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BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

POLICY IDEAS FOR WOMEN, BY WOMEN

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CLEFFI-TRISTANI: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Emily Cleffi-Tristani, Senior Advisor for Strategic Communications at Brookings, and your guest host for today's special episode commemorating Women's History Month.

While March is typically a time to celebrate women's contributions in history, the past year of COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on women – especially women of color. So for today's episode, in honor of Women's History Month, we asked women at the Brookings Institution to share their thoughts on what top policy considerations they have for the Biden administration to help address the needs of women – both within the US and around the world.

Also on today's episode, Senior Fellow Marcela Escobari offers another edition of our Sustainable Development Spotlight series, with a focus on her new policy brief on how federal infrastructure investment can put America to work.

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First up, here's Marcela Escobari

ESCOBARI: I am Marcela Escobari, a senior fellow in the Global Economy and Development Program, here with a "Sustainable Development Spotlight."

As part of the greater recovery from COVID-19, the Biden administration has an opportunity to tackle three *interrelated* challenges facing the American economy.

The first one is unemployment. Even as unemployment *rates* have gradually fallen since last April, the labor force as a whole has shrunk. We still have 10 million fewer workers employed today than before the pandemic. And because COVID-19 has disproportionately

disrupted sectors like cleaning, hospitality, and food services—high contact-sectors that also typically pay low-wages—the workers most affected are more likely to be Black, Hispanic, female, and young.

Second, even before the pandemic made things worse, the U.S. labor market was incredibly precarious. Almost half of the American workforce—some 53 million people—were in working low wages jobs, earning on average \$18,000 per year. These workers also see very little upward mobility. Looking at the transitions of some 20 million workers in the lowest paid jobs, we’ve found that low wage work is *sticky*. For every two years a worker remains in low-wage work, their chances of escaping get cut in half.

And third, the U.S. just doesn’t invest enough in infrastructure. We spend just over 2 percent of GDP on infrastructure, while European countries spend 5 percent on average and China, around 8 percent. This lack of investment hampers our productivity and long-term growth. By looking at new infrastructure proposals through a workforce lens, the administration has the opportunity to address the precarious low-wage labor market and speed up re-employment.

While providing much needed infrastructure like broadband, roads and bridges should be the primary goal, we think that the jobs that go into it can make all the difference to workers hit hardest in this crisis.

In a new policy brief, we provide an example of what this analysis might look like. We use data from hundreds of thousands of real occupational transitions in the last 20 years to answer some questions that may help policymakers prioritize and adapt projects to maximize their workforce impact.

First, absorption. How many and what kinds of workers will new projects employ? Each project will require a unique occupational mix, and occupations employ different kinds of workers. Take broadband. An \$80 billion dollar investment, the amount proposed in the

Clyburn bill, would employ about 200,000 workers over the course of a year in occupations like telecom line installers and electronics engineers. Most of them (85 percent) can be sourced from currently un- and underemployed people from the telecom and construction industries. These workers tend to be older, whiter, and male. So, policymakers might consider a diversity and inclusion strategy when hiring for infrastructure projects.

Second, how good will these jobs be? The recovery from the 2008 recession left too many workers behind. The quality of jobs created and who has access to them matters if we want to make sure recovery for the economy also means recovery for workers. Given the urgency to accelerate re-employment, policymakers may favor investments that create jobs with low natural barriers to entry and that provide a living wage, basic labor protections, and stability. Here, infrastructure jobs do well. They generally pay more than the national median, offer opportunities for upward mobility, and are accessible to workers without a college degree.

Third, what specific reskilling may be required? If we assume that the 200,000 jobs in broadband are create in year one, we find that there are not currently enough unemployed or underemployed workers to fill about 15 percent of the jobs created. The potential shortages are in highly technical jobs specialized to the telecom industry. These jobs pay well, and many workers would benefit from the opportunity to learn the skills needed to fill them.

