

Season 2 | Episode 56

# Women in the Workplace: The Past, the Present, and the Future

**PAYCHEX**  
Business  
Series

Coronavirus



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## Full transcript

**Gene Marks:**

Hey everybody. This is Gene Marks and welcome to the Paychex Business Series podcast. Today's guest is a great one. It's Wendy Chun-Hoon. Wendy is the Director of the Women's Bureau at the Department of Labor. What is the Women's Bureau, you may ask? I did not know what it was until we did a little research for this show, because it is a very, very important part of the Department of Labor. It advocates really for women's rights in the workplace. Wendy who is now the 20th director. She's three months on the job. She is working very, very hard for things like paid leave and childcare and elder care and providing more opportunities for women to get more higher-paid jobs as well.

**Gene Marks:**

Now, remember this is a good thing not only for workers, but for their employers as well, because the more opportunities that we give to people, the happier that our employees are, male and female, the more they stay with us and the lower costs we have of finding new employees, the more productivity we have. So, this conversation is what you need to know as an employer to keep your employees, particularly your female employees, happy, and also to be aware of some of the things that she's working on that are going to be affecting you in the next couple of years.

**Gene Marks:**

Again, I've got Wendy Chun-Hoon here, who, as I said earlier, is the Director of the Women's Bureau at the Department of Labor. Wendy, first of all, hello, and thanks for joining us.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

Thank you so much for having me, Gene.

**Gene Marks:**

I am glad that you are here. So, let's, first of all, start a little bit about you -- what you do, and then we'll talk about you in general, before we get into the ways... What you do and how it affects business owners. But so you're at the Women's Bureau at the Department of Labor. What does the Women's Bureau do?

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

I'm about three months in to this new position. So, the Women's Bureau is actually authorized by law to, and I'll read the sentence to you, formulate standards and policies, which promote the welfare of wage-earning women, improve their working conditions, increase their efficacy, and advance their opportunities for profitable employment.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

So, in other words, the Women's Bureau really is the only federal agency that's mandated by Congress to work exclusively on issues that affect women in the workplace, but also represent their needs as wage-earning women in the public policy process.

**Gene Marks:**

It almost sounds like I didn't read the history of the women's... It almost sounds like this goes back to like World War II.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

Well, before.

**Gene Marks:**

Before.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

We are celebrating our centennial year, it ends on June 5th, I believe. So, for the past 100 years, the Women's Bureau has served as a trusted resource for research and a lot of data and statistics, advocacy, as I mentioned, a lot of education and outreach to working women. And also, I would say innovation on improving women's working conditions, employment outcomes, so that they're thriving and that their families can thrive.

**Gene Marks:**

Sure. Yeah. That makes complete sense. Yeah. I just finished a novel by Jennifer Egan called Manhattan Beach. I don't know if you've read it or heard it, she's fantastic. And that whole story took place, her main character worked basically in a munitions factory in New York during World War II. And a lot of it was about the working conditions for women back then, clearly a lot different than today, but I can see where the history comes from.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

I reacted, I thought you were going to mention the Frances Perkins biography.

**Gene Marks:**

Also. I did not read that-

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

It's in my reading list.

**Gene Marks:**

... but I hear it's excellent.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

It is. We interviewed the author, Kirstin Downey, and it was an amazing conversation.

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah. I believe it. Those issues are fascinating, obviously, the issues for women in the workplace themselves have... They've become so predominant in the thinking of business, but I can see that your position has become a real important one. Tell us a little bit about your background. How'd you get this job?

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

Yeah. I have a diverse career. I started straight out of graduate school, actually, working for a private philanthropy. So, was really thinking a lot about government, about public policy, but also about working women and workers, low-wage workers particularly, from a foundation's point of view, and trying to influence the process from that vantage point.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

I spent a little time in state government in the state of Maryland, where I live, and was working actually with the Department of Human Services. So, really thinking about directly how government supports low-wage workers, went back into foundations, and then for the past 10 years, I've been working with a nonprofit organization called Family Values @ Work that is focused keenly on policies like Paid Family Medical Leave, paid sick and safe days, childcare. But, again, a lot of the same issues that are just critical to women in the workforce.

**Gene Marks:**

So, Wendy, obviously there are a lot of issues affecting women in the workplace this year, issues that we as employers need to be aware of. So, go ahead and give it to me, what are some of the big issues that are affecting women in the workplace in 2021?

