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Understanding the pandemic's impact on working women

How employers can act now to
prevent a setback in achieving
gender parity in the workplace



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Global survey finds that nearly **seven out of 10** women who experienced negative shifts in their routine as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic believe their career progression will slow down.

Foreword

It may be years before we comprehend the full ramifications of COVID-19 on our society and places of work. But one thing is for sure: while we are still learning to navigate the pandemic, we have each had to adapt our daily lives to respond to it.

We surveyed nearly 400 working women across nine countries to provide a snapshot of how some working women have been impacted by this global pandemic. We wanted to find out how and to what degree their day-to-day lives have changed and whether they believe these changes will impact their careers.

The results of this research, set out in the following pages, are concerning. For many working women, the pandemic is upending their work/life balance and affecting their physical and mental health, and some are even questioning their current and long-term career prospects. Some have cited working longer hours because of the pandemic and others are juggling extra caregiving responsibilities as a result of pandemic-related consequences (i.e., school closures, caring for relatives) while also working full-time.

We also asked women to name the most beneficial actions their organizations could take to help mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic and ensure they stay at their organizations long-term. Their answers are instructive and illuminating.

We hope this survey helps organizations understand the significant impact the pandemic is having on women and what leaders can do to help support their workforce. Efforts to mitigate these impacts will be essential to prevent rolling back gender diversity progress, and they will help minimize the long-term societal and economic consequences the pandemic has had on women.

We are at an inflection point. With no end to the pandemic currently in sight, it is vital for organizations to step up to meet this moment and its specific challenges, or we risk facing a major setback in our pursuit of reaching gender parity across the global workforce.



Emma Codd
Deloitte Global Inclusion Leader



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed every aspect of our lives — including the way we work. Women, who have traditionally taken on primary caregiving duties¹, have been especially hard hit², with added daily responsibilities and a host of new challenges to their work/life arrangements.

Our survey of nearly 400 working women across nine countries, at a variety of career levels of seniority and spanning various industries, reveals the pandemic is affecting their daily routines, physical and mental health, and careers.



Nearly **82%** of women surveyed said their lives have been negatively disrupted by the pandemic

Nearly **70%** of women who have experienced these disruptions are concerned their career growth may be limited as a result



The survey unveils the pandemic's impact on the work/life balance and well-being of countless working women, highlighting how the pandemic could threaten some of the progress made on gender equality in the workplace in recent years.

Importantly, our survey findings have enabled us to not only identify how some women have

been impacted during the pandemic, but also the actions companies must take in order to support women's continued success and progress within their organizations. From making flexible working the norm to addressing micro-aggressions in the workplace, there are six critical areas of focus for employers to take action and ensure that women continue to advance in the workplace.



COVID-19 is taking a heavy toll on the daily lives of women

The circumstances under which women are working and living have changed drastically since the onset of the pandemic, including where and how they work.

Lockdowns and shut-downs related to the pandemic have resulted in many women more frequently working from home: now, more than a third (37%), are working from home full-time versus just 1% before the pandemic. This extra time at home is impacting in various ways: on the one hand, our survey reveals some women have more free time as a result of changes to commuting and travel routines, and on the other, women are experiencing a number of extra responsibilities and commitments added on to their already busy lives.

This is true of a vast majority of women, whether they have caregiving responsibilities or not. Among survey respondents, 89% said demands on their personal time and daily routine have changed due to the pandemic, with 92% of that group indicating that these shifts have had a negative impact. Additionally, the number of women who say they are responsible for 75% or more of caregiving responsibilities (e.g. childcare or care of other family members) has nearly tripled to 48% during the pandemic compared to their caring responsibilities prior to COVID-19.

These extra demands across work and home come at a heavy price. Forty percent of working women who experienced negative shifts in their daily routine say they're

unable to balance their work and life commitments, and nearly 40% cite significant consequences to their physical and mental well-being.



Of respondents who experienced shifts in their daily routine:

65% now have more responsibility for household chores

1/3 said their workloads have increased due to the pandemic

58% of those with children reported added childcare responsibilities

53% of those with children reported home-schooling/education responsibilities

46% reported feeling a need to always be available from a work perspective (i.e., online at "off" hours, responding to emails immediately)

Of those:

45% said they feel overwhelmed

48% said their physical well-being has suffered as an impact of feeling they always need to be available



Women see the pandemic's impact as a threat to their careers

Along with having to adapt their daily lives in significant ways, many working women are also concerned about the impact the pandemic could have on their career progression both in the short and long term.



Nearly **70%** of women who said they've experienced adverse changes to their daily routines during the pandemic believe these shifts have prevented—or will prevent—them from progressing

Worryingly, just under a quarter (23%) of respondents who feel they need to always be "on" for work fear they will end up having to choose between their personal responsibilities and their careers. Ten percent are considering a career break or leaving the workforce entirely.