This type of analysis can help maximize the long-term impact of these investments on the workforce and inform local reskilling efforts. They can help policymakers prioritize projects that can absorb locally displaced workers. Plugging abandoned oil wells, for instance, not only can reduce harmful methane emissions but may be helpful to workers in places like Pennsylvania transitioning from fossil fuels.

There are precedents for programs like this. During the Great Depression, federally funded infrastructure investment amounted to 6.7 percent of GDP. At its peak, it provided

paid work for up to 40 percent of unemployed Americans, equivalent to about 4 million jobs today.

So while we're thinking about the great new bridges and broadband we'll end up with, we also need to be considering the people who will build them, and how this is a massive opportunity to really *break ground* on both our economic recovery, and to reconcile with a labor market scarred by inequity and lack of opportunity.

CLEFFI-TRISTANI: You can find this report on our website, [brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu). And now, Brookings scholars share their thoughts on policy ideas for the Biden administration that address the needs of women.

BROADY: Hi, I'm Kristin Broady. I'm the policy director for the Hamilton Project and fellow in Economic Studies at the Brookings Institution. My research focuses on higher education, racial wealth and income gaps, and the future of work with automation. In light of Women's History Month, I think it's important to keep in mind that women, particularly women of color make up the majority of essential workers in the United States. This includes jobs like cashiers, teachers and childcare providers, food service, and preparation workers. While many of these jobs were considered essential during the pandemic, and while many places closed down like restaurants and schools, grocery stores were still open, children still had to be educated, elderly people still needed to be taken care of, food still needed to be served, even if people were picking it up and taking it home or having it delivered, and women were the ones that were ensuring that these things happened.

So, there are several things that I think we can do to support women and particularly minority women, as we think about the post COVID economy. We need to provide workforce training and education for women, and again, particularly minority women, whose jobs may not come back, maybe the restaurant that they work that is not coming back, or maybe within the business that they worked at, many of the higher-level employees are going to be working

from home. So we need to think about how to support them. This could involve workforce training at a Community Center, it could include government funded workforce training, it could include a certificate program, an associate program or maybe some level of higher ed, a baccalaureate degree or a master's degree to help these women get ahead in their particular field.

It should also involve childcare so that women can go to school where necessary or go to new training programs or go to new jobs, but that's impossible if they don't have a place for their children. So that involves quality childcare, a place where they feel safe leaving their children, a place where their children will get a quality education.

It may include transportation for women who don't have access to transportation, it may include broadband access. While we believe that everyone has Internet at home, everyone doesn't, particularly people in underserved minority communities or in rural areas.

So, while it's important to provide workforce training, education and opportunities, it means creating pipelines between education, workforce development, and jobs that are going to be available. Jobs that are available now, jobs that are going to require additional training and upskilling due to automation, all of these things are things that we need to consider that the Biden administration needs to consider in order to support the people, women, and particularly minority women who have been keeping things going in this economy, and in this country for many years, and will continue for many years to come.

Thank you.

BUSETTE: Hi, this is Camille Busette, I'm a senior fellow in the Governance Studies department with affiliated appointments in the Economic Studies and the Metropolitan Policy Program. I'm also the director of the Race, Prosperity and Inclusion Initiative here at Brookings, which really focuses on how to advance equity and economic mobility for poor and low-income Americans and for communities of color.

I wanted to encourage the Biden administration to work very hard to convince Republicans that it's important to raise the minimum wage, and I think that's important because there are a lot of low-income women and women of color who work for less than \$15.00 an hour and for whom raising that minimum wage would be really important not only to for their own well-being, but also to that of their children. I'm quite concerned that we have left so many millions of people behind, in terms of the living wage. So that's the first thing.

Second thing would be for us long term to think about how we can provide Social Security credit for women who stay at home to take care of kids and also for other family members. Currently our Social Security system does not recognize that work, and as a result, women who spend a good portion of their careers taking care of others in the home are really behind when it comes to Social Security credits and that really affects them adversely, financially, and particularly if they outlive a spouse or a partner.

