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## Women and Work Two Years Into the Pandemic

Executive Summary for NWLC's National February Survey

**To:** Interested Parties

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

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The pandemic upended most aspects of life – work, school, family and social life, and physical and mental health – but the impact was not uniform. According to a new national NWLC/GQR survey, women face unique and higher barriers than men in both reentering the workforce and thriving in the workplace. They also emerged from the pandemic in worse economic shape than men, in part because women were already paid less, had fewer savings, and were concentrated in jobs with little flexibility and minimal benefits. With the pandemic now two years old, these gender disparities put a full recovery at risk, likely extending its impact well into a third year and beyond.

Much has been written on the challenges working women face as a result of the pandemic, supported by real world data on unemployment, spending, savings, and health care costs. This survey explores more deeply the nature of women's experiences in – and out of – the workforce during the pandemic, the barriers women are facing to getting back to “normal,” and the policies necessary to facilitate an equitable recovery for women and for our economy.

At the same time, it also highlights the structural challenges that many women face beyond the public health and economic crisis caused by the pandemic, especially for workers in low-wage jobs. Struggles with low pay, lack of flexibility and benefits, caregiving responsibilities, and mental health issues all predate the pandemic but were also exacerbated by it. While the American Rescue Plan Act and earlier coronavirus relief legislation critically helped mitigate the damage from the pandemic and set the stage for recovery, it could not reach the structural barriers to economic security that many women face. Indeed, the pandemic further exposed these challenges, making the policy solutions to address them all the more urgent. The survey reveals that the policies most people support are ones that address the barriers facing women who work, including paid family and medical leave, affordable child care, universal pre-kindergarten, and support for caregiving for elderly or disabled family members.

This survey is unique in that it details the experiences of women who are particularly marginalized, including women of color, women in low-paid jobs (paying \$15/hour or less), and women who lost or quit their jobs during the pandemic. It reveals that employer-driven layoffs and hours reductions, health concerns, and caregiving pressures all played a role in pushing women out of the workforce over the past two years—and many remain out of the workforce today. Women in low-paid jobs were more likely to have lost or quit a job, reduced hours, or changed jobs relative to other women, while women with caregiving responsibilities have particularly struggled to re-enter the workforce; among mothers who left the workforce since February 2020, 54 percent have not yet returned.

The survey also highlights the impact of the pandemic on women who could not afford to stay out of the workforce or were essential workers. For these women, who often risked their lives to support their families, the pandemic was a particularly hard experience. Robust oversamples ensured that the survey could examine the experience of Black and Latina women, who were relatively less likely to have lost or quit a job during the pandemic and more likely to have re-entered the workforce – in part because they were more likely than other women to be essential workers and less likely to have another breadwinner at home.

*The following executive summary details key findings from a recent poll of 3800 adults in the United States, conducted via web and live telephone interviewing from February 7-25, 2022. Half of all interviews were conducted online, while 29 percent were conducted by cell and 21 percent were conducted by landline. The survey includes a nationally representative base of 1,000 people in the U.S., in addition to oversamples of Black women (400), Latinas (400), Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) women<sup>1</sup> (200), women who left the workforce during the pandemic (300), women in low-paid jobs making \$15/hour or less and a household income under \$75,000 (300), and representative state oversamples in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, and West Virginia (300 each). Margin of error on a probability sample of this size for the national base is lower than +/-3 percent. Margin of error for the oversampled groups range from +/-3.3 percent for women who left the workforce to +/-6.1 percent for AAPI women. Margin of error is higher among subgroups.<sup>2</sup> The data are statistically weighted to ensure the sample's regional, age, race, and gender composition reflects that of the estimated general population of adults in the U.S. In June 2022, income weights by race were also applied, leading to small data adjustments from the prior version.*

*This summary also includes findings from qualitative research conducted by Sprout Insight, from interviews with 35 working women between the ages of 25-55 years from Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. Of the 35 women, 22 participated in 20-minute in-depth individual virtual interviews, and the remaining 13 women participated in three 90-minute virtual focus groups. Women were recruited to quotas for racial/ethnic background (i.e., AAPI, Black, Latina, and white) and job type (hourly and salary). Women varied in relationship status, employment situation, and income.*

## A highly volatile employment landscape

The pandemic brought dramatic changes to the American workforce, with large numbers of workers losing or quitting jobs, changing hours, and changing jobs. Consistent with data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the survey reveals that women were more likely to lose or quit their jobs than men and men returned to work more quickly than women.

