

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of Working Nation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers; people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Sarita Gupta is the director of the Ford Foundation's Future of Work(ers) program, leading the team that oversees Ford's effort to actively shape the future of work, that puts workers and their wellbeing at the center. Sarita, thank you very much for joining us on Work in Progress.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

Thanks Ramona. It's great to be here.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Let's tell the audience what the Ford Foundation's Future of Work(ers) director initiative is all about.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

Sure. Well, at the Ford Foundation, we are committed to a mission of combating the drivers of inequality. And in that context, the foundation has recognized the deep inequalities that working people face. And so the Future of Work(ers) director program has a vision of building a future in which working people will experience basic economic security, dignity on the job and greater opportunity for themselves and the next generation.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

We intentionally named our program, the Future of Work(ers) director rather than the Future of Work, because we really believe that it's the future for working people that is in question, not only the ways in which work is changing. We believe the future is fundamentally about people. And therefore, we focus on the future of workers and how we can collectively develop a path to shared prosperity and economic security for all workers.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

So the program focuses on modernizing the social contract and labor policy, re-imagining the flow of capital and markets and fostering more responsible innovation and technology. And our work has focused on workers who have historically been excluded from labor protections; women, people of color, immigrants, many marginalized workers in low wage sectors of the economy in particular.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things that we try to emphasize, and I'd love to hear what you think about it, is how can businesses work with the workers to make sure that they have the skills they may need, because things are changing? Productivity can be pushed up by automation, but then people could be losing jobs. How do you make sure they're not left out of whatever equation it is buy a business?

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

That's a great question, Ramona. It's another core part of the Future of Work(ers) director program, is the importance of ensuring that working people have the ability to shape policies in their workplaces and the new economic models of our time. And so that point about worker voice and worker influence is really, really important.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

The future of work is not, as you've said, it's not just about automation. Automation is really important and we know it is taking place. But it's also about the fissuring workplaces as David Weil has talked about, right? Workplaces that are shifting in these dramatic ways, where workers are being contracted out or subcontracted. Often, today's average worker doesn't really know who their direct employer is, right? There's been mis-classification of workers and new business models that are emerging, that frankly undermine worker power.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

So we think there's a huge opportunity right now to strengthen the ability of workers to be able to come together collectively, to negotiate on the many issues that are impacting their lives. And we are hopeful that there are businesses out there who also understand that it's in their interest to ensure that workers have a voice and are helping to shape some of the solutions that many of them are challenged with in this moment.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

I think skilling and re-skilling and training for example, are really great examples of where there can be great partnership between workers and businesses. And I just want to caution that skills in training didn't cause the many problems I just described. So skills and trainings can't be the only solution. And in the only way that we see that kind of partnership and voice of workers.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

As we ask workers to become lifelong learners and upgrade their skills, we also need to upgrade the quality of jobs. So no one working full time should ever live in poverty. That is so basic yet it's still not the reality in our country. And that speaks directly to the role of employers and the role of businesses. It's important that we're creating new jobs. It's important that we're bettering the quality of the current jobs in ways that really ensure that workers have a fair chance to survive and thrive in our economy.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Who is the person who's leading that conversation? How do you get that worker voice into the conversation in a better way?

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

It's a great question, because of course, as you know, Ramona, we've seen really the incredible attacks on unions that have historically been the main vehicle by which workers can collectively have a voice in their workplace and negotiate and bargain actual contracts. And so one is, we have to continue to strengthen the ability of people to be able to form unions in their workplaces and uphold the kind of contracts that are negotiated.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

But in addition to that, I think in addition to unions playing a really important role, I think we see the growth of broader worker organizations right now. I think about the National Domestic Workers Alliance or the Restaurant Opportunity Center, Coworker.org. There's many organizations that are coming together; United for Respect. These are all examples of organizations where they are bringing together groups of workers who are trying to be really strategic and thoughtful about how they can be positioned to really shape both in the policy arena, labor policies and social policies, as well as employment practices.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