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

Yeah. I mean, clearly the pandemic had a massive impact on women's employment and resulting economic outcomes. I think it boils down to really what I would say are two interlocking and mutually reinforcing reasons. First of all, because of how women are working and because of what we sort of call in the field, occupational segregation, so the fact that women are really focused, a lot of women are really focused in specific sectors. Things like healthcare, education, home care, childcare.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

What happened to those jobs in the pandemic and how at risk they became, they were, in one sense, essential, but in other senses really vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic. And also, on the other end of this sense of occupational segregation that women are really still not in many sectors that are the sectors that pay good wages.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

So, what's considered a non-traditional occupation for women is any sector that's [inaudible 00:06:40] 25% of women in that sector. So, there are still too many occupations that don't have enough women in them, and they are often the high paying, good jobs. So, both of those things showed up in the pandemic. Then, second thing that's reinforcing, as I said, is really the apparent impact that I think went unnoticed for too long and really, really just became visible, the lack of our country's care infrastructure. So, the... Things like paid leave and childcare and elder care that are critical to staying connected to the workforce, having those good supports.

**Gene Marks:**

Yeah. Those things always seem to fall on the shoulders of the woman in the family. And as much progress as women have made over the years, there is still systemic unfairness and things that do need to be righted. So, let's go back to the first issue that you said about, there are jobs, high paying jobs that women, that lack of representation of women. So, what do you want to do about that? What are your plans? Do you have any initiatives planned to do something?

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

Yeah. I mentioned this earlier, the Women's Bureau, part of our mission is to innovate and we are actually allowed to spend parts of our budget on, for example, grants programs. So, I mentioned earlier that I had worked in philanthropy and a lot of philanthropy is innovation. So, I've been learning about one of our principal grant programs. It's commonly referred to as WANTO, but it's Women in Apprenticeships and Nontraditional Occupations.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

So, it's really structured to think about what can we be doing more of in the pre-apprenticeship space or apprenticeship space to make sure that more women are getting into those pipelines to good jobs, more people of color are getting into pipelines to good jobs. What we're learning from that space is what's required is certainly the education and training, but it's also things like making sure that we're addressing discrimination and harassment in those workplaces, making sure that women who are entering those spaces have good mentorship programs, making sure that employers are highly attentive to these things.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

So, there's both a role for the participant and there's a clear role for the employer in those nontraditional occupations, to make sure that women are really welcomed there, people of color are really welcome there.

**Gene Marks:**

You had said that there's... You are discovering as you're learning, you're three months on the job now, so I'm sure you're still very much in the learning process. So, there are grants for apprenticeships. I'm going to get back to discrimination and harassment in a minute, but with the grants and apprenticeships, are these grants, as far as you know, are they geared, are they paid to businesses that can bring on women and apprenticeship positions? Or are they paid directly to the employee to take those apprenticeships?

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

It's actually to, for example, community intermediaries that can be working both with the women who are seeking these jobs and seeking getting into these pipelines to good jobs, but also at the employers themselves. So, it's really a bridging role where the intermediary in the community has a relationship with both and can really help to create that bridge and create the awareness of what it's going to take to get more women into these jobs.

**Gene Marks:**

I'm curious what your thoughts are on women being attracted to certain of those jobs and doing that. I mean, is it because they're not in that environment, they haven't been raised that way, they weren't exposed to those kinds of opportunities when they were younger, the reason why... My daughter goes to... Well, my son was an engineering student. There were like three women in his entire program and the rest were just guys.

**Gene Marks:**

Meanwhile, my daughter goes to vet school and there's like 125 people in her class. There were like four guys in her class, you know what I mean? It's like there's this science can apply to both genders, but it's almost as if some genders are more drawn to other types of sciences. I was curious what your thoughts are on that.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

Yeah. I have a couple of things that are coming to mind. I mean, I think just even in my lifetime, I've seen the conversation about women in STEM move from women who are in the workforce age to much younger, young girls who are in seventh, eighth grade, approaching high school, and really thinking about what kind of career do you want? And look, here's an example of somebody who's been successful. Another woman who's gone before you who's been successful in that. Your aspirations are limitless.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

So, I think that that conversation changed a bit -- quite a bit, obviously for the positive. I think, there's a part of me that wants to say that girls are socialized very differently still. I'm personally doing everything I can to disrupt it as I raise two young boys away from gender norms and gender stereotypes that have negative impact later on.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

But, really, I think, I've watched the conversation on, for example, the gender wage gap and really disagree with the part of the argument that says that women are choosing jobs. When you're socialized over and over and over again, some of our data, our data are showing, for example, the point you made earlier about the disproportionate role that...or the disproportionate responsibility that women have for caregiving and women are, this is data say, women are spending twice as much time caregiving and the impact that that had in the pandemic to women's labor force participation. These aren't choices there, there's still a lot of socialization that happens. And as you move into these jobs that are considered nontraditional, there's a lot of harassment discrimination. So, I think, that we're addressing all sides of that is really important. And we have a lot of work to do left.

