

# ‘She-cession’ cessation: Women’s employment hits record high, but hardships endure

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By  
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**ROUGH RETURN:** Erin Thibeault went back to work as a teacher this fall after having a child but didn't expect the trouble she and her husband had in finding day care for her daughter. PBN PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

After taking the entire 2022-2023 school year off for maternity leave, Erin Thibeault wasn't just eager to return to work as a first grade teacher in East Providence; she had to.

While time off work was necessary to care for her now 1-year-old daughter, Thibeault says she was bound by contract to go back to work this fall or she'd risk losing her job. On top of that, Thibeault's family of four could only live on her husband's salary as a Cranston firefighter for so long.

One thing stood between Thibeault and the classroom: finding child care for her daughter.

“I didn’t want to lose my position, but we were scrambling,” Thibeault said.

Thibeault says she and her husband spent months contacting child care centers. Several had a waitlist until 2025 and most had reduced their hours in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, making it nearly impossible for Thibeault and her husband to get their daughter to and from day care with their work schedules.

To make matters worse, monthly child care costs have skyrocketed in recent years.

“You know there was no flexibility with our hours or finagling it – we needed definite care,” Thibeault said. “We were surprised just how expensive the day care is.”

Thibeault is not alone in dealing with this dilemma.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in March 2020, women across the state and country disproportionately bore the brunt of job losses, in part because of their caregiving responsibilities.

It was dubbed the “she-cession,” and while the worst of the pandemic has long passed and its effects on the workforce have faded, nearly four years later, financial obstacles remain for women trying to flock back to the workplace.

The employment situation has clearly improved.

In 2022, Rhode Island’s labor force participation rate for people ages 25 to 54 reached 86.1% – the highest it’s been since 2007, according to data from the R.I. Department of Labor and Training. This rebound has been spurred by increasing participation from women. The female workforce in Rhode Island averaged about 260,000 in 2020 in the depths of the near economic shutdown during the pandemic, and jumped to an average of 281,000 in 2022.

At the same time, unemployment for women averaged 2.8% in the first 10 months of 2023, when overall unemployment stood at 3.3%, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Populations Survey. That's quite a change from 2020 when female joblessness averaged 9.6%, compared with an overall unemployment of 9.3% in the same period.

"So, women are coming back into the labor force and they're finding jobs," said Donna Murray, DLT director of labor market information. "That's what the data is showing us."



KELLY NEVINS, Women's Fund of Rhode Island CEO / PBN FILE PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

But Kelly Nevins, CEO of the advocacy nonprofit Women's Fund of Rhode Island, says statistics don't tell the whole story.

Before the pandemic, observers say, a majority of women were employed in three sectors – education and health care; leisure and hospitality; and retail and wholesale trade – all of which were hit hard by the public health crisis.

Now that female labor force participation has reached new highs, women have returned in droves to those sectors, which also tend to have lower-paying jobs.

Meanwhile, Nevins says, women largely continue to struggle to get a foothold in traditionally male-dominated areas such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

