

Seven charts that show COVID-19's impact on women's employment

March 8, 2021 | Article

For International Women's Day 2021, we look back at the harm that the COVID-19 pandemic has wrought on women's employment trends—and a glimpse of how to restore progress.

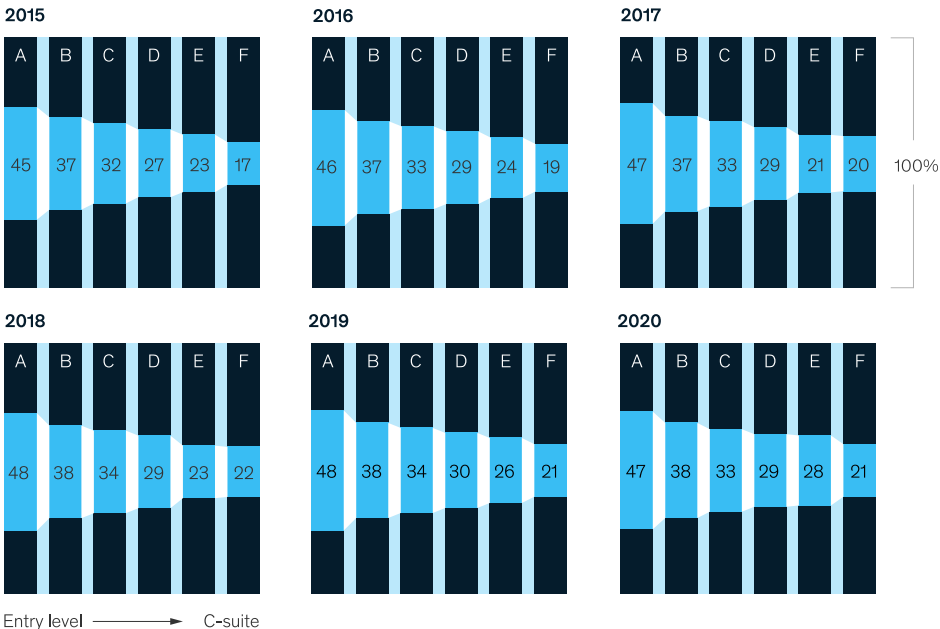
Women around the world have been deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has heightened the large and small inequalities—both at work and at home—that women face daily. For this year's International Women's Day, which UN Women has themed "Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world," we have curated a series of charts that McKinsey has published over the past year that illustrate the pandemic's gender effect, what it might cost society over time, and what could help set the course for a brighter future.

Before COVID-19, women had slowly been making some progress in the workplace

At the beginning of 2020, the representation of women in corporate America was trending—albeit slowly—in the right direction. Between January 2015 and December 2019, the number of women in senior-vice-president positions increased from 23 to 28 percent, and in the C-suite from 17 to 21 percent. Though the numbers were progressing slightly upward, women remain dramatically underrepresented, especially women of color. For more, see ["Women in the Workplace 2020," September 30, 2020](#).

Representation of women in the workforce by level, % of employees

A = entry level B = manager C = senior manager/director D = vice president E = senior vice president F = C-suite



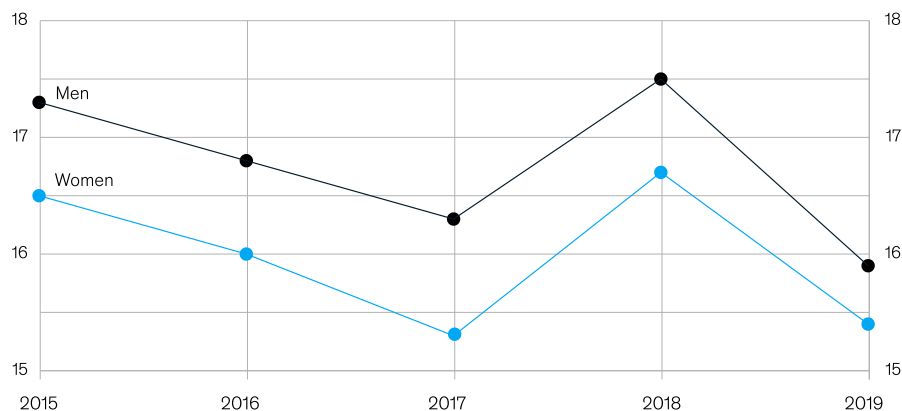
Source: Women in the Workplace 2020, LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2020

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Our pre-COVID-19 research had never shown women opt out of the workforce at higher rates than men

Since 2015, McKinsey, in partnership with LeanIn.Org, has surveyed hundreds of companies each year to benchmark women’s progress in the American workplace. In every year through 2019, the average overall attrition rate for companies (percentage of employees leaving) was even slightly higher for men than women.