And I think that's important. Those groups in addition, in relationship to unions are really key. And then of course we've seen a set of partners in the business community who are actually saying, "Okay," if we take the example of health and safety in this moment of COVID, who are saying it is helpful to have health and safety committees of workers who are on the front lines, who know what they need in terms of promoting safety in the workplace, creating vehicles in their workplaces that really honor the voice, the dignity of workers in shaping many policies.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

So it's got to be led by workers. It's got to be led by worker organizations and unions. And we have to find the right set of employers and businesses that are also willing to be engaged in those conversations that ultimately can be a win-win for the businesses and can be a win-win for workers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things that the pandemic has shown, even though it existed before, was that people of color and women, a lot of times, are in the lower wage jobs and they're being impacted so much by the pandemic. This seems like a systemic problem that we should have been addressing before and we're not addressing. How do we address it now? How do we change this so that they are not bearing the brunt of a situation like this?

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

Yeah. Ramona it's so true that prior to the pandemic, many of the workers you're talking about, workers of color, women, workers who are in low wage sectors of the economy, absolutely were already feeling and experiencing incredible vulnerability, living paycheck to paycheck. And then you add the pandemic on top of it, it has absolutely had a disproportionate impact.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

And you see that in terms of, if you look at surging unemployment right now, right? If you look at the most recent figures, 10 million net job losses since February and underemployment is surging. One third of the unemployed are now long-term unemployed. Many of those who are unemployed or underemployed are women, people of color, or BIPOC, from BIPOC communities, low wage workers. And then on top of it, we've had this disproportionate health and economic impact. So black, indigenous, Latin X, and other people of color that are then compounded by gender, immigration status, geography, and age. It's had absolute disproportionate impacts.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

So just as by way of an example, young black women face unemployment rates of up to 20% versus 4.8% for middle aged white men, which is considered full employment. I mean, that gives you a sense of the incredible disproportionate impact that this pandemic has had on jobs and job security in particular.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

And then you couple that with what I would say is a flawed benefit system, because the other thing that the pandemic has revealed, is just how outdated our technology and our delivery systems of benefits are. That up to 35 million workers failed to receive stimulus checks up to three months after the CARES Act was passed, is an example of the disproportionate impact, because you know majority of those workers were in fact, black, indigenous, Latin X, and other people of color.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

So there's just been this disproportionate impact, and the way that I think that we address it is really to ensure that we're lifting up the importance again, of worker voice, worker power, bargaining power of workers is really critical. The second is that we really take advantage of how much this pandemic has revealed the inefficiencies and inequities that are baked into our benefits systems, especially unemployment insurance and figure out how in this moment, we have a really rare opening with a change in government. And with the surge in unemployment, to re-imagine and rebuild a benefits system that is both effective and equitable. And then how knowing in this pandemic but getting people back to work is a key priority for the US economic recovery plan.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

We know that pre-pandemic, many of the fastest growing job areas also provided the least economic security and mobility. So how can we ensure that people go back to jobs that provide decent pay, benefits and opportunities for advancement? And in addition to that, given the shifts in the labor market, due to the pandemic and economic downturn and some of the commitments we're hearing out of the Biden administration, in terms of investments that they are wanting to make, we can anticipate growth in several job areas, including public health and healthcare and renewable energy and disaster response work.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

These are all opportunities for us to figure out how do we better the quality of a set of jobs, but also in the investment of new jobs and new sectors of the economy, that we are creating good quality jobs and that they are accessible to low wage earners, they're accessible to black, indigenous, people of color, workers and women.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

One of the things you just brought up with the idea of benefits and gig workers, how do you make sure the gig workers get benefits? How do we create a system for domestic workers to get good benefits? People don't have that fallback. They don't have the sick leave. They don't have the vacation time. It feels like that's an area that we should be also focusing on.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

Absolutely Ramona. I think the other thing that the pandemic has revealed is the real lack of social protections that a vast majority of workers have in our country and frankly, globally today. This is not

just a US problem, it's a global problem. If you look at countries in the global South, what workers are experiencing in the global South in particular. I'm actually really inspired by the many calls for strengthening social protections in the US and abroad.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

