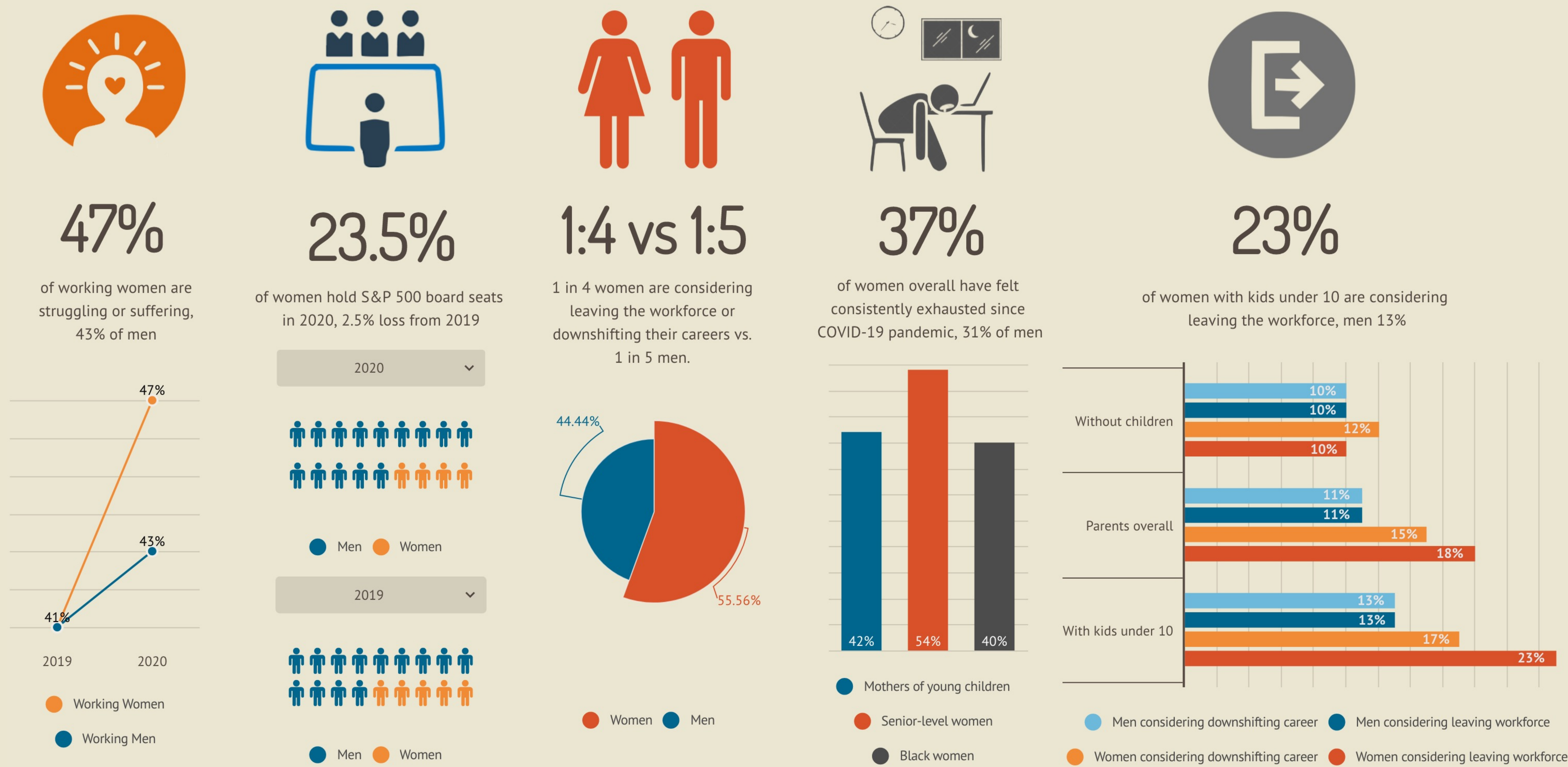


# The Pandemic is forcing Women from the Workforce.

## Can Extension's Workforce Development Programs Respond?



### 2. Adjusting expectations, rethinking performance reviews.

Reevaluating how performance reviews are conducted and monitored for potential bias against employees with caregiving responsibilities – avoids burnout, anxiety, and ultimately, less productivity. Factor in caregiving status in talent evaluations, including promotion reviews that weigh long term performance trends and future potential more.

