

RELEASED MARCH 2021

Challenges for professional women in the COVID-19 pandemic



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In this survey, we sought to understand

professional women's mental health,

their challenges attending to work and family responsibilities, and

what kind of support they needed most.



Women Lead Change (WLC) is laser focused on workforce development as seen through a gender lens. It is our mission to advance women leaders at all levels. In order to measure progress, we conduct an annual survey of companies across Iowa who have agreed to measure key benchmarks in achieving our mission.

In this time of extreme disruption, we feel it is critical to dig deeper and assess the needs of the individual female in the workforce.

ABOUT THE STUDY

In collaboration with Zhenyu Yuan, Assistant Professor in the Department of Managerial Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, we launched an online study aimed at further understanding the numerous challenges that professional women are facing in the COVID-19 pandemic. **The goal of the study: to help organizations, policy makers, communities, and families identify effective ways to support professional women.**

Participation in the study was completely voluntary and limited to adult women currently working in the U.S. Individual survey responses were kept confidential. Results in this report are based on de-identified survey responses analyzed at the sample level. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Illinois at Chicago (Protocol # 2020-0950: Challenges for professional women in the COVID-19 pandemic).



KEY INSIGHTS

- Professional women's mental health is an urgent issue in the current pandemic
- Women are being pushed to the brink when trying to shoulder work and family responsibilities
- Multiple sources of help are needed to alleviate women's burden

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

507
participants

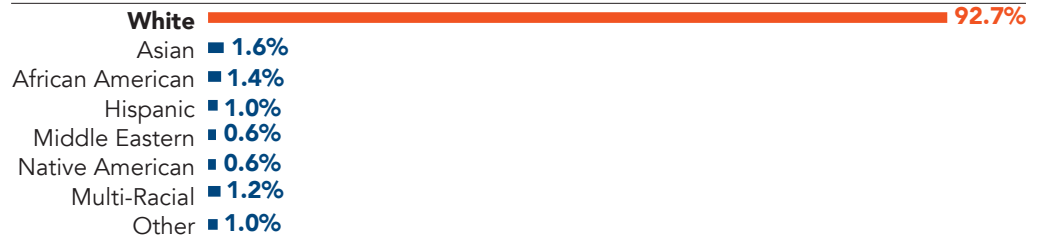
47.4%
have a bachelor's
degree

36.9%
have a master's
degree

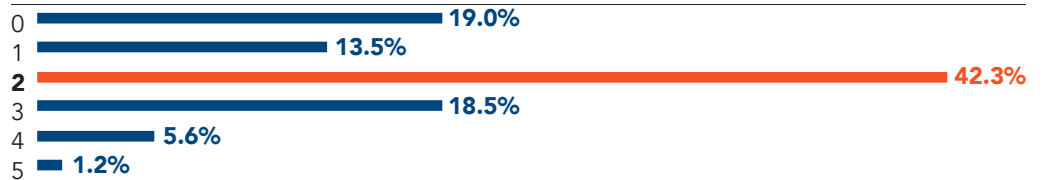
BREAKDOWN OF AGES



RACE



NUMBER OF CHILDREN



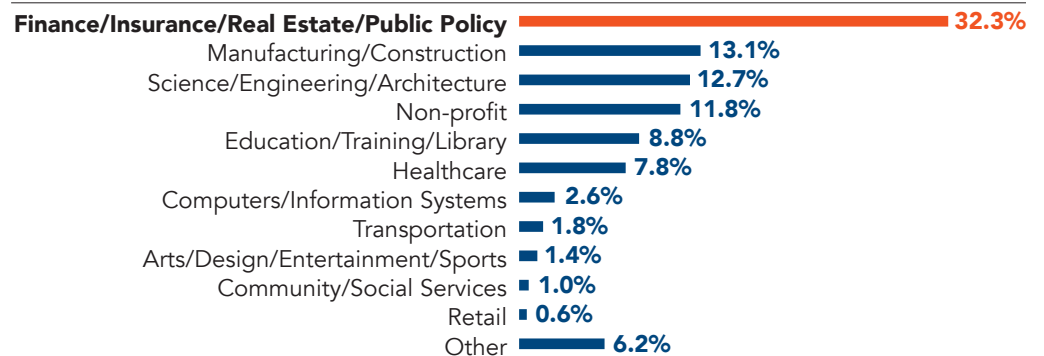
NUMBER OF DEPENDENT CHILDREN THAT ARE CURRENTLY LIVING WITH THEM



POSITION



INDUSTRY





A.

