How have women in the workforce fared, three years into the pandemic?

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Wharton School professor Nancy Rothbard studies work-life balance and how people navigate the personal-professional boundary. "Work-life balance became a new phenomenon during the pandemic because we had no boundaries between our work and our life," she says. Credit: Eric Sucar

The middle of March will now, forever, signify a turning point. Three

years ago, on March 11, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of a novel coronavirus a pandemic, calling on leaders around the globe to be prepared. In the United States, masks and vaccines became political battlegrounds, and quickly pressures brought on by COVID-19 turned societal fissures into chasms.

Women in the workforce were a stark example. With schools and daycares abruptly closed, children suddenly needed round-the-clock help. The elderly, part of a group early on declared most at risk from the new virus, required more attention, too. In the care economy, women do the majority of this work—both the informal, unpaid kind and the paid jobs in fields like child care, education, and social services—and many found themselves at a crossroads.

"The pandemic put a lot of stress and strain on everybody, as we all adapted to the intensity of working through such trying times," says Nancy Rothbard, a professor in the Wharton School who studies work-life balance. "But what was really unique to many women, especially women with young kids, was that they experienced an extra burden, an extra set of stressors."

Exact numbers for how many women left the workforce during the pandemic vary depending on the source. One estimate shared broadly, including by the White House, was two million, though recent research suggests the total may be lower. No matter the number, like so many negative aspects of the pandemic, this one disproportionately affected women of color. What's more, although February 2023 Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data showed hopeful signs of recovery for this demographic overall, with employment for some subsets of women returning to pre-pandemic levels, those statistics may paint an overly rosy picture, according to Penn sociologist Pilar Gonalons-Pons.

"It might seem like the gender disparity has washed out and, in many

areas, we have rebounded to pre-COVID levels. But the care economy has not yet recovered," says Gonalons-Pons, who studies the intersection of gender, work, families, and public policy. "We need to know a lot more about the nuances to be convinced there isn't a widening of gender inequality." In other words, the true toll of the pandemic on women in the workforce remains unclear three years later, especially in the wake of a global moment that caused many to rethink what they want out of a job.

The care economy

In June of 2021, U.S. Labor Secretary Marty Walsh held an event in Pennsylvania aimed at touting President Biden's then-newly launched American Rescue Plan. Specifically, Walsh focused on the need to invest in the care economy. "Caregiving is essential work, and the pandemic underscored its critical importance. And yet, caregivers—who are disproportionally women of color—continue to be underpaid and undervalued," he wrote in a blog post the next week. "You can't have an economy without care, and you can't grow an economy without care workers."

Broadly speaking, the "care economy" encompasses both the informal and paid labor that goes into keeping children and older adults happy and healthy. According to the World Economic Forum, this sector made up about one-quarter of the U.S. gross domestic product in 2022. It includes health care jobs like home health aides and social workers, child care jobs in daycares and nursery schools, teachers, and many others.

Yet for child care workers and home care workers, for example, average pay in 2021 was less than $30,000 annually—equivalent to the 2023 poverty threshold for a family of four in the U.S. And there's no money attached to informal work of this kind. "How we treat caregivers is a major mirror that we're holding up to how much we care about the

future of our culture," says Lily Brown, director of the Center for the Treatment and Study of Anxiety at Penn. "We send a message with what we choose to value, and it's going to reverberate in future generations."

Gonalons-Pons is trying to better understand all of this by turning to the data. Research she's conducting with Fordham University's Johanna Quinn focuses on the pandemic's impact on paid and unpaid child care workers. "Prior analysis on this mostly focused on one group or the other, but we know there's a lot of interdependency between these two," says Gonalons-Pons, an associate professor in Penn's Department of Sociology and part of the Program in Gender Studies, Sexuality, and Women's Studies. "We wanted to really highlight that."

