Increasing Workforce Participation for Virginia Women in Low-Wage Jobs

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AAUW of Virginia

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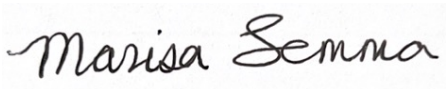
Disclaimer

The author conducted this study as part of the program of professional education at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, University of Virginia. This paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for the Master of Public Policy degree. The judgments and conclusions are solely those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Batten School, by the University of Virginia, or by any other agency.

Honor Pledge

On my honor as a student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment.



Acknowledgments

No one accomplishes anything alone, and I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge all the people who helped make this APP possible.

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Executive Summary

Due to familial responsibilities and the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, women's labor force participation is still more than ten percentage points lower than men's (FRED, 2022a, 2022b). Lower-income women face additional barriers to participation, including low wages, unpredictability, and a lack of access to benefits.

This report identifies three alternatives to solve this problem:

- Provide additional childcare subsidies
- Implement 12 weeks of paid family leave and 14 days of paid sick leave
- Establish predictive scheduling laws

Each alternative is evaluated on four criteria: effectiveness, cost, equity, and political feasibility. I recommend *Alternative 2: Paid Family and Sick Leave* because, although it requires a large government expenditure, it is highly effective at improving labor force participation for women in low-wage jobs. It is also highly equitable, as it disproportionately helps both mothers and women of color.

Successful implementation of a paid leave policy would involve coordination between employers, employees, and the Virginia Employment Commission. The VEC would need to establish enforcement and accountability structures, including a mandatory reporting system, to ensure that employers are in compliance with the policy. A paid leave policy would remove a major barrier that prevents women in low-wage jobs from being in the workforce and would create more equitable economic outcomes for women.

Client Overview

The American Association of University Women (AAUW) is a non-profit focusing on gender equity and economic security. The Virginia branch of the AAUW (AAUW-VA) prioritizes equality, individual rights, and social justice; economic security; and education (AAUW of Virginia, n.d.). AAUW-VA affects policy change primarily through its advocacy efforts; it lobbies at the state level and, in conjunction with the national branch, at the federal level as well.

Problem Statement

The labor force participation rate for women is more than 10 percentage points lower than for men (FRED, 2022a, 2022b). This is due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also represents a larger, more systemic, issue. This gap in workforce participation rates has negative ramifications for both the individual and society as a whole, as it leads to lower GDP and lower wages for all workers. This is particularly problematic for women in low-wage jobs, who already face additional challenges and additional barriers to workforce participation.

As a result of structural barriers exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the labor force participation rate for women is down to just 57 percent (Ewing-Nelson, 2021). *In Virginia, women in low-wage jobs face unique challenges to being in the workforce, and these challenges are not likely to go away, even once the pandemic is over, without some sort of intervention.*

Background

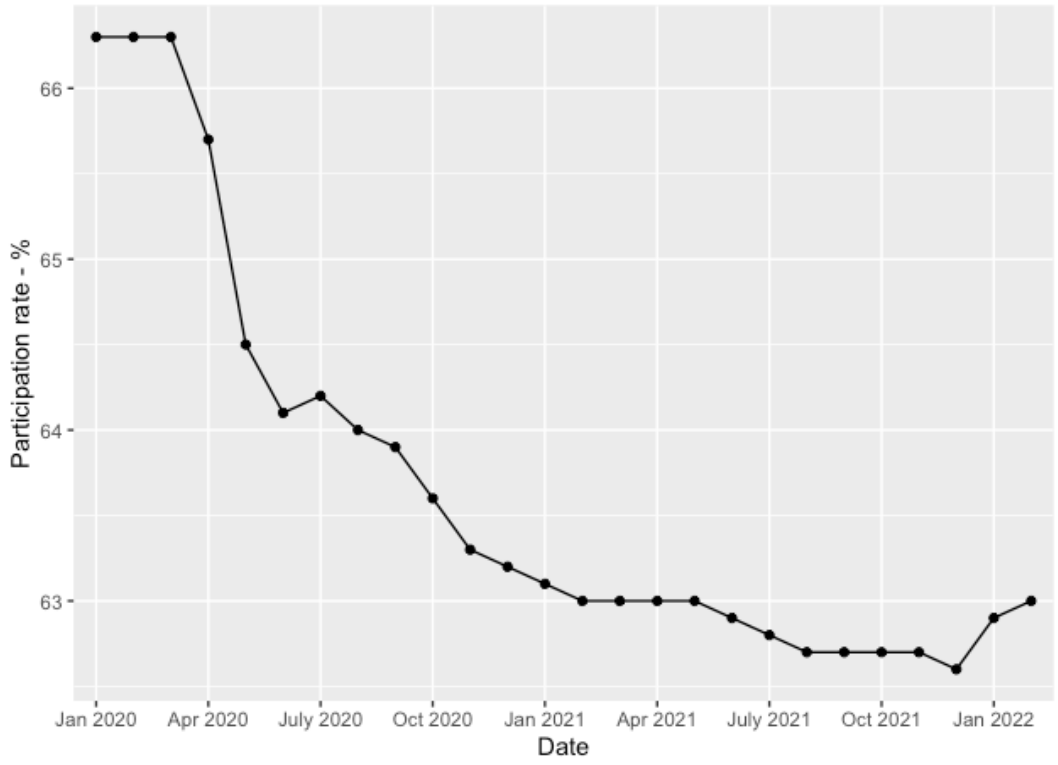
As the nation's economy seeks to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, employment is starting to get better. In Virginia, as is the case nationwide, the unemployment rate has been decreasing since a spike in April 2020. From August 2020 to August 2021, Virginia gained 82,500 jobs (Virginia Employment Commission, 2021). However, unemployment rates and job growth do not tell the whole story, because unemployment rates only capture people who are actively looking for work. The unemployment rate fails to capture those who are not actively looking for work (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