Average company employee attrition rate in US, % of employees lost



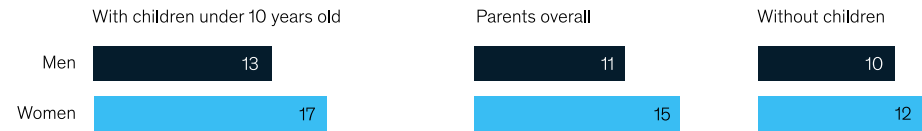
Source: LeanIn.Org and McKinsey Women in the Workplace Survey, 2015–20

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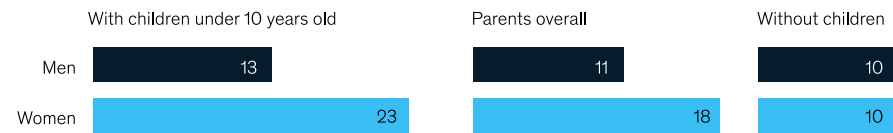
But COVID-19 dealt a major setback

The pandemic had a near-immediate effect on women's employment. One in four women are considering leaving the workforce or downshifting their careers versus one in five men. While all women have been impacted, three major groups have experienced some of the largest challenges: working mothers, women in senior management positions, and Black women. This disparity came across as particularly stark with parents of kids under ten: the rate at which women in this group were considering leaving was ten percentage points higher than for men. And women in heterosexual dual-career couples who have children also reported larger increases in their time spent on household responsibilities since the pandemic began. *For more, see [“The pandemic's gender effect.”](#)*

Workers considering downshifting their career but not leaving the workforce in 2020, %



Workers considering leaving the workforce in 2020, %

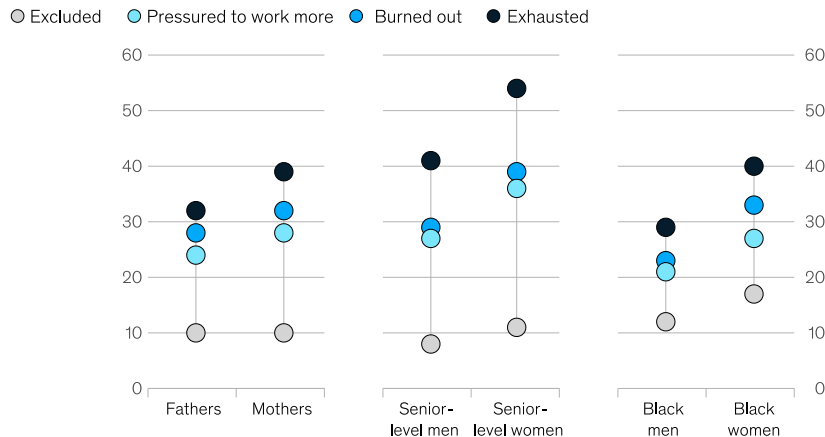


Source: *Women in the Workplace 2020*, LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2020



Women are feeling more pressure at work than men are

Despite companies' efforts to support employees during the crisis, women are feeling more exhausted, burned out, and under pressure than men are, according to the 2020 *Women in the Workplace* study. This suggests that companies need to do more to adjust the norms and expectations that lead to these feelings. *For more, see "[Women in the Workplace 2020](#)," September 30, 2020.*

Consistent feelings at work in past few months, % of employees¹

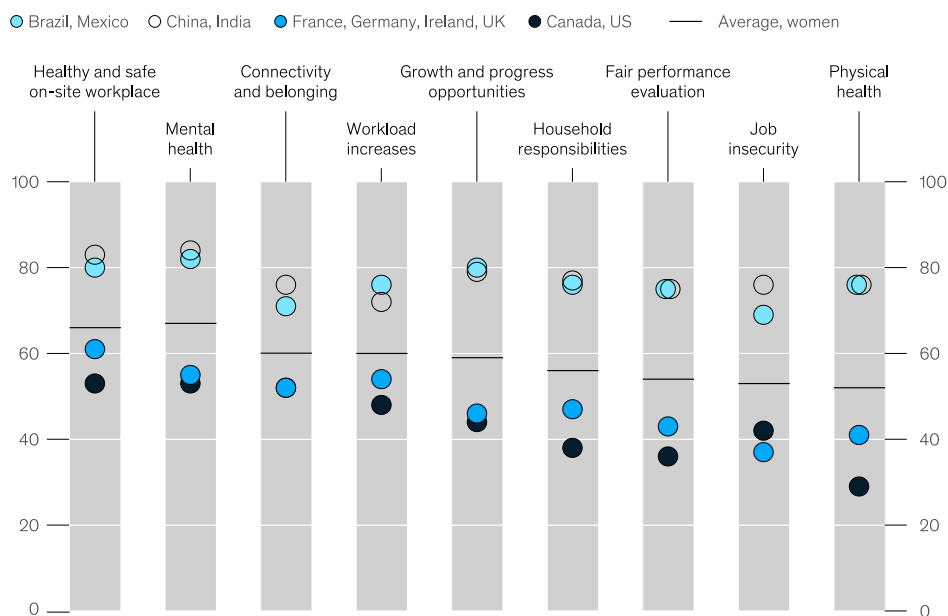
¹Question: In the last few months, which of the following have you consistently felt at work?
 Source: *Women in the Workplace 2020*, LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2020