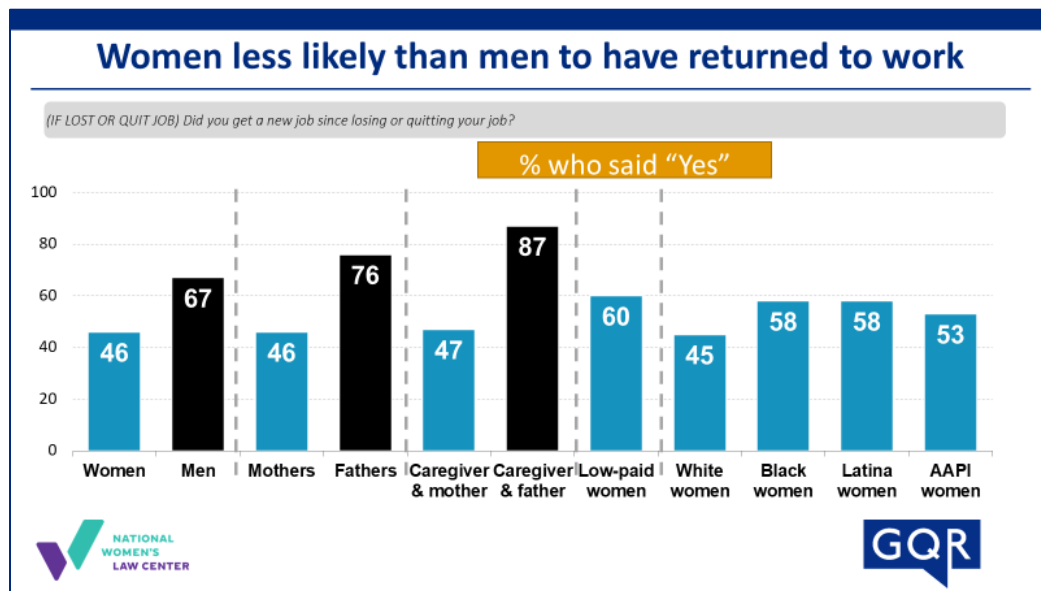
- Across the population, more than a third (35 percent) report that their job status changed since the pandemic began, defined as losing or quitting a job, reducing hours, changing jobs, or re-entering the workforce. Among women in low-paid jobs, 68 percent experienced a change in job status since the onset of the pandemic, 9 points higher than men in low-paid jobs.
- Overall, 23 percent of all women say they lost or quit a job during the pandemic, compared to 17 percent of men. Among those employed at the beginning of the pandemic, 29 percent of women and 17 percent of men lost or quit a job. Among women working in low-paid jobs in February 2020, 43 percent say they lost or quit a job during the pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> Even with the oversample, the sample size for AAPI women is still too small to disaggregate data *within* the group, despite the diversity within the group.

<sup>2</sup> Some populations, including Indigenous people and nonbinary individuals, are present in the total sample but sample sizes for these groups are too small to independently analyze.

- Most women who lost or quit a job during the pandemic cite employer actions, COVID-specific circumstances, or caregiving responsibilities as their reason for exiting the workforce. In response to an open-ended question, 34 percent of women who lost or quit a job say they were let go from their job or their hours were cut, more than any other reason. Twenty percent say it was due to the pandemic or health concerns related to COVID, while 8 percent say it was a result of COVID-related restrictions or requirements. Another 6 percent say it was because they did not have child care, added a child to their family, or otherwise had caregiving responsibilities that limited their ability to work. Among mothers who lost or quit a job, 9 percent—including 19 percent with children under 5—cite these caregiving reasons.
- Women are also far less likely to have gotten a job after losing or quitting one during the pandemic. Only 46 percent of women say they found a new job after losing or quitting a job, compared to 67 percent of men. The gender discrepancy among those who reentered the workforce is particularly high among parents, with fathers 30 points more likely than mothers to have gotten a new job after losing one. The gender gap is even larger among parents who are also taking care of someone ill, disabled or elderly: 47 percent of these women said they returned to work, compared to 87 percent of these men.



