



| By Nancy Board, MSW

The State of Women at Work and How EA Professionals Can Help

The World Economic Forum publishes an annual report on disparities around gender at work titled The Global Gender Gap Report (1). Its findings from 2022 are quite disturbing. Gender parity is not recovering; it's getting worse. According to the report, it will take another 132 years to close the gender gap globally. Workforce outcomes for women run the risk of backsliding even further. This is a real crisis.

You might ask yourself, "How can this be?" Haven't we made progress in this area? Why are we going backward? Sadly, women's representation in the corporate world hasn't improved much over the past few years. Many companies report being highly committed to gender diversity, but that commitment is not translated into meaningful progress. Not only does this hurt women, but it also impacts the company's bottom line. Many studies suggest that more women at the top reflect better bottom-line financial results. McKinsey research has consistently found that companies in the top quartile for women on executive teams were more likely to have above-average profitability. It's one of the top findings of McKinsey's report they co-created with LeanIn.Org.

To offer a grimmer picture, the recent Women in the Workplace (8) report analyzed pipeline and HR data from 279 companies in North America and more than 13 million workers. They noted some glaring facts about the state of women: (5)

- Men hold 62% of manager positions to women's 38%
- Women are less likely to have access to senior leaders
- Women are twice as likely to be mistaken for more junior employees and more likely to deal with discrimination
- 35% of women have experienced sexual harassment at work
- Unlike popular opinion, women negotiate for raises and promotions as often as men

So Why Aren't More Women in Top Leadership?

We've heard some possible reasons, as those stated above. Though some are anecdotal, excuses keep rising to the top - and many of them are simply not true:

- **Likeability Factor** - Colleagues' perceptions can make or break a woman's career. As one executive said, "For women, it kills you if you're not likable."
- **Motherhood Penalty** - Many women leave their jobs after realizing they're paying the "motherhood penalty"— they get fewer opportunities and lower wages than childless women or men (even fathers) because they are presumed to be less committed to work. The stigma surrounding flexibility and family accommodation can derail women's careers.
- **Women Aren't Where Decisions are Made** - Women are not proportionately represented in the boardroom, the back room, the golf course, the after-work dinners, or the business trips. Is this because of the caregiving needs noted above? Are women opting out of business after business to take care of family? Is this impacting their career progression?
- **Pipeline Deficiencies** - "There are just not enough qualified women in the candidate pool," some suggest. Really? What keeps women from being qualified or selected for leadership? Is there a deliberate review of key traits needed in leadership positions? Does the recruitment take into account biased practices?

The Pandemic Crisis – Worse for Women and Especially Women of Color

Caroline Kitchener reported on January 10, 2021(6), just how shocking the December 2020 jobs report in America was, even to experts, closely monitoring unemployment during the pandemic. The US economy lost 140,000 jobs in December 2020. Women lost 156,000 jobs, while men gained 16,000 jobs. The impact was greatest on women, and the women affected were overwhelmingly women of color. “When the coronavirus crippled the economy in March, women of color were hit first and hardest. Disproportionately represented in service and hospitality — industries hamstrung by the coronavirus. With many schools and daycares still closed, working in jobs that cannot be done remotely, they are often left with no choice.”

December 2020 marked the end of a catastrophic year already, but for working women, it was tragic. And given the murder of George Floyd in May of 2020, not only are physical safety, health, and emotions on overdrive, add to it extreme grief and psychological safety concerns. Women of color are hit especially hard.

- Between January and December 2020, nearly 2.1 million women left the labor force, including 564,000 Black women and 317,000 Latinas.
- More than 1 in 12 Black women ages 20 and over (8.4%) were unemployed in December 2020.
- Women lost more than half (55.0%) of the 9.6 million net jobs lost in 2020.
- Black women’s unemployment rate was down from 9.0% in November but was still more than 1.7 times higher than their pre-pandemic unemployment rate (4.9% in February).
- More than 1 in 11 Latinas ages 20 and over (9.1%) were unemployed in December, up nearly a whole percentage point from November’s rate (8.2%). This is more than 1.7 times their pre-pandemic unemployment rate (4.9% in February).
- The unemployment rate for white men ages 20 and over was 5.8% in December.
- For every man who lost a job, another found work.

