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Women and Work in West Virginia, Two Years Into the Pandemic

Summary Findings for the West Virginia Oversample in NWLC's National February Survey

To: Interested Parties

From: Anna Greenberg, Brian Paler, and the GQR Team

West Virginians have faced a volatile work landscape during the pandemic with many losing, quitting, changing, and finding jobs—but the impact has not been uniform. West Virginian women face unique and higher barriers than men in both reentering the workforce and thriving in the workplace. Women in the state are more likely than men to say they are worse off now than two years ago, in both financial and mental health. At the same time, women in the state are more likely to say they took on additional child care and caregiving responsibilities during the pandemic, making it harder for them to get work done or look for new work. The survey also highlights structural challenges that many women face beyond the public health and economic crisis caused by the pandemic, especially with low pay, lack of work flexibility, and benefits. The difficult impacts of the pandemic help explain why policies that address the barriers facing working and unemployed women are so popular—and even more so among women.

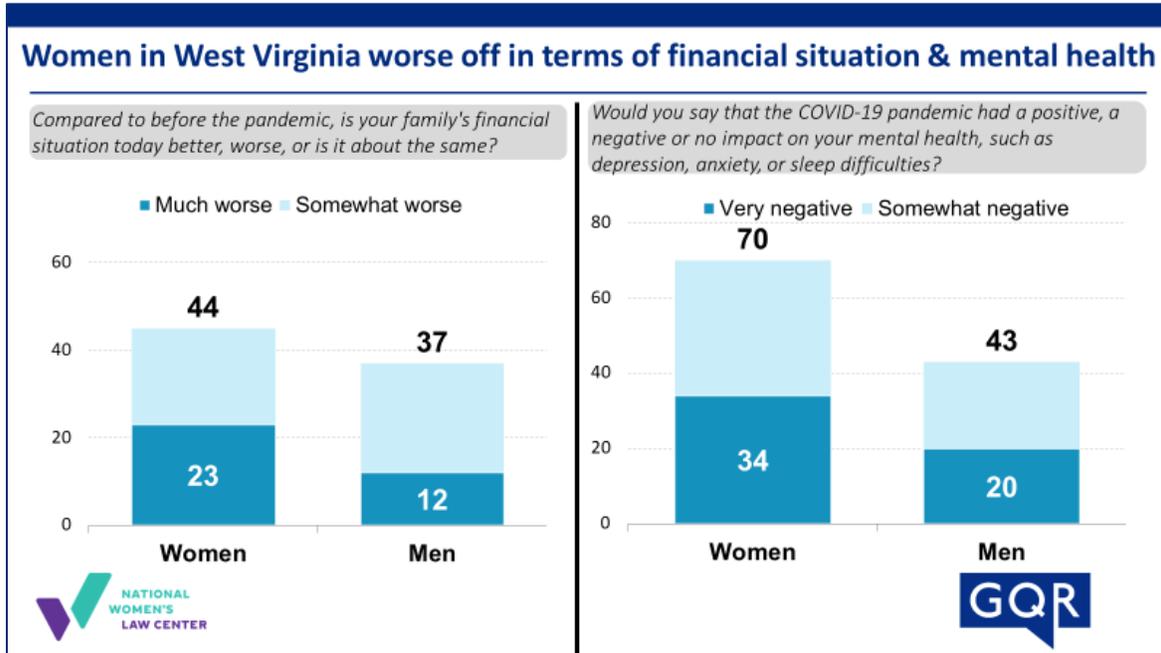
The following summary details key findings from the West Virginia oversample of the recent national poll of 3800 adults in the United States, conducted via web and live telephone interviewing from February 7-25, 2022. Nationally, half of all interviews were conducted online, while 29 percent were conducted by cell and 21 percent were conducted by landline. The findings from West Virginia are based on a representative oversample of 311 adults. Margin of error on a probability sample of this size for the state is +/- 5.6%. Margin of error is higher among subgroups; due to sample size constraints, the state-level data cannot be disaggregated by race/ethnicity in combination with gender.