When we look at labor force participation, we see that economic recovery may not be as pronounced as we originally thought. The labor force participation rate for women is down to 57 percent, lower than it has been since 1988 (Ewing-Nelson, 2021). There are two primary drivers of this historically low participation rate: the COVID-19 pandemic and the "Great Resignation." However, barriers to participation for low-wage women have always existed; therefore, participation is not likely to increase, even after these factors go away, without some sort of intervention.

COVID-19

As Figure 1 shows, from March to May of 2020, the labor force participation rate for Virginia dropped by almost two percentage points (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). Since the start of 2022, it has increased slightly, but it still remains well below pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 1: Virginia Labor Force Participation Rate, Jan. 2020-Feb. 2022

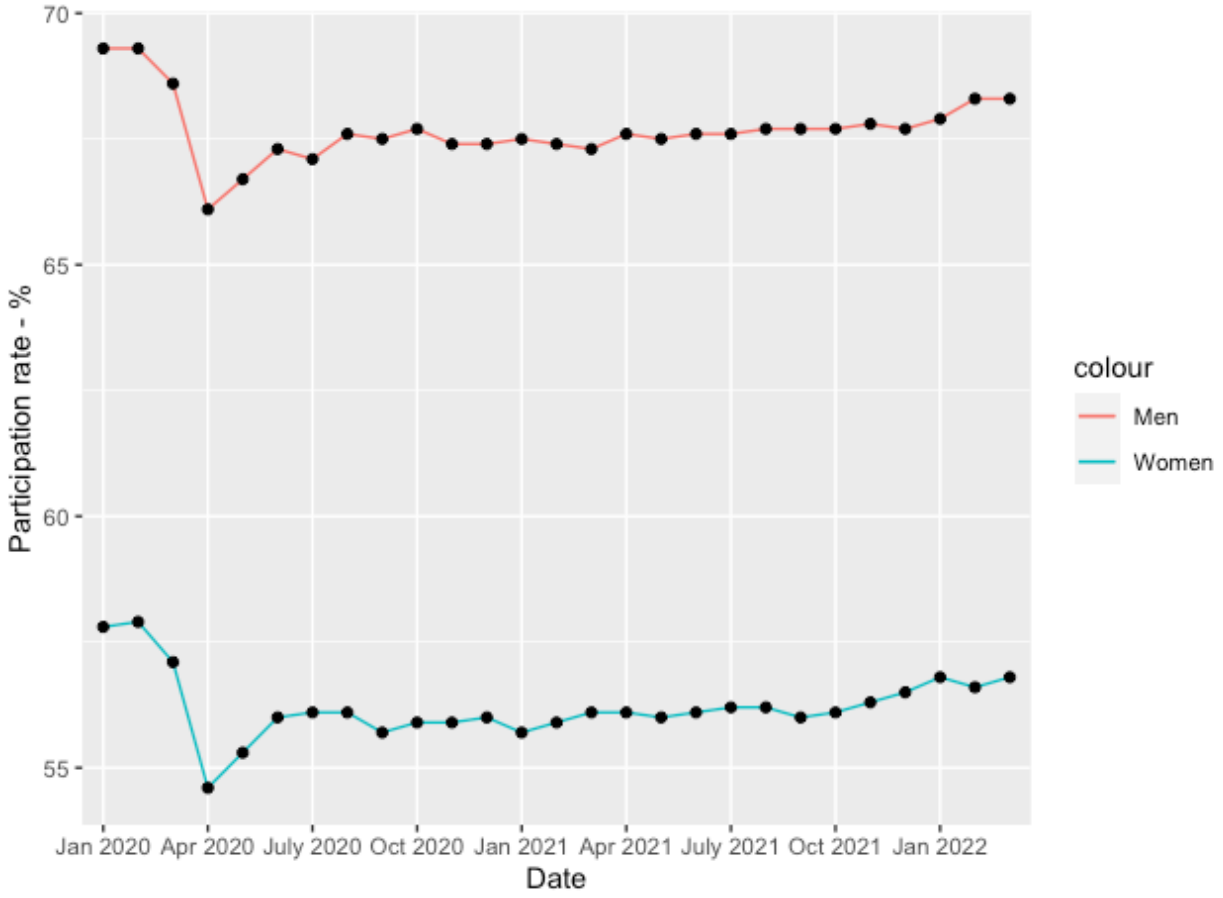


Data source: (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.)

This, in and of itself, is not inherently problematic, as the U.S. is still experiencing many effects of the pandemic. In fact, labor force participation often decreases during economic recessions (Hayes, 2022).

But when we disaggregate the data by gender, there is some room for concern. As Figure 2 shows, women consistently have far lower workforce participation rates than men, despite exhibiting similar decreases due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, there is consistently about an 11-percentage point difference in participation rates between the two demographics.

