

Gender

Women Can't Go Back to the Pre-Pandemic Status Quo

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Summary. Survey data collected in 2018 and 2019 from Harvard Business School graduates revealed that for women — and especially women of color — well-being at work was suffering long before the pandemic. While 17% of all respondents said that they often or very... [more](#)

Two years on, the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on workers' health and well-being are staggering. In addition to lost income and unemployment, the stresses of working or looking for work during the worst public health crisis in generations have taken a punishing toll.

Remote work, while literally a life-saver and certainly a job-saver for those to whom it's been available, has come with costs. Younger workers have struggled to establish critical workplace relationships. The ability to work at any time has turned into working all the time. Parents and caregivers have been stretched past the breaking point. Remote workers who live alone have endured grueling isolation during lockdowns.

Meanwhile, workers whose jobs can't be done remotely have faced the direct threat of the coronavirus, as well as angry and anxious customers and clients, whose outbursts further exacerbate the stress of working through a pandemic.

Wouldn't it feel good to rewind the clock? The answer, it turns out, is no — at least not for many workers. Well-being at work was suffering before the pandemic, and women of color, in particular, were bearing the brunt of poor workplace experiences.

Women Experienced Higher Rates of Burnout and Adverse Health Impacts Before the Pandemic

In late 2018 and early 2019, we collected data from Harvard Business School MBAs working full time in a variety of fields. We asked how often they felt burned out by work, as well as how frequently work experiences had a negative impact on their mental or physical health.

Across the board, the percentage of women who said they experienced burnout, poor mental health, and even physical health issues stemming from work “often or very often” was larger than the percentage of men who reported the same.

Burnout revealed especially stark differences: While 17% of all respondents said that they often or very often experienced burnout, a quarter of women said they did. The proportion neared 30% when we looked at women of color. (The proportion of white women reporting this level of burnout was about 23% — notably lower than women of color but still higher than nearly all men.) In fact, more than 30% of Latinas, Black women, and South Asian women said they felt burned out often or very often.

The pattern held when we looked at the proportion of respondents who said their mental or physical health was often or very often negatively impacted by work. (We asked about mental and physical health separately.) More women than men reported these ill effects, with more than 10% of women of color saying that work negatively impacted their physical or mental health often or very often.

While that proportion may sound small, it would have a significant impact on the kinds of organizations that our sample of MBA grads often work for — large, prominent corporations and professional service firms that struggle to retain and advance employees of color.

In addition, the mental health of Millennial women stood out as especially at risk, with close to 20% of both white women and women of color reporting that it was negatively impacted by work often or very often. Men fared quite a bit better, though South Asian, Black, and Latinx men fared less well than white men, of whom about 6% reported frequent negative impacts on either physical or mental health.

Women Were Looking to Switch Jobs Before the Great Resignation

Remember, these results present a snapshot of what work felt like more than a year before Covid-19 exploded around the world, before lockdowns and school closures, before worries about layoffs and supply chain disruptions, before workers had to hope that managers heretofore untrained on remote work were fairly and compassionately assessing their performance.

It should come as no surprise, then, that stressed-out women workers were thinking about switching jobs long before the Great Resignation.

Researchers have long known that stress is a significant driver of job exits. Women and employees of color are often not more likely to quit their jobs than white men when all other factors are constant — but factors that actually drive exits may be more prevalent in their work experiences. For instance, in a classic meta-analysis of turnover, one component of the stress that leads to job exits was role conflict, which happens when an employee is expected to take on responsibilities that contradict or impede one another. This is something that women of color often face when they are expected to lead “diversity work” on top of their existing roles without concomitant changes from the organization to enable change.

Separate from stress, lack of job growth also drives turnover, with workers more likely to stay at a job when they believe they have a reasonable chance of being promoted in the coming months. We know from decades of research that women — and again particularly women of color — face gender-based barriers to career advancement.

When we asked our survey respondents how likely they were to pursue or take a new job within the next year, around 20% of women across racial groups and generations said they were “very” or “extremely” likely to do so. Millennial men were the only generation with exit intentions on par with their female peers, while the proportion of Gen X and Baby Boomer men who expressed strong intention to change jobs hovered between 10% and 15%. Undoubtedly, this difference is in part a function of younger worker’s career stage, but we also found that Millennial men reported more burnout and negative health impacts from work than older men.

That 20% of women were eyeing the door before the pandemic doesn’t bode well for companies’ attempts to keep their leadership pipeline from shrinking. Indeed, a global McKinsey

survey conducted in the wake of Covid-19 suggests that the situation is worsening: its results indicated that 35% of white women are planning to leave their job in the next three to six months, as are 46% of women of color.

We Can't Return to the Status Quo

Looking at how people really felt pre-pandemic makes clear that a return to that status quo is untenable. It's safe to say that one driver of women's greater stress and burnout in our findings was the well-documented, disproportionate caregiving burden they shoulder, a condition only further entrenched during the pandemic. In other research we've conducted with MBAs, we found that even among dual-career couples who claim to give both spouses' careers the same priority, women are doing the lion's share of domestic work, a setup which adds cognitive and time burdens to women's experiences that their male colleagues, by and large, don't share. No wonder women's well-being lags that of men in our study.

And employees of color have always confronted an array of inequities that chip away at their sense of possibility, community, and safety in the workplace, from manager's assumptions about their capabilities to a lack of role models who share their identity, to microaggressions embedded in daily interactions, none of which have disappeared over the past two years.

To build diverse pipelines to leadership, companies need to turn the Great Resignation into the Great Reset, updating their processes to mitigate or prevent the gender and racial inequities that can add stress and strain to workers' experiences. In our recent book, we explore how companies can debias their people management systems and level the playing field for traditionally underrepresented employees. The headwinds of bias diminish workers' experience at work and deprive their employers of their full contribution. To ensure that women of color have an equal shot at promotion and can see that their performance is being fairly measured, companies should critically evaluate the evaluation criteria that managers are using — these should be job-

related, objective, and consistent across teams, minimizing the space for bias, unconscious or explicit, to color quantitative ratings or qualitative feedback.

How Managers and Colleagues Can Make a Difference

But systems alone aren't enough. Even when strong processes for evaluating and promoting employees are in place, individual managers still have an outsized influence on career trajectory. Just think: Your performance on a key project can't be measured if your boss never gives you the chance to lead it in the first place.

Two stories we heard from Black women while researching our book illustrate the crucial role of managers. One of the women we interviewed, a successful corporate executive, told us about a pivotal assignment that her then-boss provided, which put her on the fast track to leadership. "He made sure the door opened," she explained, even in the face of some of his peers who openly doubted his choice to offer her the role.


Being a direct supervisor isn't the only way to have an impact. The other woman we interviewed, a highly regarded lawyer, recounted a time early in her career when a partner advocated for her dignity and well-being in the face of racist treatment from a client. After she reported the incident up the chain, the head of the practice group called the head of the client company and made it clear he wouldn't tolerate the behavior she'd experienced.

Together, managers, and leaders can foster workplaces and create systems that don't lead to burnout and worsening well-being. As a result, they can build a lasting leadership pipeline that reaps the benefits of a diverse workforce and engaged employees. To make the workplace work for everyone, let's leave "normal" in the past and create a future far brighter.

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