### 3. Acknowledging the child-care system is broken, and employers must be part of the solution.

Companies and organizations need to invest in childcare so that working mothers don't have to choose between their families vs. their careers; e.g., employer childcare subsidies, learning centers that accommodate employees' school-age children with remote learning. Educate community, childcare is a basic infrastructure need required to be maintained for working families.

### 4. No penalties to the women who left the workforce or reduced their hours due to COVID-19.

Women should return to the workforce with confidence. Smart employees will recognize how the pandemic setback female employees and should be creative in how to woo them back.

### 5. Honor Ruth Bader Ginsburg's mantra: "This child has two parents."

According to Boston Consulting, like women, men have had to double their child-care and education duties to 37-hrs/wk. Yet women still bear the bigger burden at home, but the two-pronged parenting approach should become a standard going forward by employers.<sup>12</sup>

### REMOTE WORK HELPS AND HURTS GENDER EQUALITY HELPS

- **Removes trailing spouse effect.** Being able to work from any geographical location fills talent pools with more women who, if married, are less likely than married men, to relocate for their jobs. Allows employers to hire top talent from all over the state, (country, or world,) building more dynamic and diverse remote working units.
- **Mitigates height bias.** Height influences earning potential and career success. Workers six feet tall can expect to earn nearly \$166k more during a 30-year career than a colleague 7-inches shorter. (Avg. Am. woman's height is 5-feet 4-inches tall to man's 5-feet- 9-inches.)<sup>13</sup>
- **Women want to work from home.** Research finds 98% of women want to work from home at least once a week and 76% want their companies to offer more flexible schedules. The Pew Research Center reports, the lack of workplace flexibility keeps 51% of working mothers from advancing their careers vs. 16% of working fathers.<sup>14</sup>
- **Reduces commute time, increases productive, supports work-life balance goals through proactive policy changes not talk.**

### HURTS

- **Women become more invisible.** Leads to even fewer opportunities for advancement since managers often assign projects to those they can see and have frequent contact with.
- **Inequitable behavior goes unnoticed.** It's difficult to observe or correct inequitable practices when working remotely. Ensuring everyone's voice is heard during a Zoom call can be different than ensuring everyone's voice is heard and respected in an in-person setting.

### SOLUTIONS

- **Artificial Intelligence.** AI platforms can ensure human capital management decisions made across an entire organization are equitable, transparent, data-driven, and free of bias, (especially pay, performance, and promotion decisions.) This removes the ambiguities and biases that are prevalent. Plus replaces informal or relationship-based promotion opportunities with objective, data-driven decision-making.<sup>15</sup>

Created by Meghan Thoreau in infographic. Data Sources: McKinsey & Company 2020 Women in Workforce Report; Gallup Wellbeing Study; Life Evaluation Slips More for U.S. Working Women than Men; and Spencer Stuart, 2019 U.S. Spencer Stuart Board Index (2019); p. 8.

**"The pandemic, by itself, isn't hurting women's careers. It is merely highlighting — in bright fluorescent yellow marker — the existing inequities in the workplace & society that already created deep-seated disparities between men & women, from the gender pay gap to the lack of women in executive leadership roles."**

- Shirley Leung, Boston Globe

### INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 reshaped the lives of all Americans. Changes at home and work have hit women especially hard; even worse for women of color. The *She-cession*, the mass exodus of more than 25 million women left the workforce, at the beginning of the pandemic. Many eventually returned to work, but a huge number of women are leaving their careers to fill gaps in childcare and K-12 education. January's 2021 jobs report showed, 2.4 million women exited the workforce compared to 1.8 million men.<sup>1</sup> Whose professional time we value most, and whose is dispensable? How can Extension support and retrain women in the workplace?

### GENDER EQUALITY IN REVERSE

We are losing some of our best female leaders to caregiving and education duties, sending gender equality backwards 10 years. Business and institutions need to start taking a hard look at what changes they could make to help women stay employed. Extension needs to be sensitive to this loss of female leadership - internally and externally - through assessing institutional policies, community needs, and providing demand-led programming.