Figure 2: U.S. Labor Force Participation by Gender, Jan. 2020-March 2022



Data source: (FRED, 2022a, 2022b)

This gender gap indicates that the low labor force participation rate for women cannot be fully explained by the pandemic; there must instead be other barriers that are contributing to this. These other barriers include things such as childcare or other unpaid work, which women bear far more responsibility for. In fact, on average, women spend about 37 percent more time doing unpaid work than men do (Hess et al., 2020).

Women in low-wage jobs are particularly burdened by these structural barriers. Low-wage jobs include food service, housekeeping, and retail, among others (Fusaro & Shaefer, 2016). Women are disproportionately represented in these jobs, particularly in the service

industry (Cassella, 2021b; Fusaro & Shaefer, 2016). In fact, 46 percent of working women work in low-wage jobs, compared to only 37 percent of men (Cassella, 2021b). Service jobs accounted for almost three-quarters of job losses during the pandemic, and the majority of people quitting their jobs were in the leisure and hospitality sectors (Casselman, 2021; Gould & Kassa, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these structural barriers faced by women in low-wage jobs. For starters, there is still a lot of uncertainty surrounding the pandemic. While increasing vaccination rates made COVID-19 case numbers decrease for a short period of time, the delta and omicron variants both pushed case numbers back up again, and future variants could do the same. This could cause another shutdown, which could cause more layoffs. Another round of layoffs would disproportionately hurt women in low-wage jobs, since they were among the hardest hit by the pandemic (Gould & Kassa, 2021). In addition, there is always the possibility that schools and daycare centers will close again, especially since all children under five are currently unable to get vaccinated for COVID-19. If schools shifted back to online learning, women would largely be responsible for helping their kids with schooling. As a result, many of them would either be unable to work or would have to work part-time. Both of these uncertainties have contributed to the problem. Women need to be able to pivot quickly should things change, and low-wage jobs typically do not have that level of flexibility.

Safety is also a concern among women in low-wage jobs. Since low-wage jobs tend to be primarily service sector jobs, they typically require face-to-face interactions with other people. This makes employees in low-wage jobs much more susceptible to exposure to COVID-19 while at work. This concern has contributed to a low labor force participation rate among women in low-wage jobs because these jobs have very few remote work opportunities and little flexibility.

To compound concerns about health, many low-wage jobs also do not offer any paid time off for sick employees or family members of employees. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) requires certain employers to provide unpaid family leave, but there is no national paid leave legislation, and Virginia has not enacted any statewide paid leave laws (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020). Even prior to the pandemic, this was causing a lower workforce participation rate for women. Since there is no guaranteed paid leave in Virginia, many women leave the workforce altogether; in fact, from 2006-2008, 22 percent of women quit their job during the months before and after childbirth (Isaacs et al., 2017).

Wages are another driving factor of this low workforce participation. The jobs that are available don't pay enough for mothers to afford childcare expenses. Prior to the pandemic, low-income working families were spending over a third of their income on child care expenses (Malik, 2019). From March to November 2020, in response to COVID-19, child care costs rose by 47 percent, making it even less affordable for working families (Curran, 2020). Childcare is also much less available than it used to be, which compounds this problem. In fact, two-thirds of child care centers closed in April 2020, and non-white families experienced more childcare closures than white families (Lee & Parolin, 2021). Because of the unavailability of affordable childcare, it is often easier and more affordable for mothers to stay home and take care of their kids instead of working.

The Great Resignation

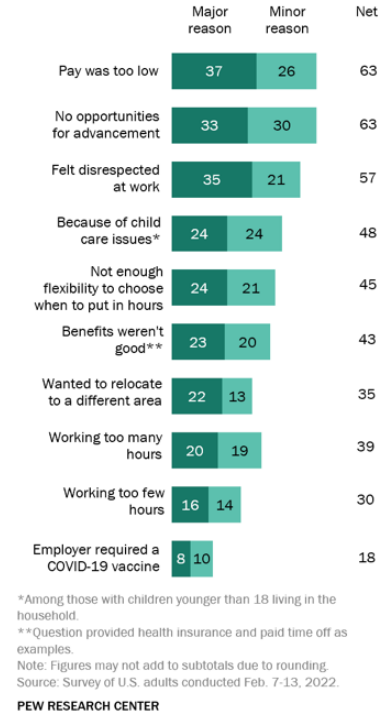
"The Great Resignation" has also contributed to this low workforce participation rate. In August 2021, over four million people quit their jobs (Casselman, 2021). Most of these people worked in the hospitality and leisure industries; in fact, almost seven percent of hospitality and food service workers quit during the month of August (Thompson, 2021). This is despite the fact that wages for low-income workers are increasing (Casselman, 2021).

The Great Resignation provides some cause for concern; if people are quitting their jobs despite wage increases, then traditional policy alternatives may not actually solve the identified problem. However, Virginia is much less affected by The Great Resignation than other states. Only 2.9 percent of Virginia workers quit their jobs in August (Fowers & Rosenberg, 2021). While this still seems like a lot, it's actually on the lower end of the spectrum; the quit rate in August ranged from 2.1 percent in Pennsylvania all the way to 4.5 percent in Kentucky (Fowers & Rosenberg, 2021).