And so in the US context, some of the really important work happening around the care economy right now, this massive commitment that President Biden has made to putting trillions of dollars. He's made a commitment of \$775 billion in this caring economy plan. That's inclusive of universal preschool, childcare, home and community-based services and Medicaid, and offers low-income and middle-class families a tax credit to help pay for childcare and increase pay for caregivers and early childhood educators.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

This is an example of where we can invest in a set of jobs and create new care jobs that are needed, given the demographic shifts in our country right now, and ensure that those jobs have the benefits attached to them, or have the ability for workers to access benefits. So the caring economy work that includes paid leave, for example, that really includes childcare supports and long-term care supports is really critical in this moment to make those kinds of investments that will make a difference for workers.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

So I think those are the types of opportunities that we have in front of us right now. And where I'm seeing from where I sit, so many important worker organizations and unions standing together and pushing for it in this moment, gives me a lot of hope that we will in fact, figure out how to address this bigger question you're asking of how do we ensure more people are actually covered under basic social protections.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Are there any examples of organizations you have come across and maybe have supported, that are doing this the right way, that are good role models for other organizations?

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

Sure. I mean, I would certainly lift up the work of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. I mean, I think NDWA has done incredible work through these Domestic Workers Bill of Rights campaigns across the country, where they've done a couple of things. One is really establish a set of labor standards. Again, this is a workforce that has been excluded from the Fair Labor Standard Act, and they don't have collective bargaining rights. So being able to create a set of labor standards and in that, alongside the incredible policy pushes they're making with these Bill of Rights. The most recent wins they had in Seattle and Philadelphia also created a structure in which workers, domestic workers would have an ongoing say in shaping wages, working conditions, and other kinds of benefits for the workers through the establishment of Standards Boards.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

So that then coupled with the work that NDWA has also been doing through their innovation side, is they've created a new benefits platform called [inaudible 00:16:17], where employers of domestic workers can contribute resources every month towards providing sick leave, paid leave, supports to

domestic workers, that domestic workers or vacation that they can access. So that, again, this is a way for domestic workers. Who've been completely cut out of these systems to have some ability to access benefits.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

That kind of multi-strategic approach, I think is important. There's work to be done in the policy arena, to establish standards, work to be done to ensure there's worker voice and power in the process and work to be done to create the kinds of benefits systems that frankly lead the way for what long-term benefits systems for other sets of workers have been excluded, could look like.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So Sarita, another area that we like to talk about here and hear people's thoughts on is, how do we contend with so many 40 plus workers who have lost their jobs? And what are the barriers for them finding another good job?

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

I'm so glad that you've raised that, because we do need to contend with the fact that so many 40 and older workers are losing their jobs. And so I would, again, connect it back to what workers broadly are experiencing during this recession. Like the surging unemployment that I talked about, the flawed benefits system, the racial inequities, the unequal recovery. We are in a moment of sort of a case shaped recovery.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

And so you add the fact that you're 40 or older, there's these immense stereotypes around older people being less technically proficient, which often contribute to the alienation of older workers during a hiring process. Employers sometimes view older people in a negative light, even if they'd never admit it publicly. There's an assumption of being less technically proficient. And then on top of that, many older workers are finding themselves in jobs that truly are transforming. And so we need to put supports in place that help with just transitions. I'm thinking about in relationship to a lot of the conversations around the green economy and the need for thinking about our response as a country to climate change and the need to shift jobs and the importance of just transitions in that, and again, this piece that you raised earlier about the importance of training and re-skilling of workers. All of those things are important factors that we need to be thinking about.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

When we think about newer sectors of the economy, there's a little bit of a bias we have that we're only thinking about young people being able to fill those types of jobs and to break open our own assumptions and break out of our stereotypes and to really imagine opportunities and how we create opportunities for the vast diversity of the workforce that we have in this country.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

And here's the reason why this is so important. One of the big fears that I have is, if we don't figure this out, we will have to confront millions and millions of older workers who will be aging into poverty, because they don't have the kind of jobs or jobs security, and on top of it, retirement security and the benefits that we've been talking about. All of that will contribute to immense poverty in the future. And

we have an opportunity to get in front of that now, and to be really thoughtful about the opportunities we're creating both for young people and for older workers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I couldn't agree more. And I think one of the things that employers forget is the experience that an older worker brings, especially someone who has been in a field for their whole career. They can bring in problem solving. They are going to look at something differently than a younger person's going to look at it.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

