

COVID-19 and Gender Inequality in the Workforce

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed many of the social issues in the United States. Focusing in on issues of gender inequity, the coronavirus forced more women out of the workforce than men. An article by USA Today cites 865,000 women leaving work in just September 2020 compared to 216,000 men.¹ But, even before the pandemic, women faced more challenges than men when it comes to establishing a career.

Many are aware of the gender wage gap; nationally, for every \$1.00 a man earns, a woman earns \$0.83.² There is a similar trend in Massachusetts data, for every \$1.00 a man earns, a woman earns ~\$0.81.³ And these disparities are larger for women of color. In the United States, Black women lag even further behind in terms of the gender wage gap. On average, for every \$1.00 a white, non-Latino man makes, a Black woman will only earn \$0.63. In the State of Massachusetts, this gap is even steeper than national data, with a \$0.43 difference between the wages of a black woman in comparison to the wages of a white, non-Latino man.⁴ This is how most people view gender inequality in the workforce, but it is more than this. Another contributing factor is the expectation for women to balance household duties, like child care, with career responsibilities, and during the pandemic remote schooling. All of these responsibilities compound, creating barriers for women to progress in the workforce. The World Economic Forum stated it will take 135.6 years to reach global gender parity with the current economic trajectory.⁵ Efforts for gender parity need to be coordinated, covering all bases to ensure women have the same opportunities as men to prosper in their careers. Many policies can address gender disparities, but access to affordable, reliable, quality childcare should be the focus for policymakers, because it is a foundational need for women in the workforce.

Women with their youngest child under the age of three years old have a 61.8% labor participation rate, compared to men who have a 94.2% labor participation rate. Although the largest disparity is seen between men and women with youngest children under the age of three, women with children across all age groups have a lower labor participation rate than men in the same circumstances. This is true across all race and ethnicities of mothers, especially in White, Asian, and Latina women.

Workforce Participation

National data suggests that between April and September of 2020, women had higher unemployment rates than men. In October 2020, this flipped with men having higher rates of unemployment.⁶ Although unemployment rates for men are higher than those of women, women are still less likely to participate in the labor force than men.⁷

¹ USA Today, (2020, October 11). "865,000 women were laid off last month amid COVID-19 pandemic" available at [865,000 women were laid off last month amid COVID-19 pandemic \(usatoday.com\)](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/10/11/865000-women-laid-off-covid-19/5811110002)

² Center for American Progress, "Quick Facts About the Gender Wage Gap" available at www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2020/03/24/482141/quick-facts-gender-wage-gap/ (last accessed November 2020)

³ National Women's Law Center, "The Wage Gap, State by State" available at nwlc.org/resources/wage-gap-state-state/ (last accessed November 2020)

⁴ National Women's Law Center, "Wage Gap for Black Women State Rankings" available at nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Black-Women-Wage-Gap-State-By-State-2021-v2.pdf (last accessed March 2021)

⁵ World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2021" (March 30 2021) available at www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021/in-full/gggr2-key-findings-gender-gaps-covid-19-and-the-future-of-work (Last Accessed April 2021)

⁶ American Bureau of Labor Statistics "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey" available at www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea10.htm (last accessed November 2020)

Furthermore, national data suggests that mothers are less likely to participate in the labor force than fathers. This data, organized by the age of the youngest child, exposes a great disparity between fathers and mothers with children under three years old. Women with their youngest child under the age of three years old have a 61.8% labor participation rate, compared to men who have a 94.2% labor participation rate. Although the largest disparity is seen between men and women with youngest children under the age of three, women with children across all age groups have a lower labor participation rate than men in the same circumstances. This difference exists across all races and ethnicities of mothers, and is especially disparate in White, Asian, and Latina women.⁸

In Census data from 2019, Massachusetts men's labor force participation was at an estimated 85.6% while women's labor force participation was at an estimated 79.3% and at 76.9% for women with children under six years old.⁹ This shows that there are more men than women in the labor force in Massachusetts. Unfortunately, there is no data on labor participation rates for men with children from this source and is impractical to draw conclusions regarding parental status and labor force participation rate in the State of Massachusetts.