As it relates to the on-demand work environment, nearly a third (**29%**) of women who feel they always need to be available are concerned that if they aren't able to fulfill this need, their career progression may be impeded



For women who feel they always need to be available at work, their top concerns if they are not able to do so include worrying that they may place a burden on team members who are able to work at off-hours (29%), and the fear that their career progression will be adversely impacted (29%).

Working women with and without caregiving responsibilities are being impacted in different ways

Our survey shows that, while most women are feeling the impacts of the pandemic in significant ways, there are some notable variations between those with caregiving responsibilities in their households and those without.

Prior to the pandemic, slightly over 16% of respondents with caregiving duties said 75% or more of childcare or care for other family members fell on them. However, that figure has grown to 48% as of the time of surveying. Those with caregiving responsibilities also indicated they have added responsibilities around virtual schooling and caring for other dependents, which has had an adverse effect on them.

Women without caregiving responsibilities are also feeling added pressure, often manifesting in the extent to which they feel they need to be always “on,” with this taking a toll on their well-being. While those with caregiving duties might be spending additional time on non-work-related activities, those without such duties feel a more negative impact on their mental (44% vs. 37%) and physical wellbeing (49% vs. 38%) than their caregiver counterparts.

As it relates to work, more non-caregivers feel a need to be always available than caregivers (53% compared to 44%). This translates to different types of stressors, including non-caregivers feeling more overwhelmed (58% vs. 41%).

Whether they have caregiving responsibilities or not, women across the board are feeling the strain: over a quarter (27%) of respondents with heightened demands on their personal time and daily routines report having less time to prioritize their health and wellbeing, and more than half (54%) of those adversely impacted believe their male colleagues have not been impacted to the same degree by the pandemic.



Despite the challenges created by the pandemic, women remain optimistic about their potential to progress in their careers. But barriers endure.

On a positive note, a majority of respondents see potential to progress in their careers in the next year by taking on more responsibility (52%). Forty-seven percent anticipate receiving pay increases.

Amidst the pandemic, many women remain loyal to their current employers—32% plan to stay with them for two to five years, and 30% for more than five years.

Three in five women, however, question whether they want to progress when considering what they perceive is required to move up in their organizations at the current time. Reasons cited for this are varied, with some pointing to pre-existing cultural factors or ways-of-working that may now seem even more dissuasive in the context of the pandemic. While some of these factors may have been traditionally associated with being present in an office, these results indicate that they remain a concern during times of remote working.

When you consider what is required to move up in your organization at this moment, what causes you to question whether you want to progress? (Select all that apply)

Asked only to those who indicated they question progressing at their organization

- 41%** Lack of work/life balance
- 30%** Non-inclusive behaviors experienced (e.g., microaggressions, exclusion from meetings/projects)
- 29%** Lack of flexible working arrangements
- 27%** Expected work hours
- 27%** Don't agree with organization's mission or values
- 26%** Lack of formal mentorship programs
- 26%** Work that I don't find interesting/meaningful
- 24%** Lack of diversity
- 24%** Poor or no role models
- 22%** Poor culture
- 22%** Lack of benefits/compensation
- 22%** Required skills that I don't have/ don't know how to attain
- 13%** Necessity to be onsite/at the office to advance



What would be the most beneficial action(s) your organization could take to support you in your career/ensure you stay long-term in light of COVID-19? (Select all that apply)

- 55%** Promoting me/giving me a pay raise
- 48%** Providing more flexible working options
- 47%** Ensuring that teams are resourced adequately to provide the necessary coverage and support
- 46%** Providing leadership, networking and mentoring opportunities
- 45%** Providing better benefits (i.e. parental leave, sick leave policies)
- 45%** Providing mental health resources
- 44%** Holding periodic, deliberate check ins with teams to understand "Are you okay?"
- 42%** Providing childcare programs or support
- 40%** Providing more learning development opportunities, interesting projects and/or "stretch" assignments
- 37%** Providing more access to senior leaders in the firm
- 36%** Providing more skills development opportunities
- 34%** Offering short-term sabbaticals

Employers should take action through a customized approach

In addition to asking women about their current situation, the survey sought to identify the factors that would best enable women to continue to thrive at work during the pandemic and beyond. The answers indicate that there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

Respondents cited a number of actions their employers can take to help them continue to succeed at work and in their careers as they adapt to the shifts caused by the pandemic.