- White women are more likely to say they lost or quit a job (27 percent) during the pandemic than women of color, and are less likely to say they have since started a new job. This could be due, in part, to the fact that white women are more likely to report being married or living with a partner, in addition to being older and the most likely to say they retired. White women were also less likely to be essential workers than Black and Latina women, which may explain their greater participation in the workforce during the pandemic.
- More than one in five Latinas working in February 2020 (21 percent) lost or quit a job during the pandemic, while 42 percent say they had their hours reduced – more than any other racial or ethnic group. Among those who left the workforce, 58 percent report getting a new job since. Compared to the others, Latinas are most likely to say they hold an essential worker position (47 percent, compared to 36 percent of all women).

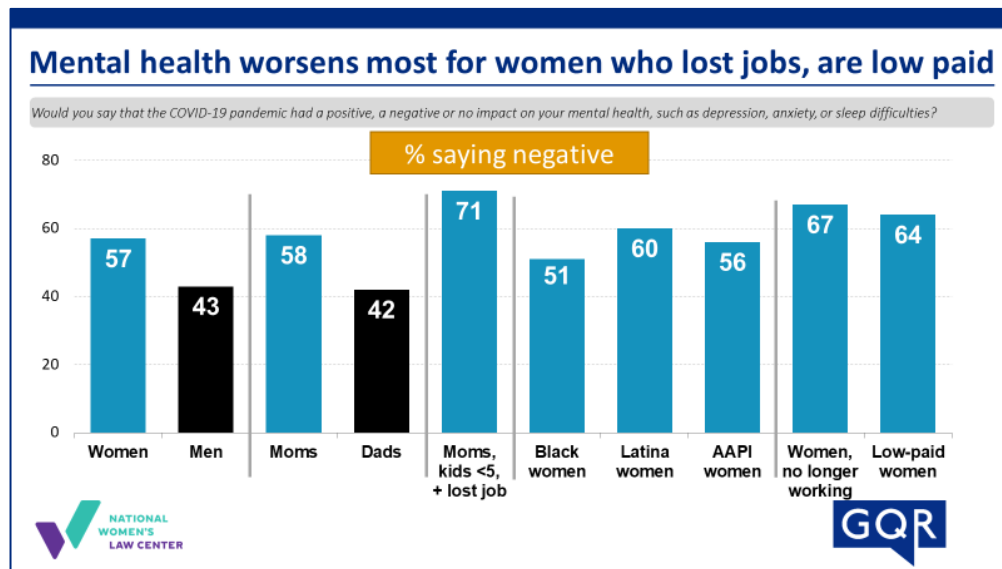
- Among Black women employed in February 2020, 19 percent report losing or quitting a job during the pandemic and 58 percent of those who lost or quit a job report coming back into the workforce during the pandemic (tied with Latinas at 58 percent for the highest rate of return). Higher re-entry numbers may be due to lower incomes and greater breadwinning responsibility at home, as only 26 percent of Black women report being married or living with a partner.
- Among AAPI women employed in February 2020, 11 percent say they quit or lost a job during the pandemic. They are also the group of women least likely to say they reduced hours or changed jobs. Of those who left a job, 53 percent say they since started a new job. This relatively low level of volatility during the pandemic is likely due in part to relatively higher household incomes, while relatively more AAPI women report being married or living with a partner.

### Negative effects on mental health and financial security

**Worsening mental health.** The pandemic took a huge toll on the country’s mental health. Fully half of Americans say COVID negatively affected their mental health, with women (57 percent) more likely than men (43 percent) to say their mental health worsened due to the pandemic.

*“I was actually locking myself in my closet because the closet is in a deep corner of the house where no one can hear me, where I can’t hear them.”*  
South Asian woman in Georgia

- The mental health crisis particularly affects Latinas, as 60 percent say their mental health is worse than it used to be. Women who left or quit a job during the pandemic (67 percent) and mothers who lost or quit a job with children under 5 (71 percent) are especially likely to say their mental health has been negatively affected.

