

The Impact of COVID on Working Mothers and Black Women

In the Jan 29, 2021 edition of Forbes magazine, it was reported during an interview that the COVID crisis is negatively impacting women--especially mothers, senior-level women and Black. As virtually all of us have witnessed or directly experienced, the events of 2020 have turned workplaces and work cultures upside down. Reports have shown that women have been more negatively impacted than men in key ways throughout the pandemic, including women experiencing significant increases in domestic violence and rape, higher unemployment rates for women compared with men, greater exposure to the virus due to a predominance of women in the frontline healthcare workforce, a heavier toll on mental health, and more.

Across all data, research shows women are having a worse experience than men and this differs across Black women, Latina, Asian women, LGBTQ+ women and women with disabilities who are all facing challenges distinct to their realities.

Q: What is the biggest challenge that COVID has created for professional women, and how has this differed for women of color?

A: Although all women are under pressure, our research shows that working mothers, women in senior level roles and Black women are being hit especially hard.

It's been well documented that women typically take on the majority of household and caregiving responsibility. With the restrictions of COVID, however, we're seeing the emergence of a "double double" shift. Among parents in dual-career couples, mothers are 1.5 times more likely than fathers to spend an additional 3+ hours per day on household work compared to before COVID. That adds up to 15 hours a week—a healthy part-time job—which may exacerbate burnout and increase concerns that their performance is being judged negatively.

Lastly for Black women, the pandemic has added additional burdens to what was already a worse experience in the workplace. 52% of Black women report being the “only” of their gender and race at work. They are often more likely to feel uncomfortable bringing their whole selves to work: 42% feel uncomfortable sharing their thoughts about racial inequity and 22% feel like they can’t talk about the impact current events are having on them or people in their community. Perhaps most strikingly, Black women are 2.5 times more likely to report the death of a loved one, yet 1.5 times more likely to feel uncomfortable sharing their grief or loss.

Q: What is the current reality for Black women in the workplace and how can companies increase support for this group of women in particular?

A: Black women have always had a distinct, and worse, experience at work than other races and ethnicities. Black women are promoted more slowly. They are less likely than women of other races and ethnicities to say their manager advocates for new opportunities for them. And they have fewer interactions with senior leaders, which means they often don’t get the sponsorship and advocacy they need to advance.

Zero tolerance for microaggressions

In order to foster a culture in which Black women are fully valued and included, companies should make it clear that discriminatory behavior and microaggressions won’t be tolerated, and take real steps to make sure Black women get the formal and informal support that other employees do.

Q: What are the top three actions that leaders need to take now to build a better culture where all women—including working mothers, women of color, LGBTQ+ women, etc.—feel welcome and have equal opportunities to advance?

A: The pandemic isn’t over. Schools aren’t fully back in session and public health restrictions are likely to continue to strain women at work for months to come. To retain women for the long term, companies need to directly address the exhaustion, burnout and anxiety that women are experiencing, and continue to push forward on the existing barriers to women’s advancement and inclusion in the workforce.