Well-being and mental health

The pandemic is taking a toll
on women's mental health.

There is little doubt that the pandemic is creating numerous challenges for people’s mental health.

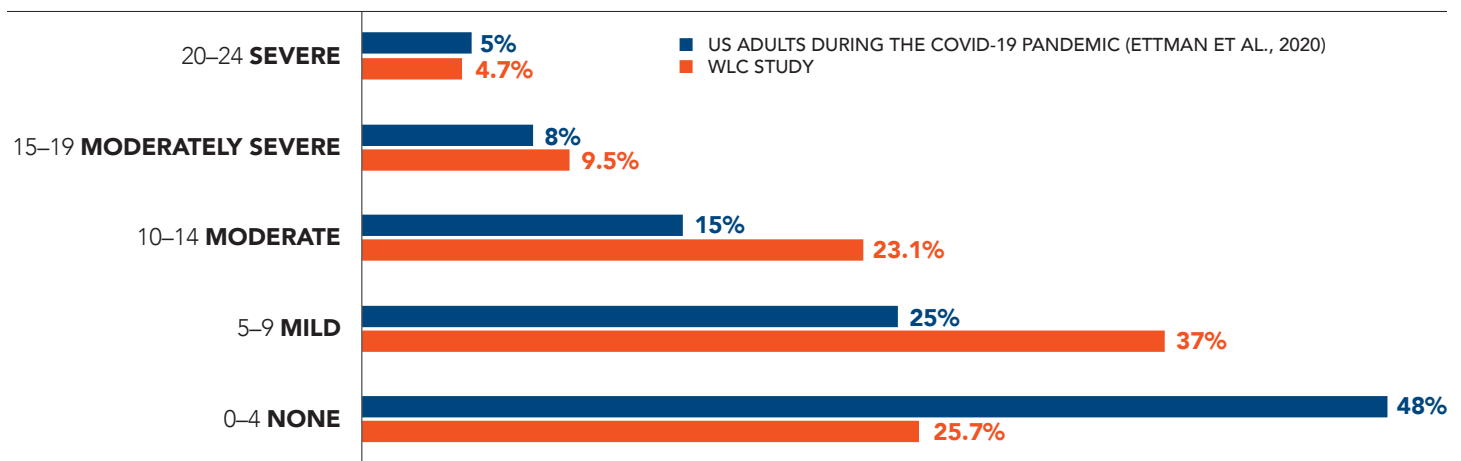
However, it remains unclear whether women’s mental health is taking a bigger hit compared with the general population. Therefore, we used the 8-item Patient Health Questionnaire depression scale (PHQ-8; Kroenke et al., 2009) to assess professional women’s mental health. Survey respondents indicated the frequency of experiencing each of the 8 symptoms (“feeling down, depressed, or hopeless”) during the past month. In accordance with the scoring scheme of PHQ-8, there are five levels of severity, ranging from “none” to “severe” (see Figure).

For comparison purposes, we also included results from a large-scale population study among US adults conducted in 2020 (Ettman et al., 2020). In other words, results from this study may serve as the population benchmarks. Compared with the general adult population, more women had mild (37% vs. 25%) and moderate (23.1% vs. 15%) depressive symptoms. These results suggest professional women may have elevated risks of experiencing mild and moderate depressive symptoms. Notwithstanding the self-assessment nature of this scale (i.e., our results should not be considered clinical diagnosis), it is reasonable to conclude that women’s mental health warrants attention in the current pandemic.



These results suggest professional women may have elevated risks of experiencing mild and moderate depressive symptoms.

DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS





B.