While the options were varied, there were notable differences between women with caregiving responsibilities and those without. For example, women without caregiving responsibilities emphasized wanting more skills-development opportunities (49% vs. 33% when compared to those with caregiving responsibilities). They also favored greater access to senior leaders in the organization

(55% vs. 33%) and greater learning & development opportunities (53% vs. 37%), potentially suggesting those without additional at-home caring responsibilities are able to invest more time in career development. Working mothers, on the other hand, were more focused on better benefits, such as sick leave or parental leave (49% vs. 33%).

Conclusion: Actions taken by employers will be critical in women's working advancement post-pandemic

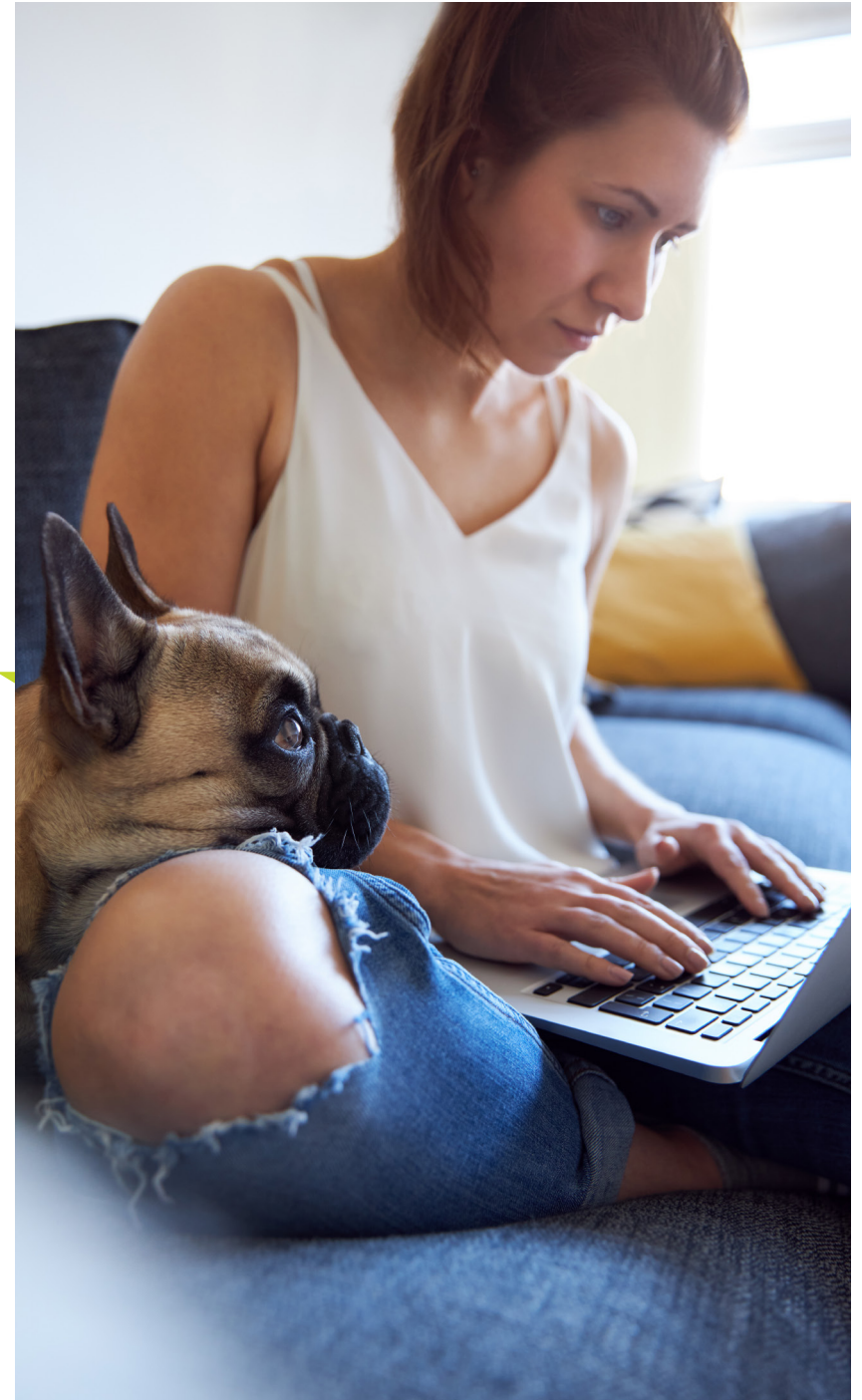
The data from this survey highlights the difficulties women face in balancing their multiple responsibilities at home and at work, with no certainty as to when the pandemic will end or when their lives will ever get back to "normal." Yet, our survey respondents were also clear about how their employers can support them.

Taking into account what the women we surveyed saw as barriers to their progression and what they said would be helpful, we've come up with the following list of steps for organizations to consider to help safeguard efforts to achieve gender diversity.

