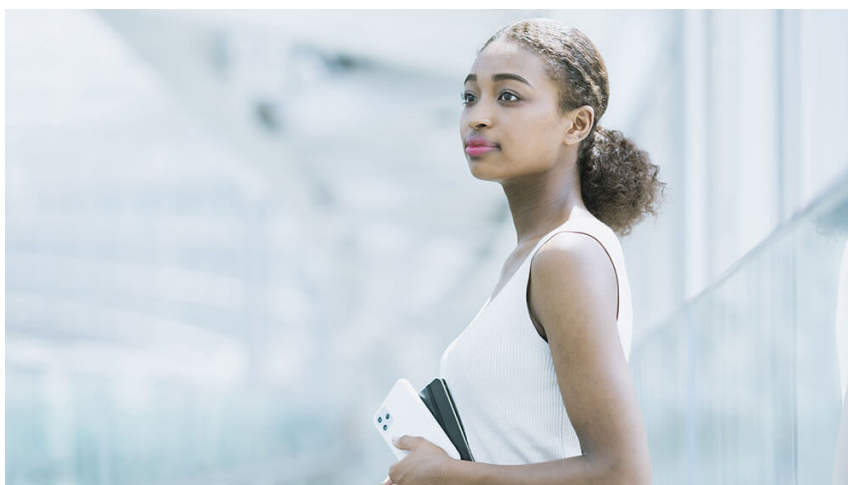




When It Comes to Work, Women Are More Negatively Impacted by the COVID Crisis

Author: Michelle Russell



McKinsey's Women in the Workplace annual report reveals that one in four women from the 40,000 polled is considering downshifting her career or leaving the workforce because of COVID-19. Black women are coping with greater impact of the health crisis on the Black community, the report points out.

McKinsey & Company has released its sixth annual Women in the Workplace (https://wiw-report.s3.amazonaws.com/Women_in_the_Workplace_2020.pdf) — the largest comprehensive study of the state of women in corporate America — and its subtitle, "Corporate America Is at a Critical Crossroads" establishes from the onset that this has been a year like none other, especially for women in the workforce. The survey of more than 40,000 employees at 47 companies in the U.S. and Canada finds that one in four women is considering downshifting her career or leaving the workforce because of COVID-19.

That decision has already been made for many. Women, especially women of color, are more likely to have been laid off or furloughed during the pandemic, stalling their careers and jeopardizing their financial security. The COVID-19 crisis has also exacerbated challenges women — who bear a disproportionate portion of childcare responsibilities and household labor — have previously faced in the workplace. "Now," the report states, "the supports that made this even possible for women — including school and childcare — have been upended," as many women are juggling remote work with caring for children and overseeing their schoolwork.

At the same time, Black women are coping with a greater impact of the health crisis on the Black community — and, the report points out, "the emotional toll of repeated instances of racial violence falls heavily on their shoulders."

"If there was a panic button, we'd be hitting it," Rachel Thomas, CEO of the nonprofit LeanIn.org and co-author of the report, told Quartz (<https://qz.com/work/1911086/covid-19-has-working-mothers-considering-a-career-step-back>), in a story about the report. If women follow through on scaling back on their careers, she said, it would reverse years of progress that have been made in gender diversity since the Women in the Workplace study began — including a 22-percent increase in women in the C-suite since 2015.

That's substantiated by the report's findings that senior-level women are one-and-a-half times as likely as men to say that they are thinking of scaling back because of COVID-19, mostly because they are experiencing burnout. Many at this level are also parents, the report notes, and women "are often held to higher performance standards

than men and they may be more likely to take the blame for failure — so when the stakes are high, as they are now, senior-level women could face higher criticism and harsher judgment."

If there is a silver lining in the shift to remote work during the pandemic, it's that organizations will most likely embrace it after the crisis, opening up opportunities for mothers, caregivers, and people with disabilities.

But that seismic change in the workplace also has major implications for the events industry. According to the report, "The shift to remote work means less business travel: Many companies are reconsidering the need to have employees travel for face-to-face meetings and events. More than nine in 10 companies say they will cut business travel moderately or significantly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and only about one in 100 companies expect business travel to increase."

RELATED: [Why Did Four Times More Women Than Men Leave the Workforce in September?](https://www.pcma.org/more-women-left-workforce-than-men-september/)
(<https://www.pcma.org/more-women-left-workforce-than-men-september/>)



McKinsey
& Company

LEAN IN

The report offers six areas where organizations should focus or expand their efforts when it comes to female employees.

Offering Solutions

Taking into account all of the data about how employees are faring during the COVID-19 crisis, two trends stand out, the report states: "First, women are having a worse experience than men. Second, women aren't all having identical experiences. Black women, Latinas, Asian women, LGBTQ+ women, and women with disabilities are facing distinct challenges. It's important for companies to understand this so they can address those challenges directly."

The report offers six areas where organizations should focus or expand their efforts:

- 1 **Make work more sustainable** — Leaders and managers need to look at productivity and performance expectations set before COVID-19 and assess if they are still realistic. They can also find ways to give employees extra time off.
- 2 **Revisit norms around flexibility** — Organizations should look for ways to help set work/life boundaries, including establishing set hours for meetings and policies for responding to emails outside of normal work hours.
- 3 **Take a close look at performance reviews** — Given the shift to remote work and heightened challenges workers are coping with in their personal lives, employers should reassess performance criteria set before the pandemic and bring it into line with what employees can reasonably achieve and communicate that in order to prevent burnout and anxiety.
- 4 **Take steps to minimize gender bias** — This includes bias training, so that the higher performance standards set for women, harsher judgment for mistakes, and penalties for being mothers don't become more pronounced during COVID-19.
- 5 **Adjust policies and programs to better support employees** — Employers may need to reallocate resources to the programs that are most valuable for their workers right now.
- 6 **Strengthen employee communication** — One in five employees said they have consistently felt in the dark about organizational decisions impacting them during COVID-19. Organizations need to provide regular updates on the state of business and key decisions affecting staff, and communicate with empathy, so that they feel valued and understood.

Michelle Russell (mailto:mrussell@pcma.org) is editor in chief of Convene.

© October 1, 2020





MEMBERS GET MORE.

JOIN TODAY