The pandemic has ultimately had a negative effect on the labor force participation rate of both men and women, and has had a disproportionate effect on women. The Department of Early Education and Care in Massachusetts reported that the labor force participation rate [January, 2021] in Massachusetts decreased by twice the national average. With this, adults are struggling with necessities like food, rent, or keeping up on general household expenses. They also reported women's labor force participation rate being at the lowest point in 35 years, and 70% of employers in Massachusetts are worried about retaining women in the labor force.¹⁰ Why has the pandemic had such a disproportionate effect on women's labor force participation rates? Disruptions in child care could be the answer. A survey done by the Kaiser Family Foundation has found that 30% of women who have left the workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic have left due to school or childcare closures. Almost half of the women in this survey reported taking unpaid sick leave due to these closures as well. When looking at disparities by race and ethnicity, it was found that 32% of Black women left work for childcare, along with 35% of Latina women, compared to 30% of white women, and 13% of Asian women.¹¹

Household Responsibilities, Stress, and Burnout

Even pre-pandemic, women reported making changes in their careers—quitting their jobs, taking time off, turning down promotions, and reducing hours at work to care for their families.¹² Women make many sacrifices for their families, and this can be attributed to the role they take on in their households.

⁷ Department of Labor. "Labor Force Participation Rates" available at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/data/latest-annual-data/labor-force-participation-rates#Labor-Force-Participation-Rate-by-Age-and-Sex> (last accessed May 2021).

⁸ Department of Labor. "Labor Force Participation Rates" available at [www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/data/latest-annual-data/labor-force-participation-rates - Labor-Force-Participation-Rate-of-Mothers-and-Fathers-by-Age-of-Youngest-Child](http://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/data/latest-annual-data/labor-force-participation-rates-Labor-Force-Participation-Rate-of-Mothers-and-Fathers-by-Age-of-Youngest-Child) (last accessed December 2020)

⁹ United States Census Bureau "Employment Status" available at data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Massachusetts&g=8600000US02116_8710000US2502116&tid=ACSS1Y2019.S2301&hidePreview=false (last accessed December 2020)

¹⁰ Department of Early Education and Care "Meeting of the Board, February 9 2021" www.mass.gov/doc/february-9-2021-board-meeting-materials/download Powerpoint Presentation

¹¹ Kaiser Family Foundation, "Women, Work, and Family During COVID-19: Findings from the KFF Women's Health Survey" available at www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/issue-brief/women-work-and-family-during-covid-19-findings-from-the-kff-womens-health-survey/ (Last Accessed March 2021)

¹² Pew Research Center, "On Pay Gap, Millennial Women Near Parity- For Now" available at [On Pay Gap, Millennial Women Near Parity – For Now | Pew Research Center \(pewsocialtrends.org\)](https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/11/05/on-pay-gap-millennial-women-near-parity-for-now/) (last accessed November 2020)

Women tend to spend more time on “non-market labor” or housework and child care than men. Brookings Institute administered a survey which found mothers of young children to spend two hours more, daily than fathers of young children on this kind of work. In fact, most mothers, regardless of employment or marital status, perceive themselves as taking on the majority of responsibility for child care.¹³ Women are more likely to take on the brunt of household responsibilities, which could explain why childcare arrangements have such an effect on a woman’s career. In fact, out of over 4,000 women that responded to a survey by the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women, 39% have reported that changes in their childcare arrangements had affected their performance at work and 45% reported that changes in childcare arrangements have negatively impacted their financial security.¹⁴ To expand upon this point, in a survey conducted by Beacon Research, parents of young children responded to questions related to the state of childcare. This survey showed that parents were experiencing stress related to childcare concerns. Specifically, 77% of women respondents were concerned about not returning to work due to changes in childcare plans. This survey also found only 13% of its women respondents have access to paid family leave, and 44% have access to flexible work hours.¹⁵ Not only are women expected to take on the responsibility of child care arrangements, but they aren’t being supported in doing so.

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With all the expectations on women and the lack of support they receive, it’s no wonder they’re so stressed. A national survey found 70% of parents have experienced increased stress due to the pandemic.¹⁶ Like with jobs, parents can experience parenting burnout consisting of exhaustion, loss of personal effectiveness, and emotional distancing from children. The pressure women feel in parenting is related to higher levels of parental burnout and lower work-life balance. Low work-life balance is related to low levels of career ambitions.¹⁷ Women experience parental burnout at higher rates than men.¹⁸ Because they experience this stress at higher rates, it must impact their careers at higher rates than men’s. This is problematic, as even just the stress of these responsibilities is detrimental to women’s abilities to prosper in the workforce.

