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# Women Are Quitting: How We Can Curb The 'She-Cession' And Support Working Women



**Margie Warrell** Contributor ⓘ ⊕

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A mom trying to work from home while holding her daughter and watching her son during the COVID-19 ... [+] GETTY

The COVID-19 pandemic has fast-tracked workforce trends such as remote working that benefit women. All well and good. Yet it's also taken a disproportionate toll on them. Women continue **bearing the brunt** of domestic duties. This is amplified for working moms who are 1.5 times more likely to report additional 3 hours a day on domestic 'chores' – essentially

another part-time job. It explains why an eye-popping 865,000 women left the U.S. workforce last September - coinciding with children returning to school, from home. Given that working women contribute **nearly \$8 trillion to the annual GDP**, there's clearly a compelling case for doing more to help women stay in the workforce through this pandemic.

The most recent *Women in the Workplace Report* by McKinsey found, for the first time, that 1 in 4 women was considering stepping out of the workforce or downshifting their careers. Their study of over 40,000 employees concluded that if every woman who was considering quitting her job or reducing her workload actually did so, two million women would exit the US workforce. Women in senior roles, working mothers, and women of color were most at risk.

Such a 'she-cession' would not only undo the strides made toward gender diversity in recent years but would jeopardize future progress as well.

Senior female leaders are more likely to sponsor other women (particularly women of color), champion DI initiatives, and give credit to other women for their work. They also act as **role models** for younger women, something I found in my own doctoral research as a key lever for women's advancement. A paucity of strong female role models coupled with a loss of female support from senior-level women mentors and allies risks the loss of retaining female talent, particularly among minority women.

With a vaccine roll out on the horizon, there are reasons to feel optimistic that 2021 will be a better year for women. However, given the ongoing trend toward a 'she-session', companies need to prioritize efforts to support women in staying in the workforce through these difficult times and to keep moving up the managerial hierarchy. Indeed throughout this crisis, we've seen just how important the **feminine leadership attributes** – empathy, collaboration, decision-making - that women bring to decision-making tables are to making optimal decisions.

**Adjust norms around flexibility.** As the pandemic has blurred the line between work and home life, increasing the risk of burnout, employees should set policies about responding to emails outside business hours, set limits on meeting length and encourage employees to prioritize self-care and set boundaries for themselves so they can disconnect.

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**Highlight accessible female role models** – As the pandemic has dragged on, many women have felt increasingly isolated. In the absence of casual water-cooler/coffee-bar conversations, many women feel like they're the only ones not holding it all together all the time. Opportunities to step behind the curtain of the lives of successful female leaders willing to candidly share their own struggles helps to ameliorate against a sense of disconnection and remind other women that everyone is figuring it out and having tough days.

**Get men on board** – Men play an important role in creating a more inclusive and gender-equitable workplace. As a study by [Catalyst](#) found, engaging men with sponsoring women and being career-allies is a vital strategy for addressing entrenched gender bias.

**Reset expectations for sustainable workloads.** Set practical employee expectations that allow women to create a sustainable pace and be fairly evaluated for their performance during the pandemic. Process agility is vital in every sphere of business operations in crisis, including performance metrics.

**Invest in mental health & wellbeing.** The extra burden women are facing puts them at an extra risk of mental and physical burnout. As women and minority groups are feeling higher rates of exclusion and judgment during the pandemic, employers need to reinforce the [importance of leading with empathy](#) and actively demonstrate their commitment to supporting the whole health of employees. As I've written previously, this doesn't negate the need for accountability and making hard decisions. Rather it ensures that employees - female and male alike - feel that those in charge genuinely care about their welfare and not just their output.

With the ratio of women working below 57% for the first time since 1988, the clock has clearly been turned back. Some might argue that its already done permanent damage to women. I refuse to subscribe to such a fatalist outlook. However, bouncing forward after this crisis to a stronger economy and a better future will require a collective commitment to supporting women. For those who have left the workforce - by choice or necessity - to quickly get back into it and work to making up lost time. For those who have stayed, to continue supporting their advancement toward more senior roles.

This pandemic has revealed systemic weaknesses in societies around the world. Yet it has also brought home some important truths. One is that communities, organizations, and leadership tables benefit when diversity is sought, nurtured, and valued fully.

Nurturing the potential of women by helping them be gainfully employed and optimistic about their future is not just good for women, it's good for everyone.

*Margie Warrell, PhD, is a speaker, author, expert in courageous leadership and creator of the [Brave Women Rising](#) program.*

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