Juggling work and family

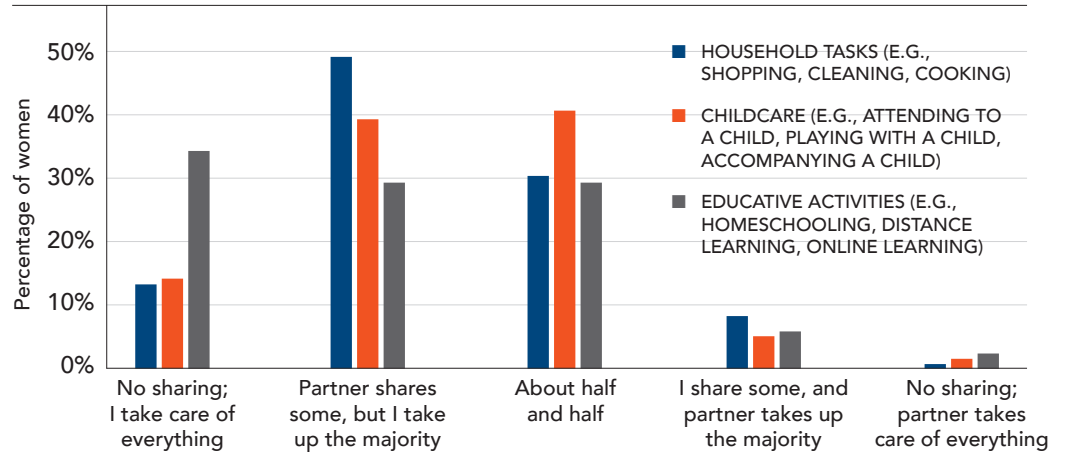
The heightened tension from juggling work and family duties is pushing many women to the brink, leading some to call the pandemic-induced recession a women's recession (<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace#>). Therefore, we wanted to better understand the challenges professional women were facing in both the work and family domain through our study. Overall, our results paint a stark picture of the obstacles and hardships for professional women working in the pandemic.

FAMILY DOMAIN

First, although one may expect partners to step up and share family burden in the pandemic, we found that married women, which comprised most of our sample, continued to shoulder most of the household responsibilities. More problematically, this trend held across age groups, their work position, and the number of dependent children.

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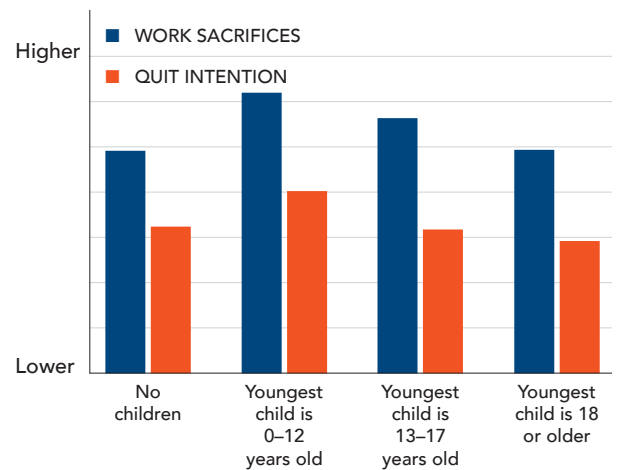
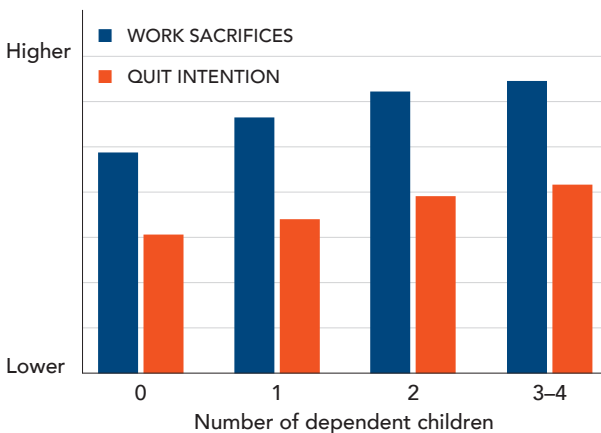
FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES



Second, different demographic groups have their unique challenges.