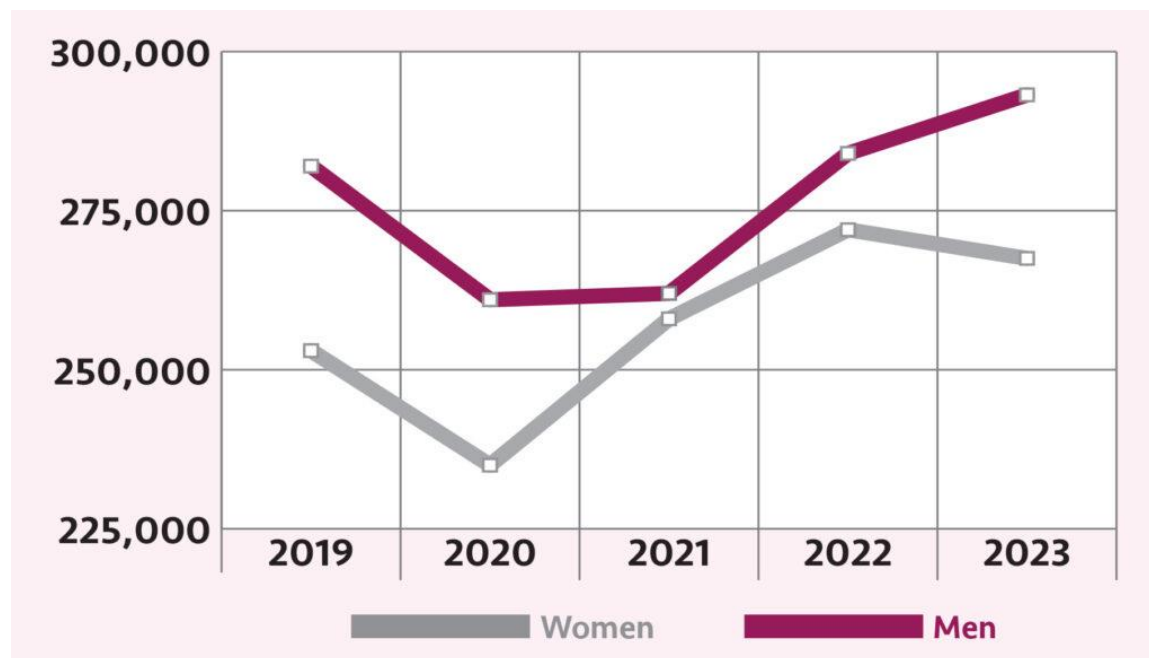
"We definitely still see [higher employment of women in] areas ... we call the 'pink sector,'" Nevins said. "Unfortunately, those are the ones that also tend to be lower paid and with lesser benefits."

As a result, even as the cost of living rises, wage gaps between men and women persist. U.S. Census data shows that the median annual earnings for Rhode Island women is \$43,394 versus \$53,544 for men.

Under those financial pressures, employment surveys show the caretaking duties that knocked women out of the workforce are still a hurdle on the way to returning to work, according to DLT Deputy Director Nora Crowley.

DLT data shows that 60% of women ages 25 to 54 who were not working in 2022 listed house and family care as the reason they were out of the labor force.

“We don’t want to suggest that child care costs, for instance, is no longer a barrier for families,” Crowley said. “It still is.”



NUMBER OF PEOPLE EMPLOYED IN R.I.: After a drop in the number of employed women in Rhode Island in 2020 (an average of 235,000), female employment figures recovered in 2021 and climbed higher in 2022 (an average of 272,000) than from before the pandemic. State labor officials attribute the dip in numbers for the first 10 months of 2023 to a decline in females in the prime working ages of 25-54. / SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey

## **CULTURE FIT**

Anita Bruno was one of those women whose work life was turned upside down during the COVID-19 pandemic and hasn't been the same since.

Bruno, a longtime carpenter, was working on a dormitory project at the Rhode Island School of Design when the pandemic hit in March 2020.

Even though the construction industry was largely protected because it was deemed essential and avoided shutdowns, Bruno had to leave her job because she couldn't find anyone to supervise her son, who was in middle school, when classes were taught through videoconferencing at home.

"[The pandemic] absolutely affected me and put me right out of work," Bruno said. "There were no afterschool programs that I could get him into. Everything was full."

Now more than three years later, Bruno's son has returned to school, but she has yet to return to construction sites full time. Instead, she takes odd jobs while she focuses on her position as a CEO and founder of R.I. Women in the Trades, a nonprofit that aims to support women pursuing careers in construction, a sector historically plagued by harassment and discrimination against female workers.

While progress on that front remains incremental, Bruno says the group scored a recent win when U.S. Rep. Seth Magaziner, D-R.I., led 10 members of Congress in sending a letter to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration last month, calling on the agency to ensure construction workers have access to bathrooms at construction sites.

While it may seem slow-going, Bruno says she reminds herself that "you only eat an elephant one bite at a time."

"Culture, that's what it's all about," she said. "We're trying to change the culture so our grandkids have the opportunities that we didn't."

Other sectors have reaped the rewards of a deeper talent pool by offering benefits such as remote work, flexible schedules and higher wages when possible.

Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island says a massive 73% of its 890 employees identify as female, nonbinary or transgender, and six of the nine members of its leadership team are women, including CEO Martha L. Wofford.