There are a variety of factors causing this great resignation. As shown in Figure 3, 48 percent of people who quit their job in 2021 did so at least partially because of childcare issues. 45 percent did so because of a lack of flexibility in hours. 43 percent did so because the benefits – including access to paid leave – were not good (Parker & Horowitz, 2022).

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen believes that once the pandemic is under control, labor supply will go back to normal (Leonhardt, 2021). If this is true – and if the reasons given in Figure 3 are indeed what is driving the Great Resignation – then policy alternatives should focus on the barriers that have always existed for women's labor force participation (for example, childcare or paid leave). Even if labor force participation were to go back to pre-pandemic levels, there would still be a large gap between the participation rates of men and women. Thus, tackling the structural issues is likely to be more effective at closing the gender employment gap and actually benefiting women in low-wage jobs.

Figure 3: Reasons for leaving a job



Source: (Parker & Horowitz, 2022)

Consequences

There are many consequences of a low labor force participation rate, both at the individual and societal level. At an individual level, there are impacts on future earnings. When women return to the workforce after taking time off, they typically earn less than they were earning before (Cassella, 2021b). Staying out of the labor force could thus significantly hurt their future earnings, which would exacerbate the gender wage gap. Many women are also experiencing long-term joblessness. Long-term joblessness can make it harder to get back into the workforce

and can also impact future savings, earnings, and long-term health (Cassella, 2021a). A lot of long-term unemployed people are in low-wage jobs, which makes them less likely to have enough savings to survive a long period of unemployment (Cassella, 2021a).

Exiting or remaining out of the labor force can also limit access to welfare programs, which can further compound economic problems. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) requires recipients to work, since the credit is equal to a fixed percentage of earnings (Gitis, 2017). To receive unemployment insurance in Virginia, you must be actively looking for work and must be prepared to accept any "suitable" job offers (Virginia Employment Commission, n.d.). This means that women who are not in the labor force are ineligible for these types of welfare benefits, and that can exacerbate poverty or other financial problems.

A low labor force participation rate for women also has impacts on the U.S. economy. If employment were equalized across gender, there would be an estimated $500 billion in additional GDP (Cassella, 2021b). It is also estimated that every 10 percent increase in the number of women working causes a five percent increase in wages for all workers (Cassella, 2021b). Thus, women leaving the labor force is bad not just for them, but for society more broadly.

Evidence on Potential Solutions

The following section will examine some ways that other jurisdictions have attempted to increase labor force participation for women in low-wage jobs and the amount of success that those attempts have had. Prior to the pandemic, there have been many policies attempting to do this, both in the U.S. and abroad. These policies have included paid leave laws, childcare subsidies and tax credits, part-time work options, and wage increases.

Paid Leave

Paid family leave is one of the most common – and perhaps the most effective – ways to increase women's workforce participation. In fact, a study by Gehringer and Klasen (2016) found that while cash benefits, family allowances, and daycare benefits led to more women working part-time, parental leave increased full-time employment for women. Many European countries have paid parental leave in some capacity, though the number of weeks and the extent of the benefits varies (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). Many of these countries also have paid family leave for things like taking care of a sick child, though some offer only partially paid leave (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). Some also offer incentives to encourage fathers to take parental leave: for example, Norway and Sweden have a "use it or lose it" system, where four weeks are set aside for the father and the family loses those four weeks if the father does not take them (Gornick & Meyers, 2003).

Access to paid leave is much less common in the United States. As of 2016, only about 14 percent of workers had access to paid family leave (Isaacs et al., 2017). For low-wage workers, that number is even lower; as of 2021, only about seven percent of low-wage workers had access to paid family leave (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021b). Only about a third of these workers even had paid sick leave, which is especially problematic given that many low-wage jobs are in the service sector (Gould, 2021).

President Biden's 2021 Build Back Better Act originally called for 12 weeks of paid leave – with workers given at least two-thirds of their regular pay – for new parents, people who have to care for sick family members, and people with medical conditions (Ngo, 2021). However, this bill is not likely to pass, at least not in its current state, so federal paid leave legislation is not likely to exist anytime soon. There are, however, several states that have implemented paid leave policies. California was the first state to do so back in 2004, although eight other states plus D.C. now have it as well (Bartel et al., 2021). Virginia does not currently have paid leave, although Democrats in the Virginia General Assembly introduced a bill to establish it during both the 2021 and 2022 legislative sessions (Legislative Information System, 2021b, 2022a).

A recent study by the OECD finds that paid parental leave, up to 20 weeks, increases women's workforce participation; however, beyond 20 weeks, participation decreases (Jaumotte, 2004). Evidence shows that access to paid maternity leave in California increased the amount of leave that women take by about three to five weeks (Isaacs et al., 2017). The increase in leave-

taking after the new law was even higher for women with lower levels of education and women of color (Isaacs et al., 2017). Paid maternity leave has also been shown to increase the likelihood that women are employed in the months before and after childbirth (Isaacs et al., 2017). California's 2004 law also increased the number of 45-64 year old women with a disabled spouse who were working by about 0.9 percentage points (Bartel et al., 2021).

The effect of paid leave on young women, however, is inconclusive (Isaacs et al., 2017). After the paid family leave law in California, labor force participation for young women increased by about 1.5 percentage points. However, unemployment rates and duration of unemployment also increased when compared to men, older women, and non-Californians (Das & Polachek, 2015).