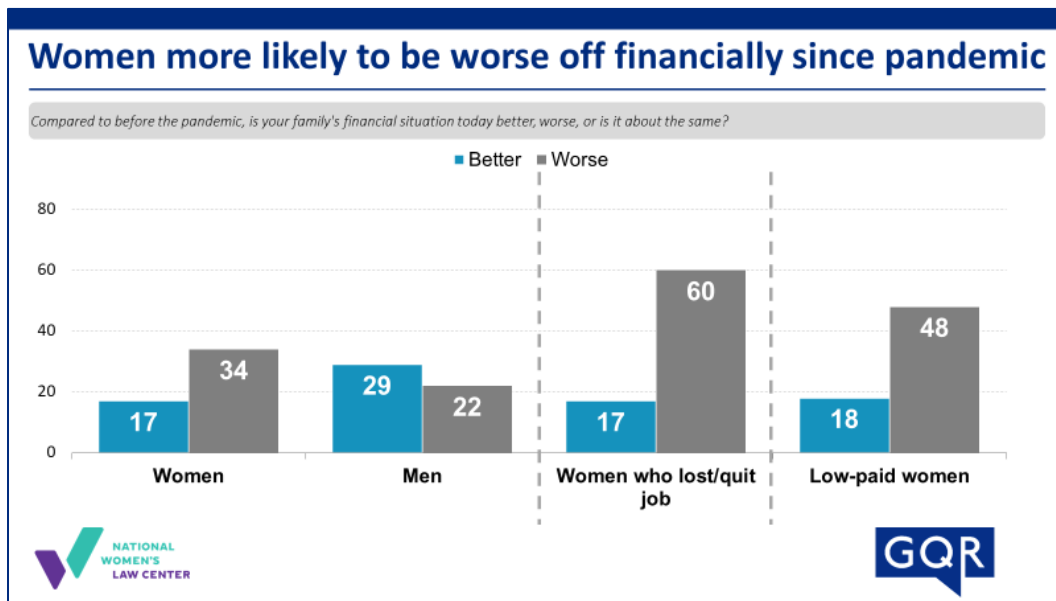


- Women (32 percent) are more likely than men (25 percent) to say they have received treatment from a mental health professional, such as therapy or medication. Among parents, 38 percent of mothers say they have received help, compared to 21 percent of fathers. For parents with children under 5, the gap is even wider, with 46 percent of mothers and 13 percent of fathers receiving help.

- Among all women who do not receive treatment, 55 percent say it is because they do not need help or can handle it themselves, 16 percent say it is not affordable, 15 percent say they do not have the time or energy, and 7 percent report it is too hard to find a provider. Among women who left jobs and women in low-paid jobs, roughly half cite costs, lack of time, or inability to find a provider instead of saying they could handle it themselves.
- Forty-five percent of women identify bills and expenses as one of their top two sources of stress, 11 points higher than men. While finances are women’s single highest source of stress, health concerns also loom large: Women’s own physical and mental health (31 percent) and the physical and mental health of their families (24 percent) are the second and third most frequently cited causes of stress. And 39 percent of women cited caregiving concerns—caring for their kids, for an elderly family member, or balancing work and caregiving—as one of their top sources of stress.

**Worse financial standing.** Women—but not men—are more likely to say they are financially worse off than better off relative to February of 2020. This is especially true for women who are in low paying jobs and women who are no longer working.

- Only 17 percent of women report that they are in a better financial situation compared to prior to the pandemic, while 34 percent say it is worse. In contrast, 29 percent of men say their situation is better and 22 percent say it is worse. Among women in low-paid jobs, 48 percent say their financial situation is worse now than it was before the pandemic. Among women who lost or quit jobs, 60 percent say their financial situation is worse. For the women who *changed* jobs during the pandemic, 45 percent say their economic situation is worse, compared to 27 percent of men who changed jobs.



- Women who are worse off are most likely to say it is because someone in the family lost a job (35 percent), they used up savings (35 percent), they experienced a decrease in pay or hours (35 percent), or they fell behind in rent or mortgage payments (24 percent). Latinas are slightly more likely to say they are worse off due to using up savings than any other reason, while Black women are more likely to say it is due to loss of a job in the family. AAPI women are more likely to say they are worse off due to a decrease in pay or hours worked.
- Among the 23 percent of respondents who report being better off now, men are more likely to say it is because they are saving more or have lower expenditures, while women are more likely to say they are better off because they are working more hours or because they received necessary support at a critical moment such as stimulus checks, child tax credit payments or other benefits.