Though the results are still forthcoming, the researchers have noted some trends, namely a stratification among paid care workers, with teachers faring best and child care workers faring worst, as well as greater employment loss during the pandemic for mothers with young children compared to mothers with school-age children and older.

Within the care sector and beyond, time away from the workforce has real and already well-understood implications for career progression, wages, and more, Rothbard says. "When you have a career break, reentering takes momentum. It takes effort. Hopefully it hasn't been too long that you have to relearn much, but it can be hard." Plus, she adds, it can have psychological ramifications, too.

Work-life balance off-kilter

In so many ways, the pandemic wreaked havoc on our collective psyche, some of that related to working life. People who held essential jobs faced inherent risks simply by going to work, and those with the luxury of jobs they could do remotely had to balance a suddenly nonexistent work-life divide. Nearly everyone with children had to figure out how to

replace facets of the care and education on which they'd come to depend.

Women largely filled the gaps, following a well-worn path; estimates from U.N. Women, the branch of the United Nations focused on women's rights, show that in general women do three times as much of this unpaid labor as men. "For many women—not all women, but women in a certain life stage in terms of their demographic profile, primarily with kids under 10—those challenges were really tough during the pandemic," Rothbard says.

Part of that likely related to a concept in psychology known as "intolerance to uncertainty," which is exactly as it sounds, says Brown: People have a hard time coping with a situation when they don't have some sense of how it might play out. With COVID-19, information arrived at lightning speed. Early public health guidance changed almost daily. At the start, no one—not even the world's top infectious disease doctors—knew precisely what would happen.

Though baseline rates of anxiety increased across the board during this time, women struggled more than men, falling in line with historical patterns seen for decades, Brown says. Rothbard surmises that some of that stems from the blurring of lines between work and home. For many years, she has studied how people navigate the personal-professional boundary.

"Work-life balance became a new phenomenon during the pandemic because we had no boundaries between our work and our life," she says. "To reestablish some routine, people started doing things like recreating a commute or shutting their laptop and putting it away at the end of the day. We had to learn to stave off the complete boundarylessness of that experience."

For many women, the additional stressors made work either no longer feasible or much less desirable. "My suspicion is that when women decided to leave the workforce during the pandemic, for the most part it was due to either logistical necessity or the fact that when they started weighing the pros and cons, the pros weren't the same as they had been, especially when you factor in child care," Brown says. "That cost-benefit analysis did not favor staying in the workforce."

What women want today

Brown herself had a child during the pandemic. Being a new mom shifted her perspective, helping her see that in the U.S., not everyone feels concerned about an exodus of women from the workforce—regardless of whether it's because they are being forced out or choosing to leave. "It's a little unsettling," she says. "I've talked with a lot of folks who have chosen to tap out of a system that wasn't working for them anymore."

That being said, she's also noticed that in many ways, this group of employees has more power today than ever. An October 2022 report from Lean In and McKinsey backs that up, at least for women in corporate America, finding that female leaders are switching jobs at the highest rate the companies have seen in the eight years they've conducted such surveys. Women leaders are also leaving in greater numbers than men.

This makes sense to Gonalons-Pons. "It's a relatively strong job market for workers, with record low unemployment at the moment," she says. "People feel optimistic about being able to find a job if they quit. That empowers workers." Yet all three researchers interviewed for this piece say there's much more needed to build a workforce that's inviting to women, one that incorporates the revelations and desires stirred by the pandemic.

They say it will be important to continue watching labor numbers to see where job gains for women are actually happening—and equally as important, where they aren't. They underscore that changes to the system must go beyond surface level, to account for the disproportionate burden placed on some groups and the fact that race and class play a role in a gender-egalitarian society.

Beyond that, organizations should rethink roles and incorporate greater flexibility, Rothbard adds. "We really are not on par with other countries. It's this incredible conundrum. We have this great education system that trains women and this egalitarian society that tells young women they can be anything they want to be, but then we have this lack of a child care support system. The pandemic really highlighted what happens when that's taken to the extreme."

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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