Childcare

Research shows that childcare prices affect mothers' labor force participation, but single mothers are less responsive to changes in price than married mothers (Kimmel, 1998). In fact, the decision to enter the labor force is greatly impacted by the costs of childcare (Blau & Robins, 1988). When childcare costs increase, married mothers are less likely to be in the workforce, especially mothers of preschool-aged children (Connelly, 1992). Lower costs of early childhood education increase its use, as well as increase mothers' labor force participation and number of hours worked (Morrissey, 2017). One study estimates that a 10 percent decrease in childcare costs leads to anywhere from a 0.25-11 percent increase in mothers' employment (Morrissey, 2017).

In addition to its price, the availability of childcare also impacts women's workforce participation. A study conducted in Maryland found that an increase in the supply of childcare increases women's labor force participation, and vice versa (Herbst & Barnow, 2008). This is particularly salient and important, since two-thirds of child care centers closed in April 2020 as a result of the pandemic, and since non-white families faced more childcare closures than white families (Lee & Parolin, 2021).

Policy responses to childcare prices typically come in the form of subsidies and tax credits. The Child and Dependent Care Credit (CDCC) is a federal tax credit that subsidizes childcare costs for families that work and have a positive tax liability (Pepin, 2020). Virginia also has a Child Care Subsidy Program which helps working families with childcare costs (Child Care VA, n.d.-a). Research by the OECD shows that higher childcare subsidies increase women's workforce participation (Jaumotte, 2004). By their estimates, increasing childcare spending to the same level as Denmark – where local governments subsidize 75 percent of costs – would increase the workforce participation rate for women in the U.S. by about six percentage points (BBC News, 2016; Jaumotte, 2004). Furthermore, a 20 percent increase in CDCC benefits would lead to a one percent increase in employment of married women and a 1.6 percent increase in the number of hours worked (Pepin, 2020). For families with children under two, this same increase in CDCC benefits would lead to a four percent increase in employment for the mother (Pepin, 2020).

Part-Time and Flexibility

Many countries already have job flexibility measures in place. For example, in Norway, employees can reduce the number of hours they work because of "health, social or other weighty reasons of welfare" (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). In Sweden, employed parents are allowed to work six-hour days until their children are in first grade (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). Other European countries, such as Belgium, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, also have provisions that allow workers to reduce their hours (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). While there is not a ton of literature on the effects of part-time work or flexible hours, research from the OECD indicates that allowing part-time work leads to an increase in women's labor force participation, though the magnitude of the increase depends on the country's or area's preferences for part-time work (Jaumotte, 2004).

Wages

Despite increasingly prevalent conversations about the minimum wage, there is very little research on the effects of minimum wage increases – or even wage increases more generally – on labor force participation. In fact, the effect of wages on any labor force outcomes is somewhat inconclusive. One study found that a three percent increase in the minimum wage decreased the number of hours worked in low-wage jobs by 6-7 percent (Jardim et al., 2017). Another study found that large increases in minimum wage exacerbate unemployment (Del Carpio & Pabon, 2017). However, most studies have found that the effect of the minimum wage on employment is zero or close to zero (Azar et al., 2019). A study by Azar et al. (2019) found that this zero estimate was simply masking heterogeneity across different levels of concentration in the labor market. They found that minimum wage increases decrease employment in low-concentration labor markets, but increase employment in very high-concentration labor markets (Azar et al., 2019).

Criteria

The four criteria that I will be using to evaluate my alternatives are *effectiveness, cost, equity,* and *political feasibility*.

Effectiveness

Effectiveness is the most important criteria because it captures whether or not the alternative works and to what extent it solves the problem. Effectiveness will be measured by how much labor force participation for women in low-wage jobs increases. It will also take into account the long-term effectiveness of each alternative, meaning whether they stay in the workforce, not just whether they enter it. A successful policy will increase participation rates for women in low-wage jobs in both the short-term and long-term.

Cost

Cost will be measured by how much the policy costs to implement and operate. This will include both direct and indirect costs and will capture costs to the government and costs to employers. Specific examples of the costs associated with the three alternatives are listed below.

- *Government costs* include: subsidies to people for child care expenditures; paid leave benefits to employees; administrative and enforcement costs
- *Costs to employers* include: administrative costs associated with additional paperwork; non-compliance fees; costs of hiring more staff in order to have enough people covering each shift; costs of paying employees regardless of revenues generated

A successful policy will impose low costs on both the government and employers.

Equity

One of the AAUW's central tenets is gender equity, so equity is a vital criterion to include. This entire problem is centered around gender equity, so the equity component here will capture whether the policy helps not just women in low-wage jobs as a whole, but also specific subgroups of them. The most salient subgroups in this instance are mothers and women of color, so alternatives will be evaluated based on how effectively they help these two groups. A highly equitable policy will disproportionately help women of color and mothers but will also help all women in low-wage jobs.

Political Feasibility

Political feasibility captures the likelihood that the policy will be adopted given the current political climate. Since Virginia has a new governor and Republicans have taken control of the House of Delegates, it is likely that policy priorities have shifted, and thus political feasibility will be even more important. To evaluate feasibility, we must look at all relevant stakeholders,

including the state government, employers, and individuals. Evaluating political feasibility will involve looking at what stance the governor, political parties, and other prominent political figures in Virginia have taken on these policy areas or similar ones. Political feasibility will also have to consider the interests of firms, what pushback they might have for each policy, and the political power that they hold.