The number of dependent children is creating a huge burden on professional women. **Specifically, women with more dependent children had to make more work-related sacrifices and indicated a greater likelihood of quitting their job.**

Moreover, the age of children is also an important factor, as **women with young children (0–12 years old) made more work sacrifices and reported higher quit intention.**



Women who are not married are also facing unique challenges.

Single women and those who were either divorced or separated reported higher levels of job insecurity than married women. Women who were divorced or separated reported comparable levels of work-related sacrifices and quit intention as married women.

WORK DOMAIN

Non-managerial employees (individual contributors) and middle managers bear the brunt of work challenges in the COVID-19 pandemic:

Women in these two groups were more concerned about their job security than women in other managerial positions.

Further, women in these two groups were more likely to be affected by employer-mandated work changes than women in other managerial positions due to COVID-19.

Among the changes that organizations implemented (e.g., pay cut; reduced work hours) due to COVID-19, the three most common ones were:

1. My company froze promotions.
2. My company stopped supporting professional development (e.g., no longer pay for development activities).
3. My company cut my pay.

Importantly, these practices may create long-term ramifications for women's career development.

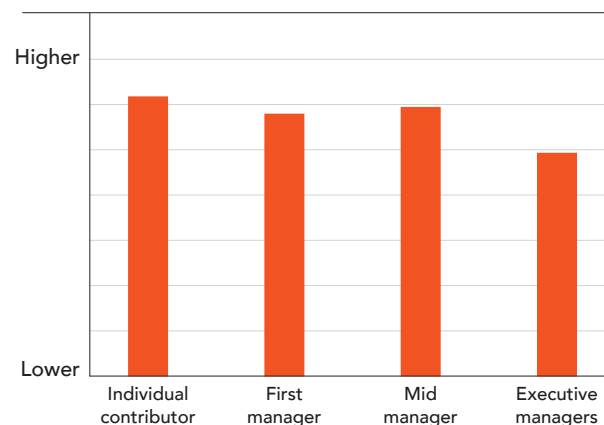
In addition to employer-mandated work changes, women are making sacrifices at work themselves to attend to family.

Compared with employer-mandated work changes (e.g., pay cut), women report greater levels of work changes that they made themselves (e.g., forgo work assignments; sacrifice personal time to catch up on work) to attend to family.

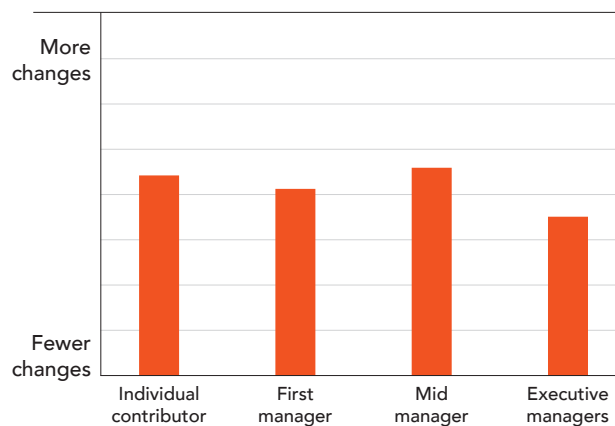
The most common sacrifices they made include:

1. I work despite the interruptions from my family (e.g., children)
2. I sacrifice personal time (e.g., sleep) to catch up on work
3. I shift my main focus to my family from my work
4. I lower my aspirations as a working professional

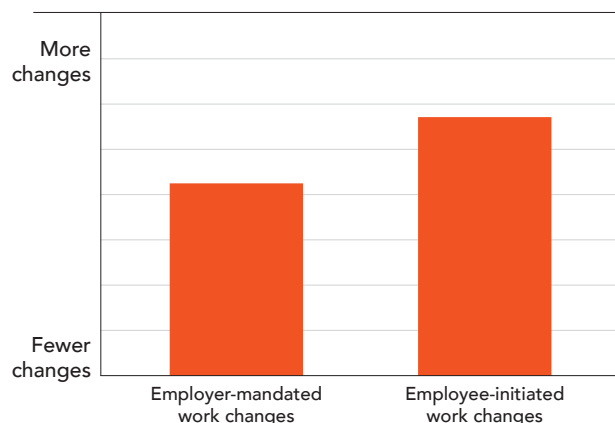
CONCERN ABOUT JOB SECURITY



EMPLOYER-MANDATED WORK CHANGES



EMPLOYER- VS EMPLOYEE-INITIATED WORK CHANGES





C.