**Gene Marks:**

So, let's talk about the discrimination and harassment, because I have some questions for you about that. But even before we do, I wrote a couple of years ago about how the one country that has a high amount of women in the STEM fields is Russia, which goes back decades because in the 1960s, during the Cold War, particularly under Khrushchev, they said that, "To catch up with America, we're going to be spending all of our significant amount of money on scientific programs, space program, engineering," all that kind of stuff.

**Gene Marks:**

A lot of the families of young girls back then said, "Well, we need to have our daughters go, because that's... We're going to follow the money. That's where it is." Now, when you look at Russian society, there is a significantly higher percentage of women that are in those fields.

**Gene Marks:**

So, it's not a choice. It is not. I mean, they were socialized at an early age to say, "We want you to do this, do it." And women responded. So, it's just interesting to see, I mean, government really does play a role in those decisions, at least to open up the opportunities for females. Okay. So, discrimination and harassment. So, Wendy, I mean, there is the EEOC, obviously, that oversees those kinds of things. What are you doing at the Women's Bureau to protect women from discrimination and harassment in the workplace? And what do I, as an employer, need to know about that?

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

Yeah. I'm sure that you have been tracking the public policy conversation, that Paycheck Fairness Act, which just the House. So, some of the recent conversation that we've been having is, what's the stuff that we still need to bring to the surface about pay disparity? What are the ways in which both public policy, but

also employers can change practice to make sure that, on the public policy side, that laws are in place to prevent discrimination, on the employer practice side, to make sure that employers are taking every step really looking at best practice on things like self-audits to make sure that you're able to identify with data the structural issues that may be across your business, your firm in terms of bias.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

If there is any inequity and things like certainly compensation, but recruitment of candidates, negotiations and salary, every point at which you evaluate employees, every opportunity for a new work assignment that builds experience and expertise in your career and on the job, and the opportunities for advancement. Things like training and development and promotions. So, I think there is a lot of room for work to be done on that front as well.

**Gene Marks:**

What role will the Women's Bureau play in the ongoing conversation about paid leave and your involvement so far in things like the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, and getting tax credits for businesses that provide people with time off, what role will you guys play?

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

Yeah. A big one, I'm hoping. Also reflecting on the work that we've already done. So, when you asked the question about discrimination, there is also a very, I think, ever-present sort of caregiving discrimination or caregiving penalty that certainly women, who are doing the lion's share of the caregiving, still face. So, when I mentioned earlier the innovation role that the Women's Bureau has played and continues to play, a couple of years ago, the Women's Bureau invested, I think, a couple of rounds of grant making to states and locales that were working with certainly local government, advocates, and also, importantly, employers on really thinking about if we were to design a paid leave program for our community, what would work best? What would it need to look like to make sure that it's equitable, has incredible impact, and works for both workers and employers.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

So, going even back to those innovations and grant programs and what we learned through that, and certainly the most recent conversation the president initiated last week in his speech, the joint session speech on the American Families Plan, knowing that things like paid leave are incredibly important for all workers and especially women to stay connected to work. I mean, the headline last fall, as school started again, and you had even more moms dropping out of the workforce, was the "shecession". And understanding that 1.6 million fewer moms with young kids, kids under 18, were working at the beginning of this year than were a year ago when the pandemic started. And knowing that for African-American moms, for Latino moms, that the statistics are worse, they're more dire.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

So, really thinking through a paid leave program that is going to be equitable, have the most impact, knowing that the FMLA, the Family Medical Leave Act is still the only policy on the books, importantly, make sure that a worker has unpaid leave, but doesn't reach the whole workforce. From a lot of workers taking unpaid leave, just is impossible for your family's bottom line.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

So, one of the things that importantly came out of the American Rescue Plan and also was predated by the Families First Coronavirus-

**Gene Marks:**

Response Act.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

... Act, as you mentioned, are tax credits to make sure that employers are supported and workers are supported to take that emergency paid leave. So, one of the resources that we can help elevate through this conversation are the ARP, American Rescue Plan tax credits, which are available to employers April 1st through September 30th of this year.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

Really making sure, the IRS is working hard to make sure that those tax credits are easy to claim. We'll include a link to the fact sheet here. And importantly also for folks who are getting vaccinated. So, it's to make sure that people have the time to get vaccinated. I just haven't gotten my second shot this weekend, know that it takes a few days to recover. So making sure that people can take the time that they need to get vaccinated, recover from the vaccination, but also other COVID reasons why people have needed time away from work, kids and childcare, your own illness, I'm sure that you're taking care of folks, or family members who may have been impacted by COVID.

**Gene Marks:**

It's funny when you talk about paid leave, I don't think there's a lot of debate about the importance of it and obviously the impact that it has on women. What freaks employers out, of course, it's just, who's going to pay for it? Part of your job is you're very influential in crafting this policy, because you're coming at it from the aspect of, we need to make sure that we are protecting women's workers as part of all of this.