¹³ Brookings Institute, “Ten Economic Facts on How Mothers Spend Their Time” March 2021 available at www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Maternal_Time_Use_Facts_final-1.pdf (Last Accessed April 2021)

¹⁴ Massachusetts Commission on the Status of women. (2020, October). “Child Care and Education During COVID-19: A Report on the Economic and Social Impact on Women in Massachusetts” Available at www.mass.gov/doc/mcsw-child-care-and-education-during-covid-19-report-october-2020/download (last accessed December 2020)

¹⁵ Beacon Research. (2020, September). “Early Childhood Education in Massachusetts” Available at www.strategiesforchildren.org/COVID-19/BR_ParentSurvey_Slides.pdf (Last accessed December 2020)

¹⁶ American Psychological Association “Stress in America” available at www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/sia-mental-health-crisis.pdf (last accessed December 2020)

¹⁷ Meeussen, L. & Van Laar, C. (2018). Feeling Pressure to Be a Perfect Mother Relates to Parental Burnout and Career Ambitions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9. doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02113

¹⁸ Roskam, Isabelle & Mikolajczak, Moira. (2020). Gender Differences in the Nature, Antecedents and Consequences of Parental Burnout. *Sex Roles*. 83. [10.1007/s11199-020-01121-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-020-01121-5).

Social and Economic Implications

From an economic standpoint, the decrease in women's labor force participation negatively impacts global GDP. According to 2017's World Employment Social Outlook which looked at international data and global GDP pointed to the relationship of GDP and women's labor participation rates. Specifically, if the gap between men's and women's labor force participation was to decrease by 25% the global GDP would increase by 3.9% or \$5.8 trillion US dollars. This same report also cited affordable childcare as a significant deciding factor to women's labor force participation in developed nations, such as the United States.¹⁹ From a public health perspective, it is important to consider the effects of this pressure on women creating parental burnout. Parental burnout is a risk factor for anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and even child maltreatment.²⁰

Implications for Women of Color

Although the pandemic has had a negative impact on all women in the labor force, it has had a disproportionate effect on women of color. More than one in 12 Black women over the age of 20 in the United States were unemployed in January 2021. The unemployment rate for black women increased by 170% compared to the pre-pandemic rate for this population.²¹ Why did the pandemic affect women of color so disparately from white women? One possibility is that women of color are disproportionately represented in the sectors most impacted by COVID-19. Close to a quarter of Black and Latina women work in the service industry, which is not flexible to allow for parents to work from home. In fact, only 17% of Latina mothers, 21% of Black mothers, were able to work from home during the pandemic. Asian mothers were at the highest percentage of work from home accessibility, surpassing white mothers, with 39% able to work from home.²²

It was found in 2015 that half of all Black women in the workforce were moms, and more than two thirds of these mothers were single mothers. As for married Black mothers in the workforce, they have been shown to work at least 200 hours more on average than married white or Latina mothers, and 339 more hours than Black single women with children. It's also been shown that they will work 132 more hours than Black childless women, even with the added responsibility of raising a child. This is seen in an opposite trend with white and Latina women without children who tend to work more than their respective ethnicities women with children.²³ Black mothers work more than all other mothers in the workforce and are often the sole provider for their families. It's been found that about 84.4% of Black women are the breadwinners in their families, and 60% of Latina women are breadwinners in their families. Along with these data points, it's been shown that all women of color (Asian America, Latina, Black, and AINA) are more likely than white women to experience job disruptions due to childcare issues.²⁴ Because women of color are more likely to

¹⁹ International Labour Force. (2017). "World Employment Social Outlook". Available at www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---inst/documents/publication/wcms_557245.pdf (Last Accessed December 2020)

²⁰ Mikolajczak, M., Gross, J. J., & Roskam, I. (2019). Parental burnout: what is it, and why does it matter? *Clinical Psychological Science*, 7(6), 1319–1329. doi.org/10.1177/2167702619858430.