*“Honestly, I feel like I have to start over completely because any savings that I had at the time went towards survival basically.”*

Black woman in Michigan

## Higher barriers to re-entering the workforce for women

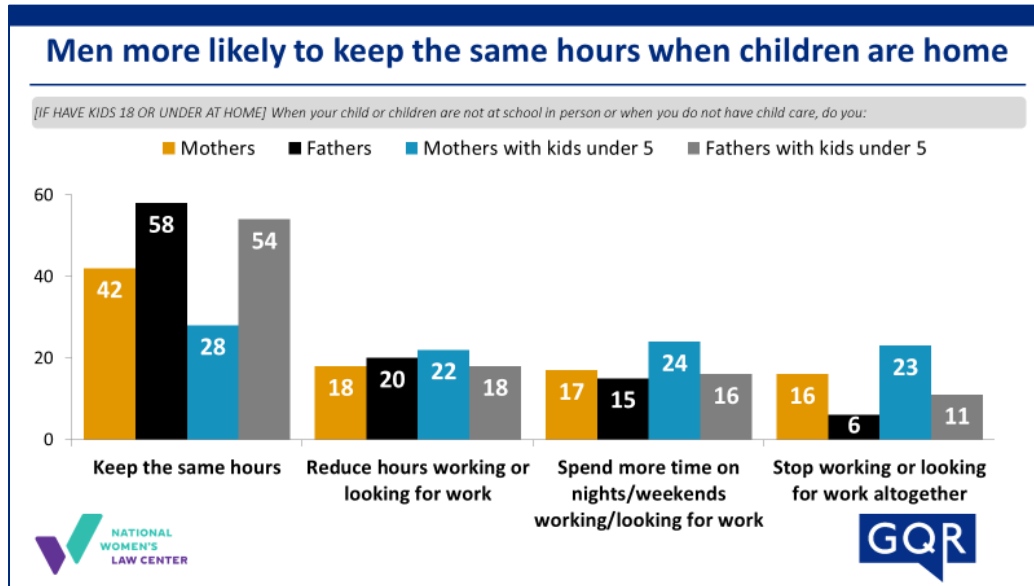
The survey details and quantifies several reasons why women have been less likely than men to reenter the workforce during the pandemic. This includes increased caregiving responsibilities as children sporadically miss school or are out of child care; new challenges caring for ill or disabled family members; and employers who are less flexible as people go back to offices.

**Child care.** A third of respondents have children 18 or under living at home. While most children are back in school or child care, parents still face irregular schedules and unpredicted absences due to quarantine periods and other disruptions. When children are home from school and child care, they are more likely to affect women’s ability to work (and to look for work) than men.

*“[My husband] kept his job, mine was the first one to go. So I had to do homework, do the schoolwork [with kids]...I said ‘wow, I didn’t sign up for this, where did this come in? It was a huge, huge change.”*

White woman in Pennsylvania

- Only 42 percent of women say they can keep their same work hours when their kids are at home compared to 58 percent of men. Mothers are almost three times more likely than men to report that they must stop working altogether when children are not in school or child care. Similarly, 41 percent of women in low-paid jobs are able to keep similar work hours when children are home, as many likely cannot afford to lose income from being out of work.