Alternatives

Alternative 1: Childcare Subsidy

This policy would involve a subsidy to help supplement the cost of childcare for low-income families. Currently, the Child Care Subsidy Program in Virginia uses federal money to provide a subsidy to lower-income families; however, subsidy amounts and income thresholds vary by locality, and there are restrictions on which childcare providers families can use the subsidy for (Child Care VA, n.d.-b). This policy would be an addition to the current Child Care Subsidy Program, with standardized income requirements and benefit amounts. The purpose of this subsidy would be to provide additional support for the families that are most in need of it, since many families still struggle to pay for childcare even with the current subsidy. Unlike the current program, this would be a direct subsidy to families that they could spend on any childcare program that fits their needs.

The subsidy would be half of the average annual childcare cost in Virginia and would be given to the families of all children living at or below the poverty line. Virginia families spend, on average, $10,867 per year for a four-year-old child (Economic Policy Institute, 2020). The subsidy would thus be $5,434. The policy would be implemented by the Virginia Department of Social Services and would be funded by the state government.

Effectiveness

This policy would likely be effective, though it is unclear exactly how effective. One study estimated that a 10 percent decrease in childcare costs leads to around a 0.5-2.5 percent increase in mothers' employment (Morrissey, 2017). This policy would decrease yearly childcare expenditures for low-income women by 50 percent, which means labor force participation for mothers would increase by somewhere between 2.5 and 12.5 percent. Currently, the labor force participation rate for mothers with children under the age of six is 65.8 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021a). A 2.5-12.5 percent increase would therefore be about a 1.6-8.2 percentage point increase. However, this estimate assumes that all who are eligible for the subsidy are utilizing it, which is unlikely given the administrative burden associated with applying for the subsidy. (This would also assume that all families know that they are eligible, which is also unlikely.) Thus, the true increase in participation is likely on the lower side of that range.

Cost

This policy would be expensive for the state government to implement. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2020), about 252,000 Virginian children were living in poverty as of 2018. If the families of each of those children received a $5,434 subsidy every year, it would cost the state government about $1.37 billion per year. This is an expensive program, but if Virginia continues to have a budget surplus, then this would be affordable. Currently, the state has a $2.6

billion budget surplus, and this number is expected to be closer to $3.5 billion for each of the next two years (G. S. Schneider & Vozzella, 2022).

Equity

This policy would be moderately equitable. People in the lowest income brackets are disproportionately people of color; in fact, a higher percentage of Black and Hispanic people in Virginia are living in poverty compared to white people (Londono Gomez & Hardy, 2021; Welfare Info, n.d.). This means they would disproportionately be receiving this childcare subsidy. This makes the policy far more equitable, especially considering the disproportionate representation of people of color in low-wage jobs.

However, it is important to note that this policy only helps parents of young children. Anyone who is not a parent, or has older kids who no longer need childcare, will be ineligible for the subsidy, even if they are living below the poverty line. This diminishes the equity of this policy, as it only eliminates barriers to workforce participation for mothers.

Political Feasibility

Political feasibility for a childcare subsidy would be moderate. While Democrats are typically the ones that favor big social spending packages, there is actually some support for childcare assistance among Republicans; in fact, according to a poll conducted last year, over 40 percent of self-identified Republicans or conservatives supported the childcare provision in President Biden's proposed American Families Plan (Rachidi, 2021). This means that, even though Virginia now has a Republican governor and a Republican-controlled House of Delegates, there may still be broad enough support to enact this policy. An expansion of eligibility requirements for the current Child Care Subsidy Program was also passed in the Virginia General Assembly last year, which means that there is generally support in Virginia for increasing access to childcare (Legislative Information System, 2021a).

Alternative 2: Paid Family and Sick Leave

A paid leave alternative would have two parts: paid family leave and paid sick leave. All employees that have worked for their current employer for at least six months and work an average of at least 20 hours a week would be eligible for up to 12 continuous weeks of paid family leave. This leave can be used to care for new children or to care for a sick relative. The 12 weeks would be guaranteed for every new child the employee has, but a doctor's note would be required in the case of a sick family member. As in the bill proposed by Senator Boysko in 2022, family leave would be compensated at 80 percent of an employee's average weekly pay, but would not exceed 80 percent of the state's median weekly wage (Legislative Information System, 2022a). The median annual wage in Virginia is $74,222, which means that the median weekly wage is about $1,427 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Paid leave would thus be capped at $1,142 per week.

All employees of firms with more than 15 employees would also have access to 14 days of fully paid sick leave per year. These days would not have to be continuous and could be used if either the employee or a member of their family is sick.

This alternative would be funded by the state government and would be administered by the Virginia Employment Commission (VEC). Unlike with other paid leave programs – which typically require the employee to file with the government – employers would have to file a claim with the VEC in order to receive state funds. This is to remove some of the administrative burden on employees, as requiring them to file claims would pose a major barrier to workforce participation. If the employers do not file a claim, they would be required to pay for this leave out-of-pocket. All employers who are in compliance with the policy each year would be eligible for a tax break.