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And the effects—both at work and at home—have been worst for women in emerging economies

Employees everywhere report myriad pandemic-related challenges, from lack of advancement opportunities and stalled growth to loss of connectivity and belonging with colleagues—all on top of serious physical and mental health concerns. But women in emerging economies are struggling even more, reporting greater challenges and feeling them more acutely than workers in developed economies. *For more, see [“Diverse employees are struggling the most during COVID-19—here’s how companies can respond,” November 17, 2020.](#)*

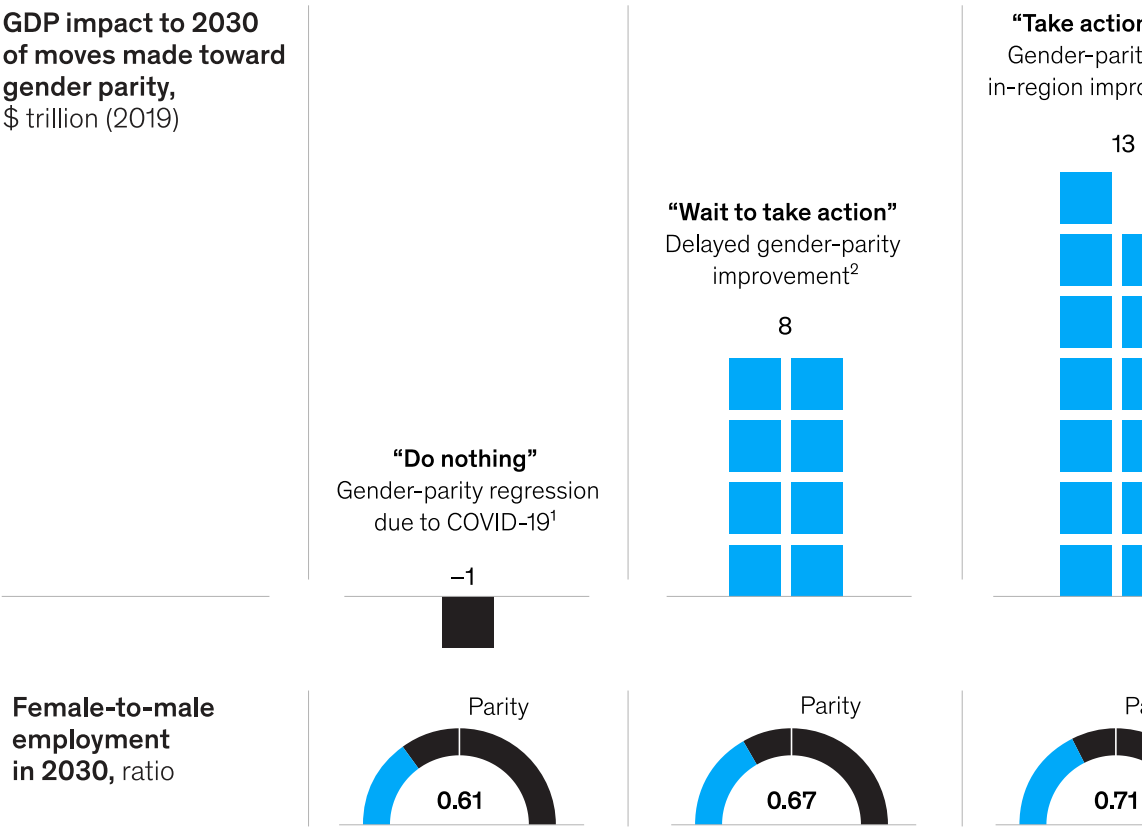
Challenges during COVID-19,¹ % of women respondents who answered ‘significant’ or ‘somewhat’



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Acting now to improve gender equity could add \$13 trillion to global GDP

