

RESEARCH

## COVID-19 has worsened workplace gender inequality: Deloitte

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*Seventy-seven percent of women say their workload has increased as a result of the pandemic. Image credit: UBS*

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The COVID-19 pandemic widened gender inequality in the workplace, which will have repercussions for businesses and consumers alike.

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Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, vast gender inequalities permeated the workplace, consistently holding women back and organizations are looking to mitigate these effects. Although [Women @ work: A global outlook](#) reflects that women's wellbeing has fallen since the pandemic, it also highlights ways employers can implement offerings to reverse the trend and promote a more equitable, healthy workplace.

"The most important thing for employers to do is to take meaningful action now," said Emma Codd, global inclusion leader for [Deloitte](#). "Our survey was clear as to the issues that are adversely impacting women in the workplace it was also clear as to those organizations that are already getting it right, and the meaningful actions that will enable women to succeed."

Deloitte Global conducted a survey of 5,000 women across 10 countries between November 2020 and March 2021.

### Women at work

With the pandemic forcing millions of people to work from home, it has become more difficult for employees to establish or maintain a work and life balance. During the pandemic, healthy boundaries between work and home were vastly impacted and diminished.

Seventy-seven percent of women say their job workload has increased as a result of the pandemic.



*Women are looking for brands to support BIPOC and sustainability. Image credit: Spark NYC*

Only 22 percent of women believe that their employers have enabled them to establish clear boundaries between work and personal hours. More than half of women say they feel less optimistic about their career prospects today than they did before the pandemic.

Although many women worked through virtual offerings, they still experienced non-inclusive behavior. More than half the survey's respondents, fifty-two percent, note experiencing some form of harassment or microaggressions in the past year, ranging from belief that their work was questioned because they are women to experiencing disparaging and/or sexual comments.

The data also reflects that many of these instances of harassment and microaggressions go unreported as women fear for their job security and retaliation.

LGBT+ women and women of color are facing additional challenges as well, as LGBT+ women are more likely to report low levels of mental wellbeing and work-life balance compared with the overall sample.

While 44 percent of women say that their employer's commitment to supporting women has been sufficient, LGBT+ women were less likely to do so at 33 percent.

Fifteen percent of women of color say they have heard comments about their communication style, as opposed to only 5 percent of white women. Fourteen percent of women of color and 8 percent of white women, respectively, expressed it was likely to have their judgement questioned at work.

LGBT+ women are nearly four times more likely to say they have experienced jokes of a sexual nature than non-LGBT+ women.

Less than half of the survey's respondents rated their current job satisfaction, motivation and productivity at work as "good" or "extremely good," compared with about three-quarters before the pandemic. Fifty-seven percent of women reported that they are planning to leave their current job within two years, while 21 percent expect to leave in less than a year.

Work-life balance was the top reason why women would consider leaving their current employer.



*As women navigate the gender barriers of the workforce, they seek to surround themselves with people who will empower and encourage them to grow professionally. Image credit: NRF*

With the implementation of inclusive programs and benefits, experts believe companies can help turn this negative

trend around, however.

Women are far more likely to say they are planning to stay with their employers for longer than two years, compared with women who work for businesses that have not demonstrated an inclusive culture. Flexibility could be mutually beneficial for employers and employees, helping companies to retain employees who will ultimately have a better chance of striking a better work-life balance.

Employers will also benefit from reflecting leadership commitment. Committing to targets for gender representation at a senior level is the most frequently cited among the top three steps organizations can take to improve gender equality, as 32 percent of women noted.

#### Growth for women

Women employees are continuing to seek equality, representation and growth opportunity from their employers.

Forty-one percent of respondents note providing better learning development opportunities and resources such as networking opportunities and mentorship programs are some of the most beneficial steps to support women.

Twenty-seven percent of respondents note taking action to improve diversity and inclusion is also one of the most beneficial steps.

All of the women surveyed who work for gender equality leaders say they feel like their careers are progressing at a satisfactory rate.

Many employers and employees are acknowledging continued progress needed in inclusion and diversity.

Department store Saks Fifth Avenue has unveiled new goals to advance diversity, equity and inclusion in an effort to drive positive change and foster a more inclusive environment. The retailer has also introduced the Saks Emerging Designer Accelerator Program, which is focused on leveraging its brand and luxury fashion expertise to develop high-potential independent brands ([see story](#)).

In February, LVMH-owned beauty retailer Sephora selected eight brands to participate in the retailer's 2021 Accelerate incubator program, comprised exclusively of BIPOC-founded brands. The Sephora Accelerate program focuses on cultivating an international community of female beauty founders and providing curriculum, mentorship, merchandising support, funding and investor connections to its participants ([see story](#)).

Companies and brands are being called to continue making visible and prominent strides in promoting gender equality inside the workplace and beyond.

"From truly inclusive workplaces, normalizing flexible working beyond policies alone, visible senior commitment to gender equality, support for life outside work that enables success at work, and fulfilling development opportunities for women to rebuilding the workplace with gender equality in mind there is an immediate opportunity to stem the damage and avoid permanently setting back gender equality at work," Ms. Codd said.