Effectiveness

Overall, this policy would be highly effective. Jones (2020) found that implementing paid family leave increases labor force participation for mothers by about six percentage points in the year after their child is born. Mothers are also three to six percentage points more likely to be in the labor force five years after their child is born; in fact, the gap in participation rates between mothers and women without young kids nearly closed in California and New Jersey after those states implemented paid leave laws (Jones, 2020). This six-percentage point increase is likely an underestimate, as all women can benefit from having paid family and sick leave, even if they are not mothers. This makes it an even more effective alternative.

However, the policy may not actually help women in low-wage jobs in the long run. The change in labor force participation is largest for women with a college degree, increasing their participation for up to eight years after their child is born. For other women, participation increases for only about a year after birth (Jones, 2020). Given the high proportion of women in low-wage jobs who do not have college degrees, this policy may not be impacting the population that is most affected by the problem.

Cost

This policy would be expensive for the state government to administer. In 2020, there were 94,749 children born in Virginia (March of Dimes, 2022). If one parent of every child took twelve weeks of paid leave and were compensated at 80 percent of the state's median weekly wage, then the program would cost about $1.3 billion per year. This is likely an overestimate of the true cost, since not all parents are in the workforce, and many who are will either not utilize paid leave or will not take the full twelve weeks. Workers making below the state's median wage would also be compensated at a lower rate, which means the costs to the government would be even lower. Employers would see very little cost associated with this policy; in fact, in California, 87 percent of businesses reported no increased costs. Some even reported increased savings (Romig & Bryant, 2021). Like the childcare subsidies, this is an expensive program, but if Virginia continues to have a budget surplus, then this would be affordable.

Equity

Equity for this policy would likely be high. Evidence suggests that, after the implementation of the California paid leave policy, increases in leave-taking were more pronounced for women of color than they were for others (Isaacs et al., 2017). This is also likely to disproportionately help women of color, as they are more likely to be caregivers – and thus need access to paid family leave – than white women (Romig & Bryant, 2021). Due to historical racism in the health care system, people of color also tend to have more health problems that would require them to take medical leave (Romig & Bryant, 2021). Thus, a paid family and medical leave policy would promote racial and socioeconomic equity.

However, it is important to note that this policy – at least the family leave aspect of it – primarily helps mothers (and specifically new mothers). That means that not all women in low-wage jobs would benefit from it. This takes away from its overall equity, but given that paid sick leave can benefit all women, the policy is still highly equitable.

Political Feasibility

Political feasibility for this alternative would be low. A paid leave bill was introduced in the House of Delegates in 2021, and a similar bill was introduced in the Virginia Senate in 2022, but neither bill made it out of committee (Legislative Information System, 2021b, 2022a). The Senate bill was "continued to 2023" in the Commerce and Labor Committee, so there is a possibility that a similar bill can be passed next year (Legislative Information System, 2022a). However, with a Republican governor and a Republican-controlled House of Delegates, political feasibility seems low.

SB 352, a bill establishing paid sick leave, was also introduced in the Virginia General Assembly this year. The bill would have provided sick leave to health care workers and grocery store employees, both of which fall under the category of low-wage workers (Legislative Information System, 2022b). The bill passed the Senate but died in a House subcommittee. If a sick leave policy cannot even be implemented during a pandemic, it seems unlikely that it would be implemented in future years. Thus, overall political feasibility is low.

Alternative 3: Predictive Scheduling

This policy would be modeled off of Oregon's predictive scheduling law, and would require employers to release work schedules for all hourly workers in writing at least 14 days in advance (Oregon Bureau of Labor & Industries, n.d.). When new workers are hired, employers must give them a "good faith estimate" of what their schedule will look like. Employers would also be required to compensate workers for any last-minute change in their schedules, including increasing or decreasing the number of hours, unless the employee requests this change. In addition, workers would be allowed to ask for changes to their schedules, alter their availability, and decline any additional shifts; however, employers are not required to grant requests to

change scheduling, and employees must provide 14 days' notice for any change in their availability.

Effectiveness

Overall effectiveness for this policy is ambiguous. This is a fairly new type of policy, and as such, there is not a ton of research on its effects on labor force participation.

It is possible that this policy would not be effective. Employers will be required to keep employees' schedules consistent, regardless of anticipated needs, and this may thus cause them to not hire more workers for fear of being overstaffed (Miggo, 2019). Therefore the labor force participation rate may not actually increase. However, a study conducted in Seattle after the implementation of its predictive scheduling law found that there was no statistically significant difference in the rate that employers hired new workers prior to offering additional hours to current employees (D. Schneider et al., 2021). What this means is that employers were still hiring new workers at the same rate, so there was still the opportunity for more women to join the labor force. However, there is no evidence on labor market outcomes for women specifically, so the effectiveness of this policy is ultimately ambiguous.

Cost

The costs to the government of a predictive scheduling policy would be low and would only include the costs of enforcement. Employers, on the other hand, would bear a far greater share of costs. They would have to pay employees for a certain number of hours, regardless of how much revenue they are bringing in (Miggo, 2019). This would be particularly costly for smaller businesses who have smaller profit margins to begin with. This also poses significant time costs on businesses, as they are required to notify employees in writing of any changes and fill out additional paperwork to ensure they are in compliance with the policy. Since these costs would be different for each firm, there is no good way to estimate them. The overall costs of a predictive scheduling policy, however, are still low, at least in comparison to the previous two alternatives.