Thanks very much.

GOGER: Hello, I'm Annelies Goger, a Rubenstein Fellow in the Metropolitan Policy Program here at Brookings. My work focuses on inclusive economic development and opportunity, especially on transforming how we support career transitions and closing the opportunity gap. With Vice President Harris, we have our first female and first Black and South Asian vice president, and this is a major step forward in women's history. But we need to keep this in perspective, because what we have is a series of crises within a crisis.

If we can muster the resources to send Americans to the moon, we can spend just as much energy tackling the structural, institutional, and cultural forces that continue to perpetuate social control over women. I proposed three moon shoot initiatives for women.

First, a moon shoot for increasing women's access to stable, well-paying jobs and economic opportunities. There are 2.3 million missing women in the labor force as of February, compared to 1.8 million men. But when we talk about stimulus plans, we hear

mostly about infrastructure, jobs, and mostly construction and manufacturing jobs. Let's be real: these are men's jobs. If the plan is to recover through stimulus and infrastructure, the Biden administration needs to invest mightily in programs to help women and people of color not only become aware of these jobs, but also, to make sure they feel welcome and supported in these jobs. The construction industry is 11% female. We have tradeswomen grants to support gender diversity, but they are only in a handful of cities. We need to provide women with a larger menu of job opportunities and work-based learning opportunities in many sectors. We have a massive shortage of registered nurses nationwide. We have public sector jobs that are about to hit a tidal wave of retirement. This is an opportunity to strategically use stimulus dollars to provide on-ramps for women into these types of jobs. Think of a G.I. Bill designed around the needs of a woman who has a family to feed and bills to pay.

The next moon shoot is a cross cutting initiative to value care work. This includes all our so-called heroes such as nursing assistance, and in-home care providers. So many of these workers experience unpredictable scheduling, low wages, and economic insecurity. We need to rethink Medicare reimbursement rates, wage structures, and establish some basic rules around predictable scheduling. We also need to seriously reevaluate health inequities that made the pandemic's impacts so uneven, especially in majority Black and Brown communities.

The third moon shoot is an initiative to reduce violence against women and gender nonconforming Americans. #MeToo, has shown us that there is a recurring cycle of high-profile abuse is, but according to the CDC, over half of female homicide victims in the U.S. were killed by a current or former male intimate partner. Abusive behavior thrives in isolation, so it's no surprise that the rate of violence against women and hate crimes against gender nonconforming Americans has increased during this pandemic. The Human Rights Campaign found that violence against transgender and gender nonconforming people was

higher in 2020 than in any year since they started tracking in 2013. We need an all-hands-on-deck approach to combating the pervasive cultures of misogyny, white supremacy, and violence in this country.

Most of our policies throughout history have been built on the prototype of a white, able-bodied man with a wife performing unpaid labor at home. This erases the everyday realities and experiences of women and non-binary Americans, among others. It undervalues our work, controls our bodies, our options, and our economic security. It literally puts our livelihoods and lives at risk.

So, this is not about charity. This is about building a society where we all feel safe and empowered to make decisions about our bodies, our families, and our communities. It's about leveling the playing field for the next generation and making intentional policy choices to recognize that our people, not short-term profits, are the real drivers of well-being in our society.

Thank you for listening. You can find my work in my profile on the [brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu) website.

AFZAL: Hi, I'm Madiha Afzal, and I'm a David M Rubenstein fellow in the Foreign Policy program here at Brookings. My work focuses on Pakistan's politics and policy, U.S. policy towards Pakistan and Afghanistan, and understanding the roots of extremism.