²¹ National Women's Law Center, "Another 275,000 Women Left the Labor Force in January" available at nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/January-Jobs-Day-FS.pdf (Last Accessed February 2021)

²² Institute for Women's Policy Research, "Building for the Future: Bold Policies for a Gender-Equitable Recovery" available at iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/employment-and-earnings/building-the-future-bold-policies-for-a-gender-equitable-recovery/ (Last Accessed April 2021)

²³ Economic Policy Institute, "African American women stand out as working moms play a larger economic role in families" available at www.epi.org/blog/african-american-women-stand-out-as-working-moms-play-a-larger-economic-role-in-families/ (Last Accessed February 2021)

²⁴ Center for American Progress "The Economics of Caregiving for Working Mothers" available at www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/reports/2019/12/10/478387/economics-caregiving-working-mothers/ (Last Accessed March 2021)

earn the majority of their household income, it's important to understand and mitigate barriers they may face when participating in the work force in order to ensure financial security for these families.

The price of child care adds a barrier for women of colors, and ultimately families of color. Nationally, Black families spend about 56% of their household income on childcare, Latinx families spend about 42% of their household income on child care, and American Indian/Alaska Native families spend about 51% of their household income on child care while white families spend about 26% of their household income on childcare.²⁵ All of these percentages are higher than the 7% of household income, which the United States Department of Health and Human Services defines as affordable, and the variance is disproportionately steep for families of color.²⁶ More than half of Latinx and American Indian/Alaska Native families live-in childcare deserts, meaning they don't have access to affordable, high quality childcare.²⁷ If women who are the primary earners for their families are unable to afford care for their children, how can they meet their family's financial needs? Increasing access to affordable, high quality child care would be an instrumental step in empowering women of color to stay in the workforce.

Policy to Monitor

The implementation of Federal, State, and workplace policies are essential to prevent these issues, keeping women in the workforce. Below are policies that could be implemented at a Federal level, State level, and within businesses. These policies could help support a system which favors women's advancement in the workforce.

The office of Congresswoman Katie Porter (D-CA) recommended political interventions to mitigate these effects. This would include continued support for Paid Family and Medical Leave and expansion of such benefits to municipal employees, as well as free pre-K and employer action.²⁸ Increased public investments in child care are necessary to support the child care sector, which will increase the quality of early education and child care. Investments are also needed to support parents in accessing child care.

Some specific policies to monitor in this legislative session are Congresswoman Katherine Clark's (D-MA) Child Care as Infrastructure Act, which aims to improve the quality of early education programs in the nation, treating them as vital infrastructure. This would include college scholarships for early educators, who nationally are 94% women and 41% women of color.²⁹ Along with potentially increasing support for women in the child care workforce, this act would upgrade the quality of the physical spaces they work in through investments in classrooms and facilities.³⁰

In Massachusetts, policymakers and advocates are working on state policy solutions. One policy to monitor is the [Common Start Coalition's bill H.D. 605 or S.D. 362](#). If passed, this bill would create a framework to address issues of accessibility and quality of early education. These issues include high parent fees, low subsidy reimbursement rates, poverty level educators' salaries, and lack of access to the resources and comprehensive services necessary to provide

²⁵ Ibid (Data for percentage of Asian American breadwinning women not specifically available in this source)

²⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, "Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Program," Federal Register 81 (190) (2016): 67438–67595, available at www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2016-09-30/pdf/2016-22986.pdf. (Last Accessed April 2021)

²⁷ Center for American Progress "How Child Care Disruptions Hurt Parents of Color Most" available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/early-childhood/news/2020/06/29/486977/child-care-disruptions-hurt-parents-color/> (Last Accessed February 2021)

²⁸ The Office of Congresswoman Katie Porter. (2020). "The Burden of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women in the Workforce". Available at porter.house.gov/uploadedfiles/final_-_women_in_the_workforce.pdf (Last accessed December 2020)

²⁹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2020). "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey" Available at www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm

³⁰ Press Release (March 16, 2021) "Clark Introduces the Child Care as Infrastructure Act" Available at katherineclark.house.gov/press-releases?ID=3898F2BD-0998-4465-B274-305F67259777

high quality care to children and families. Addressing these issues would effectively increase women’s ability to participate in the labor force by lowering the cost of childcare and help a woman dominated sector by increasing their salaries.³¹

In addition, the Department of Early Education and Care is structuring a new parent fee schedule. The proposal would ensure parents accessing child care subsidies aren’t paying more than 7% of their income towards the subsidies’ parent fee, and that parents in poverty wouldn’t have to pay fees at all.³² This would be helpful for all families in need of child care, particularly many families of color for whom child care cost is a much higher percentage of household income. Increasing the quality and accessibility of child care will be instrumental in achieving intersectional gender equity in the workplace.