Equity

This policy would be highly equitable. One of the primary goals of predictive scheduling legislation in Seattle was to "advance race and social equity," so the policy was specifically designed to promote equity (Miggo, 2019). Women of color are also disproportionately represented in the low-wage jobs that this policy encompasses, which indicates that they would likely be more affected by it than white women would.

Political Feasibility

Political feasibility for this policy is likely low. Everyone that voted against the predictive scheduling law in Oregon was a Republican, which suggests that Republicans would be opposed to such a measure (Oregon Legislative Information System, 2017). Given that Virginia now has a

Republican governor and a Republican-controlled House of Delegates, it seems unlikely that a similar policy could pass in Virginia.

Outcomes Matrix

	Alternative 1 ***Childcare Subsidy***	**Alternative 2** ***Paid Family and Sick Leave***	**Alternative 3** ***Predictive Scheduling***
Effectiveness	1.6-8.2 percentage point increase in labor force participation **MEDIUM**	6 percentage point increase in labor force participation **HIGH**	Ambiguous effect on labor force participation **LOW**
Cost	Costs to government of $1.37 billion per year **HIGH**	Costs to government of $1.30 billion per year **HIGH**	Low costs to gov't, moderate costs to employers **LOW**
Equity	Disproportionately helps people of color, but only helps parents **MEDIUM**	Disproportionately helps women of color; helps all caregivers **HIGH**	Disproportionately helps women of color **HIGH**
Political Feasibility	Bipartisan support for childcare assistance **MEDIUM**	Similar bills died in committee **LOW**	Opposition from Republicans **LOW**

Recommendation

I recommend *Alternative 2: Paid Family and Sick Leave* because it is highly effective at improving labor force participation for women in low-wage jobs. It is also highly equitable, as it disproportionately helps both mothers and women of color. While Alternative 1 is more politically feasible, it may not be as effective, and it is less equitable because it only helps mothers. Alternative 3 is much lower cost, but there is not much evidence on its effectiveness. A paid leave policy would remove a major barrier that prevents women in low-wage jobs from being in the workforce and would create more equitable economic outcomes for women.

Implementation

Implementation of a paid leave policy is complicated and would require coordination between employers, employees, and state government agencies. AAUW-VA can assist with implementation by providing the VEC and the Virginia General Assembly with the necessary information.

Enforcement and Accountability

The Virginia General Assembly will first need to appropriate funding for the program from the current budget surplus. The VEC would be overseeing the program and should then establish a paid leave department within the agency. This department would answer any questions from employers or employees and would handle the paperwork and the distribution of funds to firms.

The VEC also needs to set up enforcement and accountability structures to ensure that the policy is carried out successfully. First, they should set up a mandatory reporting system. Employers would have to report, through an online form, who is taking leave and how many weeks they are taking. This reporting system would also allow employers to receive federal funding for paid leave; if they do not fill out the form, they will have to pay their employees out-of-pocket.

At the end of the year, employers would also fill out a summary report stating how many employees were eligible for paid leave and how many of them took that leave. If employers do not fill out this form, they will be ineligible for the tax break. One potential problem with this enforcement structure is that it places a large administrative burden on employers. It is possible that employers will offer paid leave but will not fill out the correct paperwork – or at least will not fill it out correctly. This could cause them to miss out on a tax break even if they are in compliance with the policy.

In order to hold employers accountable, employees will have the option to report their employer to the VEC if they are not in compliance with the policy. The VEC will review all reports and will fine any employer who is found to not be in compliance.

Potential Risks for Implementation

There are many potential ways for implementation to go wrong. Anticipating and preparing for these risks ahead of time will ensure that if something does go wrong, the consequences can be mitigated.

Requiring employers to provide paid leave places a large burden on them, and thus employers might be incentivized to change hiring practices. They may decide to hire fewer women – or at least fewer young women – since this is the group that is most likely to utilize paid leave. This outcome seems likely; in fact, evidence suggests that firms in California decreased the number of women they hired by 1.1 percent after the paid leave law took effect there (Sarin, 2017). However, this risk will be mitigated slightly because the state is fully funding the program, so employers do not have to bear the costs. Employers may also be

incentivized to reduce the number of hours that each employee is working, so that they are not required to provide paid leave to their employees. This would allow them to avoid filling out the associated paperwork. However, it seems unlikely that this would happen. Reducing the number of hours that all employees are working would likely require employers to hire additional people, which is often costly.

Employees could also take advantage of this program. They might be incentivized to join the workforce knowing that they will soon need paid leave – for example, someone who is pregnant who would then need paid maternity leave after their child is born. However, in order to be eligible for paid leave, someone must have worked at their current job for at least six months, which reduces the likelihood of this scenario.

Conclusion

Due to structural barriers that have been both worsened and made more visible by the COVID-19 pandemic, Virginia women have a very low workforce participation rate. This has negative ramifications for both the individual and society as a whole, as it leads to lower GDP and lower wages for all workers. This is particularly problematic for women in low-wage jobs, who already face additional challenges. I recommend establishing a paid leave program in Virginia, which would provide 12 weeks of paid family leave and 14 days of paid sick leave to all workers. This program would increase workforce participation for women in low-wage jobs and would provide them with greater economic security.

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