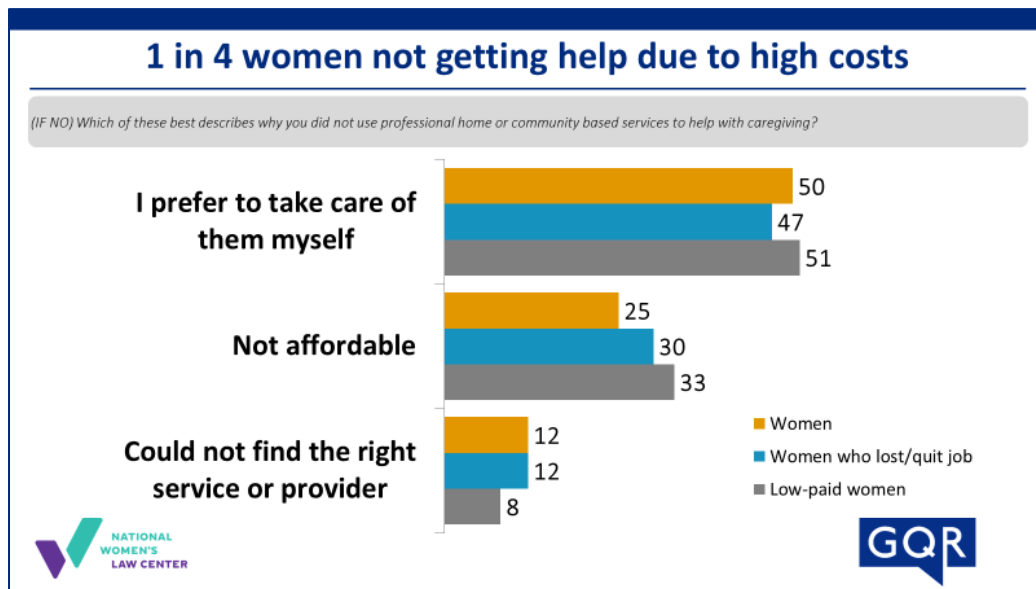


- Among women in low-paid jobs, only 23 percent receive paid sick days, 13 percent receive paid medical leave, and 12 percent receive paid family leave; in comparison, 70 percent of salaried working women receive paid sick days, 61 percent receive paid medical leave, and 56 percent receive paid family leave.
- During the pandemic, among the women who left the workforce and have not returned, 19 percent are now stay-at-home parents, compared to 11 percent of men who left the workforce during this period.

**Additional caregiving for ill, disabled, and elderly family members.** Caregiving responsibilities in families are not limited to care for young children; the pandemic also heightened challenges for people providing care for other family members, such as their aging parents or loved ones who are ill or managing a disability. Other research shows that the pandemic made it harder for such caregivers to secure appointments or support services from professionals or to get help from family and friends.

- Women (25 percent) and men (23 percent) are about equally likely to say they provide ongoing caregiving assistance to a family member that is ill, disabled, or elderly. Eleven percent of women say they are caregiving full-time. More than a third (35 percent) of women who left or quit a job during the pandemic are providing caregiving assistance, and 41 percent of caregivers also report having children living at home.
- One-third (32 percent) of women providing care to ill, disabled, or elderly loved ones say they quit or lost a job during the pandemic. Among these women, 48 percent report they have gotten a new job, compared to 84 percent of men caregivers who left the workforce.
- In total, 55 percent of women caring for ill, disabled, or aging family members say they are working full or part time, compared to 73 percent of male caregivers. While 46 percent of women caregivers are also low-paid workers making \$15 or less an hour, only 29 percent of male caregivers are low-paid.

- While men and women are just about as likely to say they have caregiving responsibilities for ill, disabled, or elderly family members, men (47 percent) are more likely than women (37 percent) to say they have accessed professional home- or community-based services to help.
- Among all women with caregiving responsibilities for family members who are ill, disabled, or elderly, 25 percent say they do not get professional help because it is unaffordable. Women who left or quit jobs (30 percent) and women in low-paid jobs (33 percent) are more likely to say they are not getting caregiving assistance due to costs.



**Job and employer inflexibility.** Women have less flexibility in their jobs than men, including being less likely to use a hybrid model, where they are sometimes working from home and sometimes in person. Women are both more likely to be working full time from home and full time in person than men, while men are more likely to access a hybrid system.

- A quarter of all women and 26 percent of mothers say they get two weeks or less advance notice of their work schedules from their employers. Among women in low-paid jobs, 35 percent say they receive two or fewer weeks’ notice. Among women tipped workers, 36 percent receive two or fewer weeks’ notice, compared to 17 percent of women who have fixed salaries.
- Overall, women (55 percent) are less likely to say that their employers are open to schedule changes to accommodate caregiving needs than men (65 percent). Among parents, 57 percent of mothers say employers are very or somewhat likely to allow work schedule changes to accommodate caregiving needs, while 67 percent of fathers say employers are accommodating. For parents of children under 5, the gender gap widens further – 61 percent of mothers and 80 percent of fathers say employers are accommodating.



- The most important things in a new job for women who left the workforce during the pandemic but have not yet reentered are salary and benefits (40 percent), the ability to work from home (30 percent), and control over their own hours (27 percent). As we note below, women out of the workforce most strongly support policies that specifically improve *how* they can work while also managing caregiving responsibilities, such as paid family and medical leave, funding for home care services, access to child care, and the ability to request changes to work schedules without fear of retaliation.



## Getting back to, and thriving at, work requires real support for women in the workplace

Despite these challenges, many women who lost or quit a job during the pandemic are looking to find a new job and re-enter the workforce. For those who are working, they are looking for more flexibility, benefits, and new workplace protections to help them achieve a real recovery two years into the pandemic.