This is also true for Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island, as over the past four years its employees have been 78%-80% female, as well as 70% of the C-suite team, the insurer says.



ANASTASIA BERGMANN, <sup>[1]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>Blue Cross Blue & Shield of Rhode Island <sup>[1]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>Chief people officer /  
COURTESY BLUE CROSS & BLUE SHIELD OF RHODE ISLAND

Anastasia Bergmann, Blue Cross' chief people officer, says businesses within the health care industry have consistently employed a higher percentage of females because many of the leadership roles are filled by women and, in the case of Blue Cross, the insurer offers employees flexibility through benefits such as options to work remotely and enhanced bereavement.

"Flexibility means meeting employees where they are, but also meeting business needs," Bergmann said.

In fact, she says the company's flexible policies helped her navigate shifting family dynamics after her husband passed away.

This is when Bergmann said she took time off work to travel with her son and daughter, process her grief and assess what's best for her family. Bergmann decided she wanted to return to work, but even though her children did not need day care services, she wanted to have a work schedule flexible enough in which she could be present for their sports and activities and offer them support. This is what she found.




"It really felt like we were all in this together," Bergmann said.

## **CARE CRISIS?**

In order to open all sectors to women, advocates say there need to be improvements to Rhode Island's child care infrastructure, which many say has become much more difficult to navigate for both parents and care providers since the onset of the pandemic, in part because of a shrinking capacity.

Leanne Barrett, senior policy analyst at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Inc., says 14% of licensed family child care slots have been lost since January 2020, and many licensed day care operators have closed classrooms or are operating at half their licensed capacity because they cannot find enough workers at the wages offered.



CLASSROOM CONUNDRUM:  Khadija Lewis Khan, executive director of Beautiful Beginnings Child Care Center in Providence, says the challenges of finding day care for women returning to work have only gotten worse since the COVID-19 pandemic.  PBN PHOTO/ MICHAEL SALERNO

Khadija Lewis Khan, executive director of Beautiful Beginnings Child Care Center in Providence, says challenges with attracting and retaining early-education workers stretch back from before the pandemic.

A major part of these difficulties is the fact that the child care system's funding – and by extension workers' wages – is dependent on how much parents can pay. At \$13.97 per hour, child care educator wages are some of the lowest in Rhode Island, according to a letter written by a coalition of local industry leaders to Rhode Island's congressional delegation in November seeking support for emergency federal funding.

"I think any system that is really mostly based on what families can pay out of pocket is going to be [an] underfunded and under-resourced system," Lewis Khan said.

But these challenges have grown worse since the pandemic.

"At the same time that many businesses are calling people back into work [in offices] ... child care centers are struggling to stay open," Lewis Khan said. "And struggling to keep all their classrooms open and struggling to attract and retain the skilled workforce that we need to provide children with the best foundation in life."

While the early-education system was supported with relief funding through the American Rescue Plan Act, those funds are running dry, Lewis Khan says.

So far, Rhode Island providers received \$57 million in ARPA funds dedicated for "child care stabilization," and another \$37 million has been allocated in State Fiscal Recovery Funds to provide \$3,000 retention bonuses to early educators, according to the letter from the coalition called Right From the Start.

Despite this, rising costs make it more difficult to sufficiently compensate those who do stay in the industry.



“I’ve seen people leave for just different fields that have higher pay and a little less stress,” Lewis Khan said. “Educators who stay in the fields are going to have more stress because we still don’t have the funds to compensate them in the way that they deserve, for the educational attainment that they have, for the education and the skills that they have.”

These staffing shortages also lead to shorter hours and smaller class sizes, meaning many parents seeking child care are put on waiting lists.

That’s what happened to Thibeault, the East Providence teacher.

She spent more than three months calling, emailing and touring day care centers looking for placement for their daughter. Eventually, they found a slot at a center with hours that fit her and her husband’s work schedules.

She was able to return to work in the fall, but not without a price.

“[Day care is] literally more than our monthly mortgage costs,” Thibeault said.

*(Correction: An earlier version of this story gave an inaccurate account of her children. She has one daughter and one son.)*