Negative effects on mental health and financial security

Women in West Virginia are less likely than men to say they are better off than just two years ago. At the same time women feel worse off financially and bear more responsibilities at home, they feel their mental health is worsening.

- Only 11 percent of West Virginia women report being better off financially today than at the onset of the pandemic, while four times as many (44 percent) report being worse off. Among men in the state, 19 percent say they are better off and 37 percent say they are worse off.
- A large majority of women in West Virginia report they are experiencing worse mental health now than when the pandemic began. Seven in 10 women say the pandemic had a negative impact on their mental health, such as depression, anxiety, or sleep difficulties; nationally, 58 percent of women say their mental health is worse. Comparatively, 43 percent of men say their mental health is worse, similar to the national average for men (45 percent).

- Among West Virginia women who report a negative mental health impact, 31 percent say they pursued treatment from a mental health professional, such as therapy or medication, for mental health issues, compared to 22 percent of men. Among those women who did not pursue help, one in three (33 percent) say treatment or professional help was not affordable, too hard to access, or that they did not have time to pursue it.



- Among women in West Virginia, 56 percent say their own or their family’s physical and mental health is one of the top two causes of stress for them, compared to 52 percent of men who say so. Just over half (51 percent) of women cite bills and expenses as a top stressor, compared to 41 percent of men.
- Caregiving concerns are also a notable source of stress, especially for women: 32 percent of West Virginia women cite caring for children, elderly family members, or balancing work and caregiving as a stressor, compared to 25 percent of West Virginian men who cite one of these causes.

A volatile employment landscape – both women & men struggling to get back to work

The pandemic brought dramatic changes to the American workforce, with large numbers of workers losing or quitting jobs, changing hours, and changing jobs. Almost 3 in 10 (29%) West Virginians say they lost or quit a job, reduced hours, or changed jobs in the two years since the pandemic began. However, unlike the national landscape, West Virginia women are a bit less likely than men to have lost or quit jobs during the pandemic, while majorities of both women and men who lost or quit jobs have not yet returned to work.

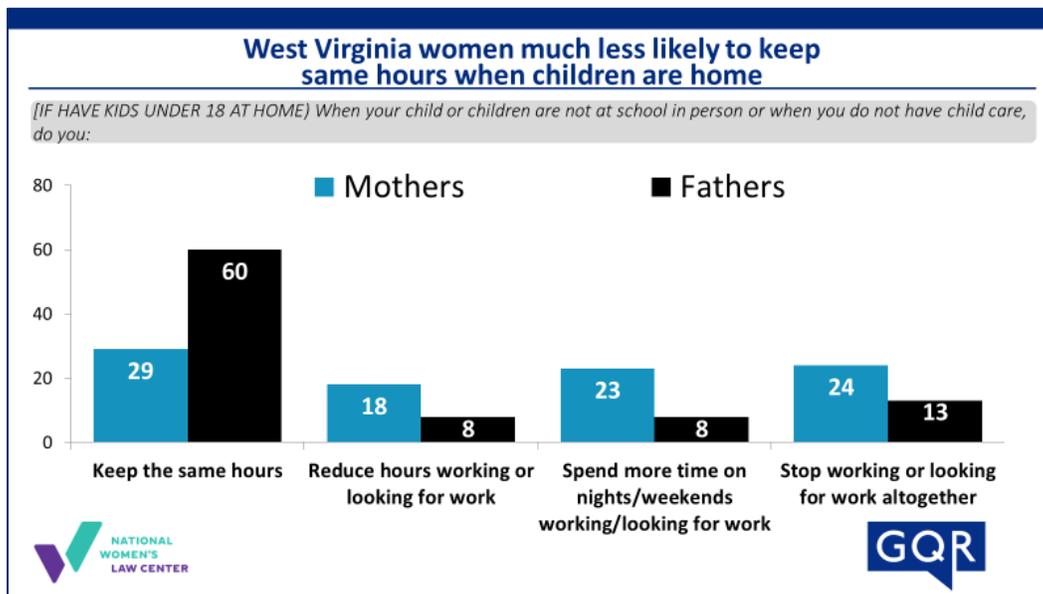
- In West Virginia, 20 percent of women working in February 2020 (and 25 percent of men) say they lost or quit a job during the pandemic, compared to 30 percent of working women nationally. Working women in West Virginia are about as likely as men to say they lost hours (30 percent and 33 percent, respectively.)