**EDUCATION.** Women earned more bachelor's degrees than men since 1982, more master's degrees than men since 1987, and more doctorate degrees than men since 2006.<sup>2</sup>

**LABOR FORCE.** Women's labor force participation peaked in 1999 at about 60% and has been declining since.<sup>3</sup>

**PRE-COVID-19.** 76.8 million women, 16 and over, in the labor force, represented 47% of the total labor force, compared to 53% of men.<sup>4</sup>

**AUTOMATION.** Women are 58% more likely than men to lose their jobs due to automation due to the sector they work in.<sup>5</sup>

**82-CENTS.** Women earn 82¢ for every dollar a man earns.<sup>6</sup> Typically the lower earning female is forced to cut back on work to care for children.<sup>7</sup>

**REMOTE LEARNING.** 80% of working mothers took the lead on remote learning vs. 31% of working fathers, and 40% of working parents have quit or reduced their work hours since the pandemic began.<sup>8</sup>

Photo sources: (above) 4 Ways Your Company Can Radically Help Working Mothers, 2021. Available from: <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/366126>; (top right) Getty Image, Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-56319623>

### EXTENSION CAN RESPOND, ENGAGE, AND DEVELOP :

- ✓ **EDUCATOR PARTNERS** to redefine what education looks like, including remote learning support, so families can spend more time together in the evenings than doing schoolwork.
- ✓ **RESOURCES** that connecting parents with at-home care providers in your community through use of technology.
- ✓ **PROGRAMS AND OUTREACH** that bring new teachers into the field of early education and care, supporting childcare programs, and helping transform early learning centers into neighborhood resource hubs to support local families with young children.<sup>9</sup>

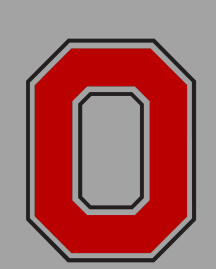
### EXTENSION CAN MAKE THE WORKPLACE BETTER FOR WOMEN :

- ✓ **BY ENGAGING COMMUNITY BUSINESS PARTNERS** with equitable workplace review programs and resources, to promote: 1) flexible workplans, 2) Switching from email to simpler message-based communication platforms, e.g., Slack, Teams. 3) Scheduling work meetings into predictable chunks of the day or in the month, 4) Redefining what constitutes a full weekday/workweek and how employee productivity is evaluated, and 5) Moving away from billable hour compensation schemes.
- ✓ **EQUITABLE CHANGES FOR ALL**, share resources, federal/local subsidies impacts workers equitably across the board rather than the piece meal approaches of going employer to employer.
- ✓ **DEVELOPING EMPLOYEE RETENTION PROGRAMS** that evaluate not just how employees work, but also what kind of work they are asked to do, keeping work meaningful.<sup>10</sup>

### DON'T GO BACKWARDS TO THE WAY IT'S ALWAYS BEEN. EMPLOYERS, EXTENSION: THINK BOLDLY FORWARD.

Research by McKinsey & Co. show that profits and performance can be 50% higher at workplaces where women are well represented at the top. Let COVID-19 be the reset button, to rewrite the workplace rules to create a more equitable and productive work environment.<sup>11</sup>

- 1. Making flexibility the new normal and recognize that 'facetime' is overrated.** The pandemic taught us to make connections and build culture virtually. The in-person 9-to-5 structure is out and counter productive. Let employees choose how often they want to physically come in the office – impact is more important than in-person office time. A University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee study found 1/3 of women leave companies that are not flexible enough to accommodate adequate work-life balance. Even before the pandemic Millennials and Generation Z wanted change, more flexible in their workplaces, and responsive working environments.<sup>14</sup>



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF FOOD, AGRICULTURAL,  
AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

MEGHAN THOREAU  
OSU Extension, Pickaway County  
Community Development and STEM  
[thoreau.1@osu.edu](mailto:thoreau.1@osu.edu) | [u.osu.edu/mindstretched](http://u.osu.edu/mindstretched)

CFAES provides research and related educational programs to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis. For more information, visit [caesdiversity.osu.edu](http://caesdiversity.osu.edu). For an accessible format of this publication, visit [caes.osu.edu/accessibility](http://caes.osu.edu/accessibility).