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What Does 2022 Hold for Women in the Workplace?

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Toward the end of 2020, [we explored the data](#) telling us that *four times* as many women than men had dropped out of the workforce. That meant the female labor force participation rate had returned to numbers not seen since 1985. This huge reversal of gender equality efforts was alarming. At that time, there was hope that a new presidency and promises of the COVID-19 vaccine would help turn the situation around. More than a year later, the numbers evolved—and they continued to evolve throughout 2022. As we reflect in 2023, how are women faring in the workplace and how can employers respond?

The State of Women in the Workforce: Early 2022

The stark fact is that, more than a year since we first reported on it, the female labor force participation rate was still dismally low—the lowest it had been in 33 years.

That said, according to the [2021 Women in the Workplace](#) report by McKinsey and LeanIn.Org, there were noticeable gains in the number of women in leadership positions. However, even this small progress has come at a cost—women were reporting significantly more burnout. Shockingly, the ratio of burnout in women versus men almost doubled in the course of a year. As a result, one in three women said they were considering leaving the workforce or at least downshifting their career (increased from the one in four during 2020).

This came at a time when women in the workforce were more needed than ever. The data says female leaders are much more likely than their male counterparts to act as advocates for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. They are also more apt to support their colleagues during work-life challenges, whether it's providing emotional support, navigating workloads, or helping to prevent burnout. The challenge is that these efforts are frequently undervalued and underrecognized—less than a quarter of companies in the McKinsey survey were recognizing this type of work in formal evaluations and performance reviews.

Besides burnout and lack of recognition, women at the start of 2022 continued to receive a lack of flexibility and benefits that would truly help them achieve optimal work-life balance. For women of color, the reality was even more challenging—they left the workforce at an even greater rate.

Changes in the Lives of Women in the Workplace

By the time McKinsey and LeanIn.Org released their most recent [Women in the Workplace report](#) in late 2022, the data was already evolving. While women continue to leave their roles,

they're increasingly driven by aspiration. They're seeking promotions into senior-level roles and choose companies that support their career goals.

Lack of advancement opportunities put companies particularly at risk of losing Black women—59% of whom seek top executive positions—and young women, who are placing greater importance on career growth than in the past.

The Impact of Remote Work

When Slayton conducted our [own workplace survey](#) toward the end of 2021, we found that a mere 16.7% of organizations were operating fully in-office. The rest were divided between hybrid and remote work. By the end of 2022, this number already [shot up to 21%](#)—and 13% of hybrid companies expected a return to full-time in-office work.

Many organizations believe remote and hybrid working models fulfill the need for flexibility for workers, particularly women, who struggle with challenges like childcare, disrupted school schedules, and other family needs (the [number of working women](#) who were also responsible for childcare had tripled from pre-pandemic numbers to 48%). How, then, does this account for the [nearly 70% of women](#) who believe their career progression will slow down due to the disruption that COVID has wreaked on their routines? And how will the decline of “flexible” work environments affect the [40% of women](#) who cite negative consequences to their physical and mental health?

On top of this disparate situation, the fact is [women are 26% more likely](#) than men to apply to work remotely. That reality means more men are in the office than women, and more conversations are happening in the office as a result. There's a [significant worry](#) among academics and gender-equality advocates that employers will—whether overtly or subconsciously—favor in-office employees. In many cases, it's only natural that unscheduled, off-the-cuff conversations at the watercooler and in the hallways lead to unexpected opportunities and new ideas. Some [leaders have expressed](#) this sentiment publicly—Jamie Damon, CEO of JPMorgan, commented that, “ doesn't work for those who want to hustle. It doesn't work for spontaneous idea generation. It doesn't work for culture.”

Thus, not only are hiring, retention, and employee engagement efforts tinged by a proximity bias, but there is a growing stereotype that those who take advantage of remote work are somehow less ambitious. This trend is hurting those who have little choice but to remain partially or fully remote. It's little surprise, then, that [51% of women](#) feel pessimistic about their career prospects.

How Companies Can Respond Going Forward

Employers who continue to provide remote work—and this is becoming the norm—must recognize that it requires a more nuanced strategy than simply offering the option. Intentionality around meeting times and platforms, culture- and team-building, and opportunities for collaboration and idea-sharing is critical.

A recent CEO World article highlighted four action steps leaders can address to help retain and attract women in the workforce. First, as already mentioned, an overwhelming number of female leaders and workers are also responsible for childcare. As such, meeting the needs of working mothers is essential. Remote work certainly helps, but it's not the only strategy (and not always the most effective strategy, either, as discussed above). Evaluating workday schedules, finding a way to offer or subsidize childcare, and valuing flexibility are going to be key approaches in keeping these essential workers at their best.

Other considerations are evaluating pay structures (raises and bonuses should be equal, regardless of whether a worker chooses to be in-person or remote), implementing empathy (learning to understand each other and how best to offer support and respect), and providing meaningful development opportunities (with the appropriate tools to help improve career satisfaction).

Real World Examples of Supporting Women in the Workplace

It's one thing to talk through these challenges at a high level, citing data and posing solutions. It's another thing to take the first step and implement proactive, thoughtful strategies that tangibly work to solve the problem at hand. Here are some great examples of companies that are genuinely seeking gender equality and inclusion.

[P&G](#) has positioned themselves as a leader in creating a gender-equal environment. They are a corporate partner of LeanIn.org, with more than 4,000 of their female workers participating in peer-to-peer programs around the world. They also helped found the Leading Executives Advancing Diversity (LEAD) Network, in an effort to attract, retain, and advance women in the retail and consumer industry. They have countless other corporate partnerships focused on gender equality and inclusion, and regularly launch research studies and publish reports on the topic, with the goal of awareness and action.

[Etsy](#) has rolled out two concrete strategies for achieving intentional flexibility in their

workplace. They already offered a hybrid work model, with workers allowed to work from home a handful of days per week; but now their executive team has committed to following the same model, which effectively helps them avoid proximity bias. Secondly, they have implemented “Prime Time” where all meetings must be held between 11am-2pm—which allows workers to design their workdays any way that best accommodates their needs. Both of these new rollouts help women in the workplace achieve better career satisfaction and development.

[Patagonia](#) is another example of a company doing what it takes to protect employees who are working parents. During their 2021 performance reviews, they chose not to consider any pre-pandemic performance goals, with the understanding that such a disruption likely turned performance on its head. Additionally, even before the pandemic, the company offered on-site childcare to all their employees. As a result, Patagonia reports that parents have been less likely to quit than non-parents in their workplace.

Finally, [Conagra](#) is an example of company whose D&I efforts, including gender equality, are reflected in concrete programs, initiatives, and policies. They have a variety of Employee Resource Groups, including one specifically for supporting women in their professional and personal lives.

Women in the Workplace in 2023 and Beyond

Ultimately, the numbers of female workforce participation are dismal, and many women are losing hope for their career prospects. However, the pandemic has universally disrupted the way companies address their employment models, and it’s fair to say that the hard work of understanding and responding to the implications of this shift has only just begun. When Fortune 500s and other well-known companies make big moves to better support their entire workforce, equally and inclusively, the example is being set and others are sure to follow. We look forward to a positive trajectory for women in the workplace over the course of 2023 and beyond.

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