When I think about policy considerations for the Biden administration to help address the needs of women, I gravitate naturally to the part of the world that I focus on, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and a critical policy decision the Biden administration currently faces there, which is what to do about U.S. troops in Afghanistan. This is a U.S. decision that is sure to impact outcomes in Afghanistan, including what the future looks like for Afghan women and children, who have seen enormous gains since 2001. After the dark days under the Taliban in the 1990s. These gains are apparent, especially in Afghanistan's urban areas, where girls

attend school. Women work, they are professionals, they're lawyers, journalists, teachers, and doctors. The choice we face is this. Do we leave Afghanistan on May 1st for a deadline set by the Doha deal signed between the U.S. and the Taliban last year? Or do we stay? If we leave on May 1st, it will more than likely be without a peace deal between the two warring sides in Afghanistan, the Democratic government in Kabul and the Taliban. Afghanistan will then almost certainly descend into further violence, destabilizing the region. The Taliban will be emboldened. The rights of women and children will surely suffer and may back to the dark era of the 1990s when girls couldn't attend school, women couldn't work, they couldn't even get medical treatment anywhere other than at women's hospitals.

The positive is that we will have the withdrawn troops which will feel good in the short term. But the region will suffer, and that will be blamed on America in the long term and will likely adversely affect U.S. security interests in the long term as well.

There are also going to be costs if we stay, including the threat of violence against U.S. troops. But if we manage to stay until we can help secure an intra-Afghan peace deal between the Taliban and Kabul, it's very likely that we will also have secured a better outcome for the country's women and children. Though I should note here that any deal with the Taliban will still probably involve some sort of compromise and regression and the rights of women and children relative to how they stand today.

In the intra-Afghan peace negotiations that began in September last year in Doha, there are three women on the negotiating committee from the Kabul government side, the Taliban side to no surprise, has no women. Afghanistan's women are scared, and they are targeted constantly by terrorists as they attempt to go about their everyday work. President Biden and his administration have said that he wants to try and ensure the rights of Afghan women and children as he goes about making this big decision of whether to stay in Afghanistan or whether to leave.

But the president has also made it clear that he wants to bring the troops home, and his priority is ultimately American security interests. The president has said that U.S. troops cannot be the means for securing better outcomes for citizens around the world. And that's right. But this decision is different. Our troops are already in Afghanistan and the decision the president faces has the potential to directly impact the rights of women and children there, rights we helped to secure. Here, the choice that will help secure both long term American security interests, and the one that will preserve the progress made by Afghan women and children is the same one, and that is to stay in Afghanistan for a bit longer until we can make sure that an intra Afghan peace deal is reached.

FELBAB-BROWN: Hello, I am Vanda Felbab-Brown, senior fellow in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution. I'm also the director of the Initiative on non-state armed actors and co-director of the Africa Security Initiative. My work focuses on variety of conflict issues, criminal violence and illicit economies.

Supporting women and their ability to equitably access political power and economic opportunities needs to remain a crucial priority for the Biden administration. But to do so effectively, it is important to mesh high level ambitions and legal economic opportunities, constitutional rights, with on the ground realities. That requires carefully listening to women on the ground in the countries and in the settings where a policy change is sought.

It is also very important to diversify the set of local voices, women's voices, to move beyond simply the capitals of our countries, and to equally and comprehensively represent also the voices of women in rural areas and those who live beyond the rule of the state. Perhaps those who might be living in areas governed by non-state armed actors or criminal groups.

Fundamentally, it is crucial to get away from simply prescriptions developed in Washington, D.C., or London, faraway places, and really to enable women on the ground to come up with their own solutions.

Oftentimes those local solutions may be far less comprehensive, far less ambitious in scope than opt-in maximalist policies that international actors would seek. Instead of full rights of women, they might, in local places, involve simply maximizing opportunities for greater coping mechanisms, when the role of the state is pernicious, or the state presence is minimal and women and local families and local communities are governed by other actors, often local arm actors.

We need to really come up to a fundamental readjustment in how we think about women's rights and women progress to allow women on the ground to come up with their solutions and importantly with their priorities, even when those priorities might be quite different than those that we would want to embrace in faraway places like our own capital.

Sometimes what the priorities might be might be as simple as something as access to safer toilets, access to the ability to operate outside of a household without a male guardian, better capacity to access hygiene during menstruation, have access to sanitary conditions.