The findings point to six steps that organizations can implement now to support their workers both during and after the pandemic.

1 Make flexible working the norm. With work/life balance cited as the biggest concern when it comes to future progression, and more flexible working options being the most significant thing that employers can do to support those surveyed, it is clear employers cannot ignore the importance of flexible working in regards to the retention and progression of women. Flexible working doesn't just mean "working from home," something that has become quite commonplace during the pandemic. It can mean working arrangements that enable the individual to have a manageable work/life balance and still benefit the business—whether that be reduced work hours; working longer, but fewer days each week; or job sharing.³ Flexible working cannot be a "nice to have" that applies only to parents—it is a necessity for all.

In addition to having the right policies and flexible working options in place, this also means cultivating a workplace culture that supports employees taking advantage of flexible working policies without any fear of career penalty. Without this supportive culture, it is unlikely that flexible working will be fully embedded within a business.



2 Leading with empathy and trust. As working lives are disrupted by the pandemic, the need for leaders and managers to have open and supportive conversations with their teams has never been higher. Forty-four percent of respondents said they would like to have regular and deliberate check-ins with leaders who genuinely want to ask their employees if they're okay. Leading with empathy promotes an open and empathetic culture that can build trust among employers and employees. Open dialogues can also help leaders understand the short-term constraints their employees may be facing, and support them, so that their long-term prospects within their organizations may be secured.

3 Promote networking, mentorship and sponsorship as ways to learn and grow—but ensure that this is done in ways and at times that accommodate different schedules and needs. Nearly half of respondents cited the availability of leadership, mentoring, networking, and sponsorship opportunities as beneficial to their careers. These resources can be meaningful platforms for career growth. However, it is important to ensure that such opportunities are offered in a variety of ways and times to ensure more women in your workforce can leverage them. For example, only hosting early morning networking breakfasts that clash with responsibilities at home will likely result in some women feeling excluded.

4 Create learning opportunities that fit within your employees' daily lives. Our survey respondents indicated that they were keen to progress in their careers and take on more responsibilities, despite additional constraints imposed by the pandemic. Yet, professional development courses may feel out of reach to many right now, with one in three women saying they are unable to balance their work and life commitments because of pandemic-related shifts to their lives. Employers should introduce creative approaches to learning that allow their employees to access the expertise and support they need in flexible and practical ways—for example, curated digital learning that is relevant to the individual's development and provided in a way that enables each employee to choose when and where to access it.

5 Ensure that reward, succession and promotion processes address unconscious bias. More than half of the respondents said the most beneficial actions their organizations could take to support them is to promote them or give them pay raises. While structuring reward and promotion processes to address the risk of unconscious bias has always been important, the pandemic has introduced the need for many organizations to look at contribution in different ways, including in the context of remote working and unavoidable commitments outside work. Addressing the risk of unconscious bias in these processes, including as it relates to perceptions of women's caregiving responsibilities, is more important than ever.

6 Above all, make diversity, respect, and inclusion non-negotiables and make sure they are experienced in your company's everyday culture. Thirty percent of women who question progressing in their career cited non-inclusive behaviors—such as micro-aggressions and exclusion from meetings and projects—as reasons why they question whether they want to progress within their organization. While an employer may have diversity and inclusion policies in place, it is the “everyday behaviors” experienced by employees that will determine whether they believe that diversity and inclusion is a real priority. Non-inclusive behaviors in the workplace can occur both in the office or remotely: these need to be addressed head-on through clear messaging, training, and action.

As employers and leaders, we must do all we can to help the women in our workforces adapt to the current challenging work/life reality. This next year will prove critical in our efforts to ensure gender parity in the workplace. Businesses must prioritize flexibility, equity, and inclusivity if women are to achieve their career ambitions.

Michele Parmelee
Global Deputy CEO and Chief People & Purpose Officer



Methodology

On behalf of Deloitte Global, Forbes Insights surveyed 385 women globally across a span of industries in August and September 2020. Countries represented include Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, India, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. All respondents are employed full time and hold a range of titles from executive assistant to vice president. Sampling was not limited exclusively to knowledge worker roles or those who are more likely to work remotely. All respondents come from organizations with at least 1,000 employees. The majority of women indicated they are married/living with a partner, and more than a third said they are the primary income earners for their households. More than three quarters of respondents have at least one child, ranging in age from newborn to 19 or older, and nearly 20% said they have other dependents whose care is their responsibility.

References

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/women/caregivers-covid-19/index.html>

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-53363253>

³ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/deloitte/2020/03/20/flex-work-is-a-frontline-solution-and-not-just-in-a-crisis/#3bdfd33f2a9a>



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