*“I’m in a time of growth and search because when the company closed down, I said, you know what? This is the time to start a business, to become independent because I can do this work on my own.”*

Latina in Virginia

- Women who lost work during the pandemic and not currently working are not necessarily giving up. A plurality (41 percent) say they are looking for work; 9 percent say they are unemployed but not looking, 20 percent are retired, and 19 percent say they are a stay-at-home parent.
- Women think job opportunities are out there, even if they are not quite able to access them. Sixty-three percent of women say they agree with the statement, “there are good job opportunities available right now for someone like me.” Women of color are even more optimistic, with 73 percent of Latinas, 72 percent of AAPI women, and 63 percent of Black women saying they agree these opportunities are out there. That said, among women who have not started a new job after losing one during the pandemic, a lower 46 percent say good job opportunities are out there, while a 52 percent majority disagree.

- Women who currently *are* holding jobs or who re-entered the workforce during the pandemic often still face challenges with child care and caregiving responsibilities, inflexible employers, and the ongoing mental health strain associated with the pandemic. Many popular policies that help women return to the workforce also support working women by improving job quality, promoting economic security, and enhancing health and well-being, while narrowing the disparities that women face relative to men in the workplace.
- 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. Majorities of both men and women support each of twelve different policies tested, although women are more likely to say they support these initiatives, and more likely to strongly support them. Overall, the most popular initiatives all involve structural changes that make it easier for women to work and support their full participation in the workforce.
- Increased funding to make home and community-based services for seniors and people with disabilities more widely accessible and to improve job quality for home care workers generates the strongest support. This includes strong support from 66 percent of women, 66 percent of women in low-paid jobs, and 84 percent of women who have not re-entered the work force.
- Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of women strongly support a proposal to provide all workers with paid family and medical leave. While paid leave is popular among all groups, 73 percent of women in low-paid jobs strongly support it.
- A 60 percent majority of women strongly support an initiative to ensure families can access high-quality, affordable child care, making sure no family pays more than 7 percent of their income for child care and early educators are paid a living wage. A 53 percent majority of men also strongly support the proposal.
- At least two-thirds of Black, Latina, and AAPI women support all 12 initiatives. Among Black women, the most popular initiatives include paid family and medical leave (87 percent), funding for home care services (87 percent), and free pre-K for 3- and 4-year-olds (88 percent). Among Latinas, 90 percent support paid family and medical leave, 89 percent support additional funding for home care, and 90 percent support the initiative to grant the right to request a work schedule change without fear of retaliation and provide at least two weeks' notice of work schedule changes. AAPI women also are most likely to support funding for additional home- and community-based services (87 percent) and paid leave (90 percent).
- A majority of men support all 12 initiatives, though less strongly than women overall. Similarly, most Republican women support 11 of the 12 initiatives, although also less strongly than women overall.

Percent who <u>support</u> initiative	Women	Men	Republican women
Increase funding for home- and community-based services for seniors and people with disabilities	88	82	80
Provide all workers with paid family & medical leave	87	83	80
Ensure access to high-quality, affordable child care	84	83	69
Grant right to request work schedule change and 2 weeks' notice of work schedules for workers w/variable hours	83	77	77
Increase the wages for tipped workers	82	65	70
Fund free pre-K for ages 3-4	80	70	71
Raise minimum wage to \$15 per hour, then increase w/ median wages	78	66	60
Provide access to comprehensive health care, w/ no cost-sharing	77	72	60
Protect employees' right to discuss salaries	73	70	65
Ensure families can access expanded Child Tax Credit	72	70	50
Require employers to report pay data to improve enforcement of anti-discrimination laws	70	56	56
Protect access to reproductive health care, including abortion	68	54	43

Percent who <u>strongly</u> support initiative	Women	Men	Republican women
Increase funding for home- and community-based services for seniors and people with disabilities	66	50	54
Provide all workers with paid family & medical leave	65	60	45
Ensure access to high-quality, affordable child care	60	53	36
Grant right to request work schedule change and 2 weeks' notice of work schedules for workers w/variable hours	58	40	48
Fund free pre-K for ages 3-4	56	43	44
Increase wages for tipped workers	54	40	40
Raise minimum wage to \$15 per hour, then increase w/median wages	53	46	33
Provide access to comprehensive health care, w/ no cost-sharing	53	46	29
Protect employees' right to discuss salaries	50	46	34
Protect access to reproductive health care, including abortion	48	35	26
Require employers to report pay data to improve enforcement of anti-discrimination laws	45	33	30
Ensure families can access expanded Child Tax Credit	44	42	26