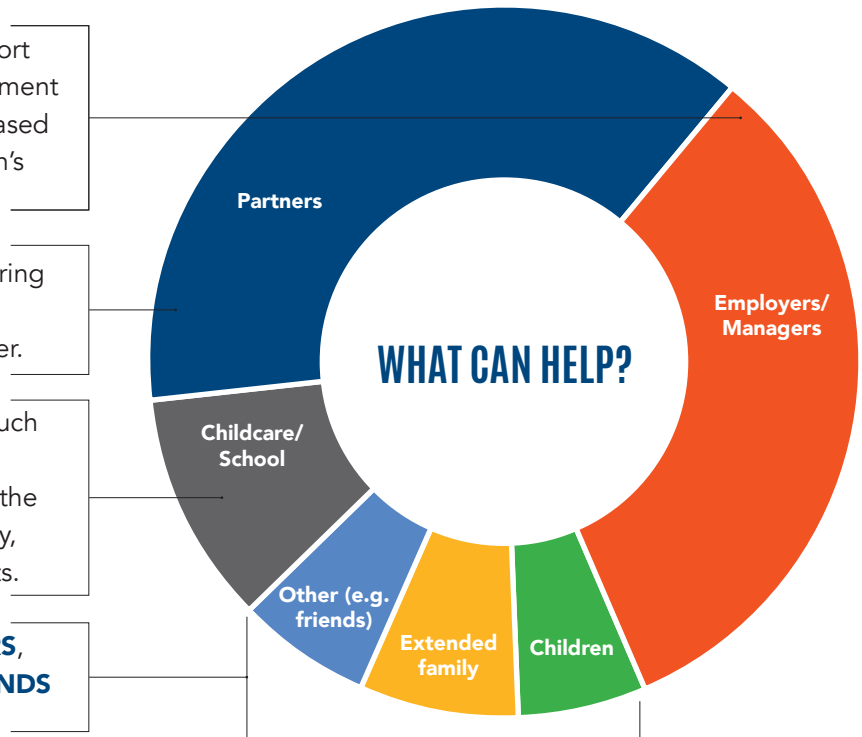
What can help?

The best companies, partners, and communities recognize the business imperative for a strong female workforce. As the pandemic is far from over, our understanding of the long-term implications of the pandemic for professional women is far from complete. This further elevates the importance of effectively supporting professional women. That is, how can they all help?

C. What can help?

What can help? This is the open-ended question we asked our respondents. While their detailed responses further underscored the unique challenges and hardships faced by professional women, we observed some common themes that warrant attention from different stakeholders.

- **FOR EMPLOYERS/MANAGERS**, such support includes: offering flexibility, ensuring employment security, recognizing that workload has increased due to the pandemic, acknowledging women's work contribution.
- **FOR PARTNERS**, such support includes: sharing household and childcare responsibilities, providing tangible support for women's career.
- **FOR CHILDCARE FACILITIES/SCHOOLS**, such support includes: keeping childcare facilities and schools open (while ensuring safety), (in the case of online learning) – offering more clarity, instructions, and technical support for parents.
- Additionally, **EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBERS**, **CHILDREN** (especially teenagers), and **FRIENDS** also play an important role.
- As some women are caring for elderly parents/ juggling work and family as single moms, they also need support from their **COMPANY AND COMMUNITIES**.



Information is power, and without some real intervention, this women's recession could have long-term drastic effects on mental health and the advancements made by women in the workforce over the past several decades. It is going to take all of us, men, women, employers, and communities, to turn this decline around.

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