There's a good argument for a multi-generational workforce, for not only the benefit to the employer, but the benefit to the worker and to society. People are living longer. People don't want to be a burden. People want to be a part of society and contribute.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

That is exactly right. In addition to the experience and wisdom they bring, they can help long-term organizational knowledge, which is also very, very important in some of the sectors of the economy we're talking about, in workplaces that we're talking about. But all of that makes me think, Ramona, that's why this moment is so important for us to be holding a multi-generational frame on both the kinds of jobs we create, the kinds of protections we create in workplaces, but also our social policies.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

This takes me right back to the conversation about the care economy for example. We can't say it's only about childcare or paid leave and leave long-term care on the table. We actually have to talk about all families are experiencing job loss. They're experiencing the lack of a care infrastructure across generations. That's what's happening, so we need a multi-generational approach to the solutions that we put forward. And so I think centering in addition to everything we've talked about in terms of equity, it's really important that we are centering a multi-generational approach.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Sarita, after having spoken to you several times about this issue, I can see your passion for this. Where does that come from? What is your personal driving force?

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

Well, Ramona, I grew up in Rochester, New York, Kodak City. And my family immigrated when I was just a baby; I was about a year old. And so I grew up in Rochester through the whole period of Kodak downsizing and grew up in a community, a very working class community where I saw literally the livelihoods of people, their rugs being pulled out from under them. And I was pretty young, but I had friends whose parents were losing jobs and we're not finding other jobs that paid the same wages as they had received at Kodak and provided the same kind of benefits.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

So I sort of saw this transformation of the city I grew up in. And I think at a really young age, I was profoundly impacted by how devastating that was for families, how it immediately cut off economic opportunities for so many or limited economic opportunities for so many. But also, I could not wrap my

head around how it was that workers and in some cases, these families I'm talking about, had given generations of their families had been a part of building this major corporation. And suddenly they had no say, they had no voice in what would happen to them as Kodak was downsizing and what new kinds of jobs would get created or not.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

The lack of voice in agency in the process is something that, when I was eight or nine years old, I didn't have this language, but I could sense that something was wrong. And I think years later, as I began to study and understand the economy more, as I thought about labor policy and began doing worker organizing, I really came to appreciate that it was that early experience in my childhood that has really driven my passion for making sure workers have actual voice in agency. The importance of collective bargaining rights, the importance of workers and communities shaping their futures, being able to have a real voice in their future.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

And then I would couple that with the experience of being a woman of color, of being an immigrant in this country, and recognizing and learning the deep rooted systemic racism that has been baked into the design of our democracy, the design of our economy, and resulted in these immense exclusions from basic protections. And so that in itself, also sort of impassioned me. One of my early organizing days was with Jobs of Justice in Chicago. And when I got to Chicago, I recognized there was work being done, really great work happening with unions and I was seeing the growth of a Day Laborer workforce in the city, but there is no protections in place for these workers.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

And so I was a part of helping to start the first Day Laborer Center in Chicago. And that experience of being out at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, talking to workers at temp agencies, understanding what real challenges and barriers they were experiencing, mostly black, Latino, and Polish immigrant workers, it just gave me such a different appreciation and understanding of why it's important to center equity in this work, why it's important to center the need for us to really confront white supremacy, as we think about a next generation of labor and social policies and business practices and norms.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

So that's really where it's my childhood in Rochester, my experience in Chicago organizing Day Laborers and broader sets of low wage immigrant workers, that have really fed this passion that I have.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Well, I think all workers are lucky to have you as a champion; someone who has compassion, understanding, and knowledge, and I really appreciate you talking to us about it.

Sarita Gupta, Ford Foundation Future of Work(ers) director:

Thank you so much, Ramona. It's been great chatting with you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Sarita Gupta of the Ford Foundation. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of Working Nation. Thank you so much for listening.