Overwhelmingly, what we need to focus on is improving, not just greater legal constitutional rights, but also immediate, on the ground, human security, and safer access to basic livelihoods for women and their families.

We also need to recognize, however, that it is not just men and cultures or particular distributions of power and political systems that are obstacles. Sometimes in some issues it might be women who need to be key targets of change, not simply the agents of change in issues such as human trafficking in West Africa, for example, [and] female genital mutilation, it is often the women who are key perpetrators and perpetuators of these problematic

practices or illegal economies. It might be the aunts, the cousins, the close family relatives, female relatives, rather than simply men.

Finally, as much as there needs to be a focus on empowering women to make their own decisions through direct cash programs, direct cash transfers, conditional cash transfers, or other support structures, we also need to engage in men. To the extent that efforts to promote women's rights and expand their access to economic opportunities, it becomes a matter of a competition of direct threat to the economic and political rights of men without the men realizing that it benefits them as well. The progress will at best be slow, at worst, can become stalled and even reversed.

So, in the era of complex post-COVID realities, with dramatic increases in extreme poverty, many populations being thrust into the arms of non-state armed actors, into dependence on illegal economies, and the state being weak, we need to be more creative than ever in how we support women, often women operating in excruciatingly difficult conditions.

And more than ever, we need to allow local solutions articulated by local women in rural spaces, in territories governed by non-state armed actors, as well as in capitals of the partner countries, to find their own solutions.

HADANI: Hi, I'm Helen Hadani, a fellow in the Center for Universal Education, and my work focuses on the benefits of playful learning in both formal and informal education contexts. As a developmental psychologist and the mother of two girls, I would like to highlight the critical need for accessible, affordable, and high-quality childcare as an important policy consideration for the Biden administration to help address the needs of women and mothers.

Childcare challenges continue to drive parents, mostly mothers, out of the workforce at alarming rates. A woman's career path is often influenced by childcare considerations rather than her career goals. COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on childcare centers,

with many having to close, leaving millions of childcare workers, almost all women and a very high percentage of women of color, out of a job.

Childcare costs have skyrocketed in recent years, with recent research reporting that childcare costs have doubled in the past two decades. That's *if* you can find quality care. Experts estimate that half of Americans live in what's called childcare deserts, where there is a lack of licensed quality childcare. Investments to improve childcare need to target these childcare deserts, which are often rural areas and communities where families of color live.

A growing number of studies show important links between childcare, parental employment, and economic growth. Businesses in the U.S. lose billions of dollars annually because parents must miss work to care for their children when a crisis arises. Federal action and support is needed to increase access to quality childcare and support working mothers.

Progressive work family policies, including paid parental leave for both working mothers and fathers, so parents can spend time caring for and bonding with their infants in the first year, and paid sick leave days are needed to support and grow the nation's workforce and promote gender equity.

I would also like to see policy changes to address the STEM gap. Women make up only 28% of the workforce in STEM, according to the National Science Foundation, and these gender gaps are particularly high in computer science and engineering, which are some of the fastest growing and highest paid jobs. According to the Pew Research Center, a typical stem worker earns 2/3 more than workers in other fields.

Interestingly, research shows that girls start believing they aren't good at math, science, and computers at a young age. A study by researchers at the University of Washington found that 6-year-old girls who were given the opportunity to engage in a fun computer programming activity with a toy robot, expressed greater interest in technology and more confidence in their own skills and abilities than another group of girls that didn't engage

in that activity. This study showed that if you give the same experiences to girls and boys, then they can have equal interest and confidence. And these findings suggest that giving girls more opportunities to engage in programming activities in or out of school, may spark and sustain girls' interest in technology, and lead to a more promising path to a STEM focused career.

GRAHAM: Hi, my name is Carol Graham. I'm a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, and I work on well-being and economics, and in thinking about the priorities for the Biden administration in terms of women and gender issues, I think a critical issue these days, because of COVID, is low wage women in the workforce, and how much they are disproportionately suffering.