According to research by the McKinsey Global Institute last summer, women's jobs were found to be almost twice as vulnerable to the pandemic as men's jobs. In a gender-regressive, "do nothing" scenario—which assumes that the higher negative impact of COVID-19 on women remains unaddressed—global GDP in 2030 would be \$1 trillion below where it would have been if COVID-19 had affected men and women equally in their respective areas of employment. But if action is taken now to achieve best-in-region gender-parity improvements by 2030 (including investments in education, family planning, maternal health, digital and financial inclusion, and correcting the burden of unpaid-care work related to childcare and caring for the elderly), \$13 trillion could be added to global GDP compared with the gender-regressive scenario. It would also raise the female-to-male labor-force participation and create hundreds of millions of new jobs for women globally. That's a significant and substantial economic opportunity. *For more, see ["COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects," July 15, 2020.](#)*



¹Based on factoring in impacts from differing industry mix for men and women, as well as other factors that could affect female employment. Compared to baseline in which women see no disproportionate impact compared with men in each sector.

²Improved using best-in-region improvements, which means every country achieved the fastest rate of progress in its region on 3 key gender gaps: participation (~60% of impact), part- and full-time mix (~20%), and sector mix and productivity (~20%), starting in 2025.

³Same as 2, starting in 2021.

Source: International Labour Organization (ILO); McKinsey in partnership with Oxford Economics; McKinsey Global Institute analysis

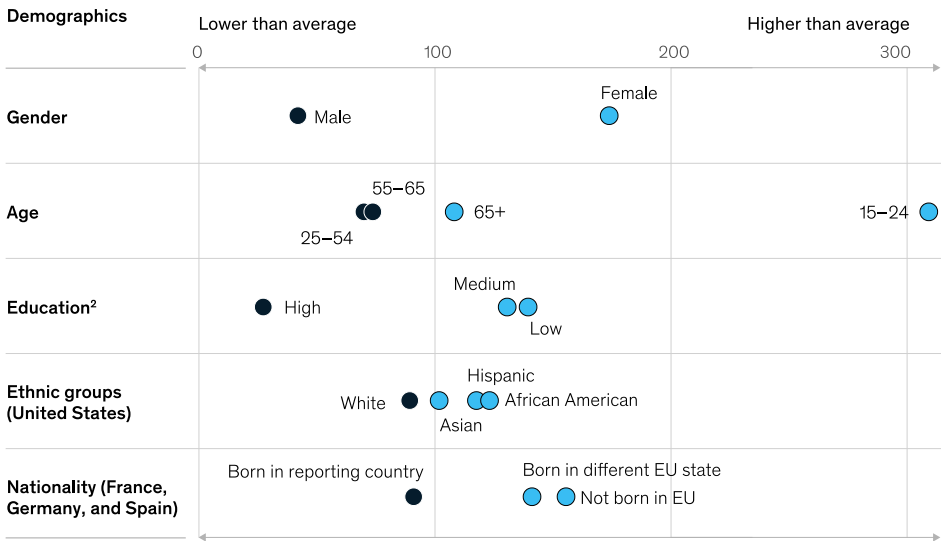
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But advancing gender equity will require a focus on how work is changing

Automation and digitization trends accelerated during the pandemic, further complicating the situation. As the economy re-emerges from the pandemic, women's path to reentry and reengagement in the workforce could be made steeper by a need to reskill or find new career pathways.

Women in France, Germany, and Spain will have an increased need for pandemic-induced job transitions at rates 3.9 times higher than men. In Europe and the United States, the groups that will most likely need to change occupations after the pandemic include women, members of ethnic minority groups, and workers with less than a college degree. *For more, see [“The future of work after COVID-19,” February 18, 2021.](#)*

Estimated percentage increase in number of occupation transitions between pre- and post-COVID-19,¹
indexed to overall percentage increase = 100, weighted average of France, Germany, Spain, and United States



¹Individuals need to transition occupation if they are in an occupation that sees net declining labor demand relative to 2030 baseline. The pre-COVID-19 scenario includes the effects of 8 trends: automation, rising incomes, aging populations, increased technology use, climate change, infrastructure investment, rising education levels, and marketization of unpaid work. The post-COVID-19 scenario includes all prepandemic trends as well as accelerated automation, accelerated e-commerce, increased remote work, and reduced business travel.

²For US: low (less than high school), medium (high school, some college or associate degree), high (bachelor's degree and above); for France, Germany, and Spain: low (International Standard Classification of Education [ISCED] 0–2, primary and lower secondary), medium (ISCED 3–4, upper secondary and postsecondary nontertiary), high (ISCED 5–8, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree).

Source: National statistics agencies; McKinsey Global Institute analysis

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This article was edited by Justine Jablonska, an editor based in the New York office.