



►► PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC, WOMEN WERE MAKING ENORMOUS STRIDES IN BREAKING DOWN EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS AND CRACKING MALE FOOHOLDS IN THE EMPLOYMENT SECTOR. DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, THERE HAS BEEN AN INEQUITABLE TOLL ON WORKING PARENTS, WITH WOMEN EXPERIENCING A HIGHER RATE OF CAREER DISRUPTION AND ADVANCEMENT.



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Women, the Workforce, and COVID-19

The pandemic's particularly harsh toll on working women.

SINCE THE PANDEMIC BEGAN, THERE has been an exodus of parents—especially mothers—from the workforce. This article, while recognizing that both men and women who are parents have been facing incredible changes and pressures, will focus on the impact these changes have had on women. With the strain of childcare, home schooling, caretaking, and other pressures, women often bear the brunt of the many stressors in the family system. Additionally, women in the legal profession are faced with multiple challenges that impact them greater than they do men, including higher levels of imposter syndrome, sexism related to working in a male-dominated field, not getting recognized or promoted at the same rate as men, and often not being targeted for career advancement by their employers. Based on recent statistics, women have left the workforce in record numbers in the past year, with statistics ranging from 2.3 to 3 million—four times the rate of men. If changes and adjustments are not made in the short and long term, this mass exodus will have a tremendous impact on the makeup of firms, government agencies, the court system, and the judiciary well into the future.

Schools and childcare facilities have been inconsistent during the pandemic and, as of the publication of this issue of the Illinois Bar Journal, children under 12 had still not been cleared for COVID-19 vaccination. This has placed incredible burdens on families and working parents. Many childcare facilities, summer programs, and camps were canceled or are working in limited capacity, severely limiting options for parents. Additionally, many parents feel uncomfortable sending unvaccinated children into childcare facilities and schools, especially with the increase in COVID-19 from the Delta and other emerging variants. Many parents have been forced to cut hours, leave positions, or take paid or unpaid

leave to attend to their children's needs.

If women remain in the workforce, they often face higher levels of burnout and career fatigue. Despite the barriers the pandemic has created, unrealistic expectations within the workforce for women have not changed; for example, hardly any adjustments to address the increase in added outside responsibilities—including home schooling and a lack of childcare—have been made. Employers continue to use the billable hour system to assess company compliance and allegiance to the firm. As an employer, it is incumbent on your agency or firm to be honest and look at attrition of parents at your firm—particularly women.

In a recent survey by Wakefield Research of 500 full-time employees at large companies and who have children ages five and under, 80 percent of the respondents indicated they had received flexible working arrangements in the past six months. But more than 40 percent also said that this greater flexibility led to an increase in working demands and hours. As a result, 66 percent reported experiencing burnout and 38 percent said they have considered looking for a different job or even leaving the workforce due to pandemic-related childcare challenges. This means that flexibility alone is not enough to retain good employees who are parents, especially when more demands are placed on them in exchange for this flexibility. Additionally, most caregivers don't feel comfortable discussing issues related to childcare with their employers: 66 percent of respondents worried that discussing their struggles would target them as a "problem employee."

The pressure of the intensive margin

One interesting employment metric is "intensive margin," which measures how

much people work rather than how many people are in the labor force. It is often difficult to determine from official employment statistics whether employed parents have slowed the trajectory of their careers due to child care issues and/or increased caretaking responsibilities. Often these individuals do not apply for unemployment, and thus are not statistically accounted for in changing their career paths. However, the intensive margin plays a huge role in diminishing gender equality within the workforce.

In a survey conducted by Morning Consult for The New York Times, during the past school year, of 468 mothers working for pay, one third said they had worked fewer hours during the pandemic because of child care issues. An additional one fifth of the women surveyed had moved to part-time employment; 28 percent declined new responsibilities at work; 23 percent did not apply for new jobs; and 16 percent did not pursue a promotion. Only 11 percent of mothers surveyed indicated that a flexible work schedule made them more productive. Almost a quarter of the women surveyed said they had become less productive because of child care responsibilities. Single women, especially low-income women, have experienced the most negative impact from the pandemic, including the biggest decrease in working hours, which they are less likely to recover.

During the pandemic, women had to take on multiple roles: wife, mother, caretaker, lawyer, teacher, etc. Women still tend to carry more of the burden in normal times. But during a pandemic, with children learning remotely, many women have been the primary person responsible for these tasks. In the survey conducted by Morning Star, 725 mothers with partners at home indicated that nine out of 10 times, children preferred

their mothers to help them with tasks or challenges. Additionally, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, two thirds of women are also caretakers. Data related to caretakers show they struggle with higher levels of mental health problems, higher levels of burnout and compassion fatigue, and fewer opportunities to take care of their own emotional and physical needs.


Maladaptive coping

During the pandemic, alcohol and cannabis sales increased dramatically in Illinois. Much of the uncertainty of the pandemic led to higher levels of anxiety, with many people using alcohol, cannabis, illegal drugs, and prescription medications to manage overwhelming stressors and mental health problems. Overdose deaths increased by 30 percent nationally. The long-term nature of the pandemic, without any adjustments to work expectations, led women to leave the work force in record numbers due to their inability to manage their work life and juggle all the roles thrust upon them. Due to increasing pressures, increases in maladaptive coping skills began to take hold in many people who struggled to manage uncertainty, feelings of loneliness, inability to cope, and to maintain control over their personal and professional lives.

Prior to the pandemic, women were making enormous strides in breaking down employment barriers and cracking male footholds in the employment sector. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an inequitable toll on working parents, with women experiencing a higher rate of career disruption and advancement. To address these inequities, we need to address foundational barriers to success and provide equitable reentry into the workforce, provide flexible or part-time hours (including job-share options), and support women's mobility

within agencies and firms. Pay disparity is universal for women even at the top of the corporate ladder, and women tend to receive lower bonuses and fewer incentives. In a global survey of more than 30,000 workers conducted by an ADP National Employment Report, men who took on additional responsibilities due to COVID-19 were paid more whereas women were not fairly compensated. These disparities were even greater in the U.S. where the gender pay gap holds true across all seniority levels and industries.

Diversity is necessary in the workforce and men and women should be part of all leadership roles within a firm or organization. The loss of women in the workforce will have a tremendous negative impact on the workforce, as women play a critical role in holding the workforce accountable for real and lasting change and for providing diverse outlooks and viewpoints. The disparities in gender roles and pay within any firm or agency must be addressed and recognized. Women, and parents in general, should be encouraged to thrive and prosper in this changing world by eliminating as many barriers as possible to success in the workforce.

The changes brought on by COVID-19 provide a template and model for what needs to change in the workforce. If your firm or agency has lost valuable female employees during this pandemic, it is time to take a hard look at the policies and spoken and unspoken expectations in your work culture. The time for change is now. 

LAP is here to help! Please contact us at illinoislap.org, 1-800-LAP-1233, or gethelp@illinoislap.org.