All low wage workers pay a lot in terms of unpredictable schedules, low wages, and often lack of health insurance. A lot of things about low wage work in our country today really makes their lives very difficult. But because of COVID, where women have borne the brunt of the burden of the children at home, the disproportionate burden of teaching children at home, and already often inferior jobs, there's been a double hit.

When we look at the state of low wage workers from the perspective of well-being, we find that indeed often their well-being is much lower, their health, their expectations for the future, their ability to cope with extra shocks because they are already living on the edge, and also their time use. They often work long and unpredictable hours, balancing all those things with trying to sustain a family, and particularly with at-home schooling, as we've had for the past year, has taken a double burden on female low wage workers. In addition, when you look at who is coming back into the labor force as the economy recovers, we also find that women are coming back disproportionately less than men.

The other side of that story, though, and something that we find also in our data on well-being of all kinds of labor cohorts, is that women tend to be more resilient in the face of

unemployment, and in the face of other shocks, in part because they are by definition multitaskers, because they, by definition, spend more time taking care of children and that has served them well in terms of maintaining resilience and well-being compared to men out of the labor force, for example, that doesn't mean that their plight isn't necessary to worry about.

We should really be thinking about how the COVID pandemic has absolutely reversed many of the gains that women made in labor force participation in the past decade, and again, the reversals are the worst on the low wage end.

So, in my view, if we want to think about labor force issues and gender issues, we really need a strong focus on helping low wage women who have left the labor force and have not returned, as a priority area for this administration.

Thanks for listening.

KAMARCK: My name is Elaine Kamarck and I'm a senior fellow here at the Brookings Institution.

In my lifetime, women have made an enormous amount of progress. We no longer consider women in politics an oddity. In fact, we have had the first woman to win the nomination of a major political party, and we now have the first woman vice president. There is no doubt that in my lifetime we will see a woman as president.

Women have also made strides in the corporate world, although they still have trouble reaching the level of CEO, there are more of them than there used to be.

Women are in combat. Women are generals. Recently women have broken into the ranks of four-star generals.

But women still make \$0.79 on the dollar, although that is an improvement over the \$0.59 on a dollar that they made several decades ago.

Women have proven that they can do almost anything men can do in the workplace, but the biggest hurdles they face are the result of what men cannot do: bear children. Now, not all women want children, and this freedom is certainly a major improvement from the days when that was all women were supposed to do and expected to do. But the fact remains that the majority of us want children, and the challenge of bearing and raising children while working is the challenge of the 21st century for women and men.

The first response has to this challenge has to be paid family leave, and high-quality day care. Those first few months of life are precious, and they do an awful lot for the health and mental health of these new babies. Society should want every infant to have a great start in life, that's why paid family leave is so important.

After that, of course is high quality and affordable daycare. This is the single biggest thing that will allow women to stay in the workforce and make progress. And of course, it's more important for women at the lower end of the wage scale than it is for instance, for women in the professions.

For professional women, the challenge is slightly different. For instance, not too long ago, a woman named Chloe Fox, my daughter, wrote a piece in the *Boston Globe* describing the educational and training trajectory of a physician. The most intense training times coincided exactly with a woman's childbearing years, setting up an agonizing conflict for many would-be doctors. There's no reason that women doctors need to train on a timetable developed for men, and there's no reason that women, lawyers, or academics or business leaders need to progress on a man's timetable.

For all the progress we have made, we have not managed to overcome the biological clock. We must make motherhood compatible with work, education, and professions. Until that happens, society will not have women's full contributions.

DEWS: My thanks to Emily Cleffi-Tristani for guest hosting this episode and coordinating with all the scholars who you heard from, and my thanks to them as well: Madiha Afzal, Kristen Broady, Camille Busette, Vanda Felbab-Brown, Annelies Goger, Carol Graham, Helen Hadani, and Elaine Kamarck. Also, my thanks to Marcela Escobari for her Sustainable Development Spotlight.

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Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.