- Both women and men in West Virginia are struggling to get back to work after losing or quitting jobs during the pandemic: Only 45 percent of West Virginia women, and 42 percent of men, say they found a new job after losing or quitting a job. This is different from the national landscape, where men are much more likely to have returned to work than women; the difference is not a result of more women getting back to work, but instead is driven by fewer men in West Virginia going back to work.
- When it comes to what West Virginians are looking for in a new job, both women and men are most likely to say their top priority is salary and benefits. After that, women are most likely to prioritize control over their work hours and the ability to work from home, while men are more likely to name growth opportunities and good coworkers and managers.
- Looking forward, both women and men see good job opportunities available, but women are slightly less optimistic than men—a 62 percent majority of women in West Virginia say there are good job opportunities available for someone like them, while 67 percent of men say so.

Low job quality and inadequate support to meet caregiving needs

Women in West Virginia are significantly more likely to say increased responsibilities are hindering their ability to work, as child care and other caregiving responsibilities are falling more heavily on women. And working women in West Virginia are particularly likely to lack the flexibility, wages, and benefits they need to care for themselves and their families.

- Women are much more likely to say that having children at home from school or child care affects their ability to get work done or look for work. Just 29 percent of mothers maintain the same hours when kids are home, less than half the share of men (60 percent) who say so. Mothers in the state are more likely than men to say having kids at home means they must reduce working hours, work more nights and weekends, or stop working altogether.



- Similarly, West Virginia women are more likely than men to say they have caregiving responsibilities for loved ones who are ill, disabled or elderly, by a 24 to 18 percent margin.
- Fewer than half (42 percent) of all West Virginia workers have paid sick days through their jobs, and just over one in four have paid medical leave (28 percent) or paid family leave (26 percent).
- Among West Virginia workers, 60 percent of women report being in jobs paying \$15/hour or less, compared to 34 percent of men in the state. Among those women who are not married or living with a partner, 74 percent receive \$15/hour or less. Workers in these low-paid jobs are especially likely to lack access to paid family or medical leave, paid sick days, or other benefits (such as health insurance or retirement benefits) through their jobs.
- Nearly 3 in 4 working women in West Virginia (71 percent) and the same share of men (71 percent) only work in person, never remotely; this is considerably higher than the national average, where 56 percent of workers are working in person.

Getting West Virginia women back to, and thriving at, work requires real support

We tested a set of policies designed to address the challenges women are facing that surfaced in the survey, including measures to improve workplace conditions, support caregiving, and improve access to health care without cost barriers. A majority of women support all 12 of the policies tested. Most men in the state support each of the initiatives, with the exception of protecting access to reproductive health care, including abortion. Statewide, more than 80 percent support funding for home care services for seniors and those with disabilities; paid family and medical leave; and access to high-quality, affordable child care. Although all these initiatives are popular statewide, women are 24 points more likely than men to support requiring two weeks’ notice for work schedule changes, 20 points more likely to support higher wages for tipped workers, and 19 points more likely to support free pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds.

Percent of West Virginians who <u>support</u> initiative	Women	Men
Increase funding for home- and community-based services for seniors and people with disabilities	90	87
Grant right to request work schedule change and 2 weeks’ notice of work schedules for workers w/variable hours	84	60
Fund free pre-K for ages 3-4	84	65
Provide all workers with paid family & medical leave	83	82
Increase wages for tipped workers	82	62
Ensure access to high-quality, affordable child care	81	81
Provide access to comprehensive health care, w/ no cost-sharing	71	69
Protect employees’ right to discuss salaries	66	76
Raise minimum wage to \$15 per hour, then increase w/ inflation	65	61
Protect access to reproductive health care, including abortion	60	43
Require employers to report pay data to improve enforcement of anti-discrimination laws	59	55
Ensure families can access expanded Child Tax Credit	59	53