**Gene Marks:**

Do you get involved in the discussions as to how something like this would be paid for? I mean, for example, offering tax credits to employers that provide, this paid off, it sounds like, as long as they're refundable tax credits, that sounds like a very interesting option for employers. But are those the conversation that you do get involved in as part of your job?

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

Yeah. I think wearing, I'll straddle two hats that I was wearing. I was saying earlier in the conversation that I spent the last 10 years working with cities and states and local communities in creating their own paid leave programs and have learned a lot from those programs. So, those are often almost always designed as programs that both employees and employers pay into and they're designed as a widely shared insurance program.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

I think we learned a lot from the states that set those up about how they worked, that they were certainly a benefit to employers, employees, that they were pennies on the dollar in terms of the support that they could provide their workers while also saving money in terms of costs to rehire, costs to [inaudible 00:22:54] when you lose a worker.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

I think, what the president announced last week in terms of the American Families Plan is important, it's a continuation of what we learned and saw worked last year under the Families First Coronavirus Response, the commitment to extending those tax credits and then importantly taking the next step about how would we do this on a permanent basis, really to ensure that all workers and all employers are covered. So, on that front, we take our cues from the White House and really are folding in all lessons, lessons from the states, lessons from what was provided last year, really just in time to meet the moment.

**Gene Marks:**

I know we have limited time left. So, I just have a couple final question for you, Wendy, first of all, obviously you're working in a very, very bi-partisan environment, a very divided Congress. We don't know what will happen in the midterms, all of that. What can you at the Women's Bureau get done without congressional approval? What can happen that would give some thought to women workers and also their employers?

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

I mean, maybe the summary of our entire conversation is we have an obligation and an opportunity to meet the moment of what has happened to workers broadly, our economy broadly, and really specifically women, women of color in the pandemic. And so, I would say that our megaphone right now is to make sure that we, as the Women's Bureau, are addressing equity and wages and working conditions, and specifically in the sectors where women and especially women of color are represented, sometimes overrepresented.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

So, looking at the care sectors, the health and healthcare sectors, education, and those are really importantly addressed and high priorities for the administration and I think for Congress. Making sure that women are connected to pathways to good jobs and really looking at the opportunities that the American Jobs Plan has laid out.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

Again, talking about lifting the profile even further of reducing caregiving penalties for women. So, keeping the conversation going and elevated about paid family medical leave, about childcare, about elder care. Again, these are all top of mind, top priority conversations that are happening in Congress. Then, doing everything we can to eliminate gender-based discrimination in the workplace itself through things like equal pay and knowing that those policy conversations are also top priorities in Congress.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

So, I see our country demanding that we keep the attention and spotlight on these. I see the administration certainly, and also Congress, really debating and deciding what needs to happen and responding to what needs to happen in this moment. This economy, I've said before, only works to the extent that it works for women. So, this is our opportunity to address that.

**Gene Marks:**

Wendy, just the final words about just yourself, personally, I mean, say you have this job for the next eight years. You're happy at it, and then you're done after eight years, let's assume, and you go off and do something else and you look back 20 years from then. You say, "Man, my time as director of the Women's Bureau, I really accomplished these one or two big things and I'm really proud of it." What would that be?

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

Yeah. I have to say, personally, it's to make sure that we have paid leave... It's to make sure that we have child- and elder care at the level that we need it, with as much support as we need it, with as much understanding that these are bottom line, common cause, public good types of things, they are critically important not just for workers, they're critically important for employers and they are a shared common good that we need as a country. This is what will keep our economy going and strong, keeps us competitive in the context of the rest of the world, which often has more than what we have established here. I think that's what will make the difference.



**Gene Marks:**

Wendy Chun-Hoon is the Director of the Women's Bureau at the Department of Labor. Wendy, just thank you so much. Great information. I mean, we'll be back to you in eight years and we'll see if you actually got these things accomplished. Because you're set on doing it and I hope you do accomplish them. I think they're great goals to have. And I do think, as an employer, the initiatives that you've got going on benefit, obviously not just female employees, but listen, happy employees means a happy workplace and that means productivity and good things for employers as well. So, thank you very much for your time.

**Wendy Chun-Hoon:**

Gene, thank you so much. I'm up for the challenge. We are up for up the challenge. It's time.

**Gene Marks:**

I'm glad to hear it. I'm glad to hear it. Well, thank you. Everybody, this has been Gene Marks. You've been listening to the Paychex Business Series podcast. If you'd like more information and help and advice on running your business, visit us at [paychex.com/worx](https://paychex.com/worx). Again, I want to thank again, my guest, Wendy Chun-Hoon, we will be back with another episode sometime shortly, we will see you soon. Take care.

**Speaker 3:**

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