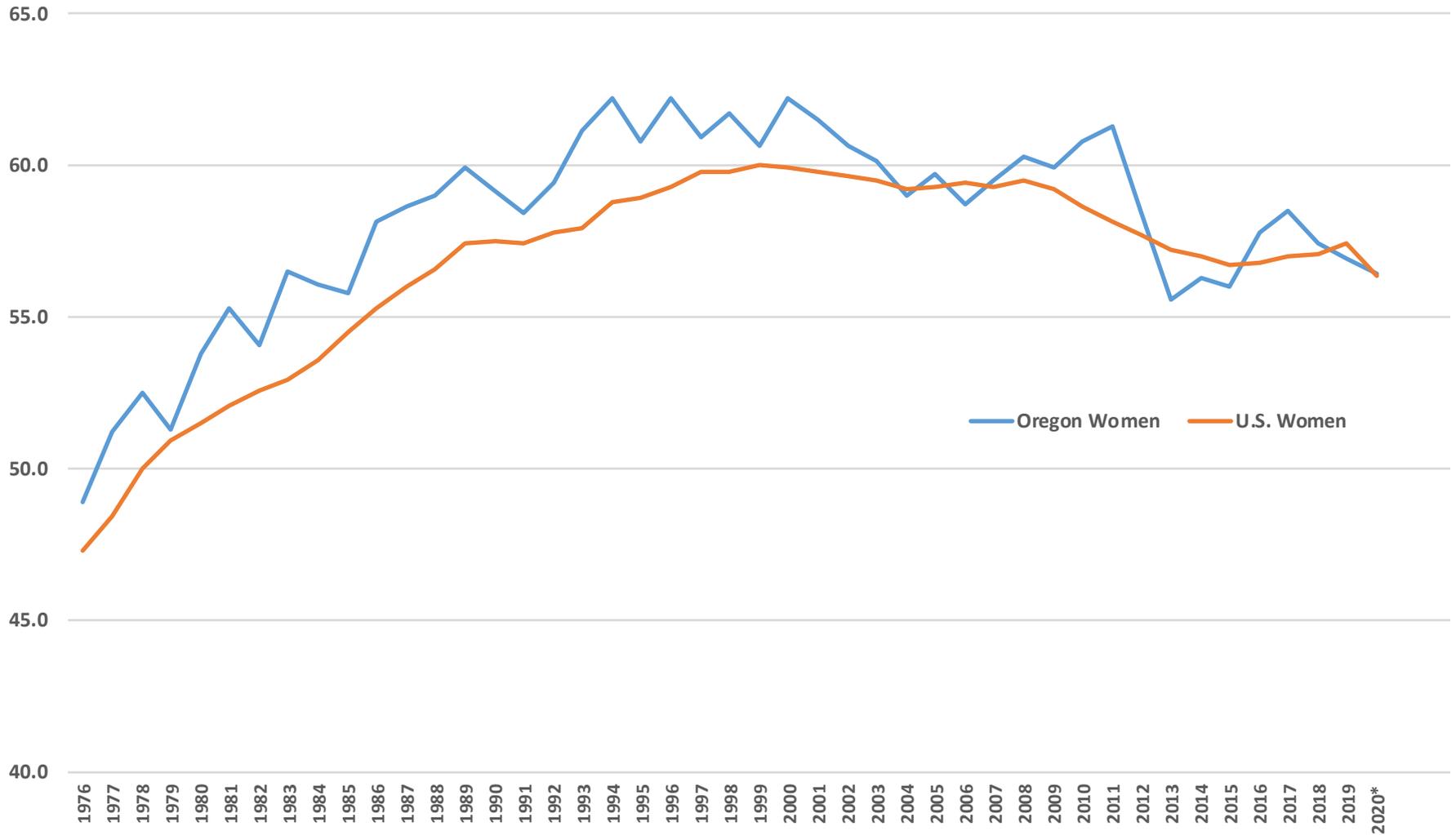
The Oregon Employment Department estimates that 37,000 Oregon women have dropped out of the labor force since the pandemic began. Marion County is about eight percent of the state’s population. So, it’s possible that several thousand Marion County women have dropped out of the labor force due to the stress of dealing with work and child care.

Oregon lawmakers have been trying to help. The 2019 session of the legislature changed the Oregon Family Leave law, whereby a worker can take 12 unpaid weeks off to care for a family member and keep their job, to a paid leave program. Paid leave will begin in 2023, funded by a payroll tax on employers and employees. And some private employers, mostly big ones like Amazon, Microsoft and Google, are currently offering paid leave to care for children.

The U.S. is the only rich country with no federal policies in place to help working families with child care and other family obligations. The pandemic has put into stark relief the consequences, for women, children, families, and the economy.

***Pam Ferrara of the Willamette Workforce Partnership continues a regular column examining local economic issues. She may be contacted at [pferrara@willwp.org](mailto:pferrara@willwp.org)***

## Female Labor Force Participation, U.S. and Oregon 1976 through Third Quarter 2020



Note: \* Includes first 3 quarters of 2020

Source: Oregon Employment Department and Bureau of Labor Statistics