Along with the above policies, increased support for Family Child Care providers is crucial to support the workforce. Family Child Care providers often allow for more stable environments due to low staff turnover, allow for families to choose care representative of their culture, mitigate issues of transportation, and allow for more flexible hours than center-based programs.³³

Workplace Solutions

Another potential piece of this solution falls into the hands of business leaders. Business leaders need to commit to non-discriminatory policies for women, but specifically mothers. This could allow for not only the retention of women in the workforce, but the advancement of women into leadership roles. It’s been shown in the first five years after birth, only 8% of mothers are promoted after returning to work versus 15% of fathers being promoted. Men are twice as likely as women to be promoted following the birth of their child. This trend continues even after the first five years, 13% of mothers will be promoted compared to 26% of fathers.³⁴

Along with this, it’s been found that although women receive the same amounts of mentorship in the workplace as men, they don’t typically receive the same kind of workplace mentorship. Where 78% of men receive mentorship from top executives, only 69% of women receive this kind of mentorship. Further, even when they have the same balance of women and men mentors available, 36% of women receive a female mentor, where only 9% of men receive a woman mentor. With this information, it’s important to note that 72% of men who participated in mentorship received a promotion compared to 65% of the women with the same experience.³⁵ With this data it is clear that women are not promoted at the same rates as men. Workplace policies to mitigate the unfair promotion standards could include objective scales to rate progress within mentorships within organizations, with clear and unambiguous standards.

In a January 2020 survey done by Clutch, it was found that only 6% of employers in their system offered child care benefits. With this finding, less than half of the women surveyed believed there was a fair chance for people in their

³¹ Common Start Coalition. (2021) “MA Families Need Affordable, High-Quality Early Education and Child Care.” Available at static1.squarespace.com/static/5ed7bd5e798a4a61dd9ac980/t/606b12c01085e055f5d10369/1617629888902/Common+Start+Coalition+Fact+Sheet+4-21.pdf

³² Department of Early Education and Care “Meeting of the Board, February 9 2021” www.mass.gov/doc/february-9-2021-board-meeting-materials/download Powerpoint Presentation

³³ Osgood-Roach, I. & Wevers, K. (January 12, 2020) “Everybody Benefits”: Family Child Care Providers’ Perspectives on Partnering With Early Head Start. Zero to Three. Available at www.zerotothree.org/resources/3127-everybody-benefits-family-child-care-providers-perspectives-on-partnering-with-early-head-start

³⁴ Harkness, S., Borkowska, M., and Pelikh, A. (2019). “Employment pathways and occupational change after childbirth” Government Equalities Office. Available at assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/840062/Bristol_Final_Report_1610.pdf

³⁵ Ibarra, H., Carter, N.M., Silva, C.,(2010) “Why Men Still Get More Promotions Than Women” Harvard Business Review. Available at hbr.org/2010/09/why-men-still-get-more-promotions-than-women

company to advance, indicating low morale among women in the workforce and 10% of women were dissatisfied with the child care benefits offered by their employers. Some recommendations from these researchers are offering on-site child care, offering child care spending accounts, offering child care subsidies, creating predictable and flexible schedules depending on employee needs, and creating a system for back-up child care assistance.³⁶ These solutions would mitigate the child care barriers many women face to advancing in the workplace.

Conclusion

The pandemic has evidently impacted women, disproportionately women of color, in their ability to remain in the workforce. As new data emerges, advocates, policymakers, and businesses have a responsibility to change the systems that negatively impact women's abilities to prosper in our current workforce. Supporting women in the workforce, means mitigating the barriers they face for workforce participation. A very foundational barrier for women is access to childcare. To make childcare more accessible would open new pathways for women in the workforce. Structural changes to these systems could truly make an impact.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abigail Usherwood is a student at Boston College in their School of Social Work. She is passionate about mitigating the negative effects of poverty, including educational disparities. This passion has brought her to intern at Strategies for Children. During her time at Strategies for Children, Abigail took interest to the negative effects the COVID-19 pandemic on women in the workforce with an intersectional lens. This piece has laid out some of the most compelling data she found and ways in which support for early education and child care translates to support for women in the workforce.

³⁶ Roddy S. (January 9, 2020). How to Offer Childcare Benefits at Your Business. Clutch. Available at clutch.co/hr/resources/how-to-offer-childcare-benefits