Considerations for Employers to Implement:

- Offer greater flexibility to employees to better manage the demands of work and family
- Implement fair hiring practices that correct for biases
- Continue supportive hybrid or work-from-home practices (where possible)
- Check in regularly with employees and listen to understand
- Start a mentor/sponsorship program and engage senior leaders with appropriate candidates
- Sincerely engage in leading DE&I initiatives, including committing to a truly equitable and anti-racist organization

Case in Point

Several years ago, in my role as COO of Global Women 4 Wellbeing (GW4W), I was asked to consult with a large multinational corporation with about 30,000 employees worldwide. Though a woman CEO currently led this organization, this astute HR Director (male) noticed the lack of gender and other diversity at the leadership tables throughout all global regions. “It was strikingly obvious,” he said when he passed the glass conference room filled with corporate executives. Noticing who was not in the room, he asked how they might advance more women and people of color and wondered what factors might be holding them back.

After several meetings with his HR team, we developed a strategy that involved inviting more women and high-potential employees to ‘water cooler’ conversations, typically attended by mostly men, as informal ways of getting to know each other as colleagues. They also scheduled intentional gatherings, which called upon men to actively engage more as mentors and consider sponsoring female colleagues looking for advancement and global assignments. They were also committed to more intentional Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DE&I) initiatives, training, and improvements throughout the enterprise.

What Can EA Professionals Do?

EA professionals will note that most of their clientele identify as women, which has been the case for years in

EAP practice work. You, as a provider, have a unique opportunity to dig deeper into the workplace and personal concerns that challenge this group of employees.

Educate yourself about and recognize the barriers and biases that exist for your clients. Ask relevant questions during your assessment related to job function, flexibility, financial stability, personal health, disease prevention, stress, family and caregiving issues, time management, self-care, well-being, satisfaction level at work, and support systems – both at home and at work.

Formulate plans with your clients that consider gender equity and advancement at the forefront and prioritize gender health care equity. Be an active, committed ally and advocate for better equity, diversity, and inclusion. Encourage changes that support innovation and creativity and are empowering for the client. Hold space for women to share their pain and trauma. Create a safe space for exploration and discovery. Take a stand for positive, systemic change. Be an ally.

Make space for those whose voices are missing from the leadership tables, especially those from marginalized communities. You may even take a step back for someone else to step forward. Call out exclusive and biased practices where they exist. Stand for justice and equity for all.

How Can EA Professionals Better Support Women in the Workplaces They Serve?

EA Professionals have a unique opportunity to impact the workplace and the systems that make that workplace what it is. Use your privilege and position as an EAP consultant and workplace expert to help your HR customers and other leaders better recognize the inequities and biases in the workplace. Whether identifying training programs that can help deal with bias and inequities or consulting on change initiatives, policies, or topics of interest that help educate and inspire action.

Many organizations can better support flexible work arrangements and take action to promote fair pay and pay transparency. Having stronger male allyship and sponsorship can have a significant impact on a woman's career progression. Your knowledge and awareness of these tangible issues can shine a light on steps that might otherwise be overlooked.

As EA professionals, we can help chip away at the systems that hold dysfunctional workplaces intact by exploring and assisting with culture change efforts focusing on gender, DE&I, and building anti-racist cultures. We are in the perfect position to assist organizational leaders in positive, forward-looking, and inclusive movements that can benefit ALL employees.

The Big Picture Impact of Women's Wellbeing at Work

Women make up half the global workforce. With women actively at work, economies and businesses will be able to thrive. Keeping women engaged, safe, and healthy at work is good for everyone, including shareholders.

Having diverse experiences and voices at the decision-making table is undoubtedly good for creativity and innovation. Many studies have proven this time and again. It is simply good for business.

Women will invariably face challenges beyond the regular workday related to caregiving and other non-paid work. As such, employers that want to retain top talent, committed to closing the gender leadership gap will adopt more suitable family and parental leave policies that don't penalize but incentivize women at work. They will consider the many health and well-being challenges women face throughout their careers and, instead of stifling the conversation, shine a light on it and normalize it.

Menstruation, maternity/motherhood, caregiving, and menopause are as normal to women's lives as leading, listening, supporting, innovating, guiding, and making multi-million-dollar decisions. To be unconscious of these traits in the workplace is simply not acceptable or realistic.

Normalizing perfectly natural experiences will no doubt ease planning and support provided to more women to lead better, lead healthier, and thrive.

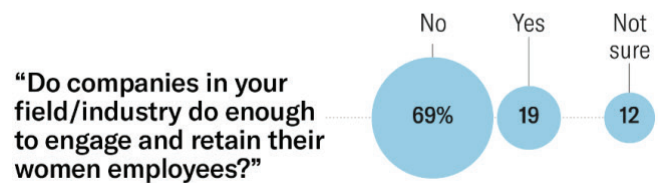
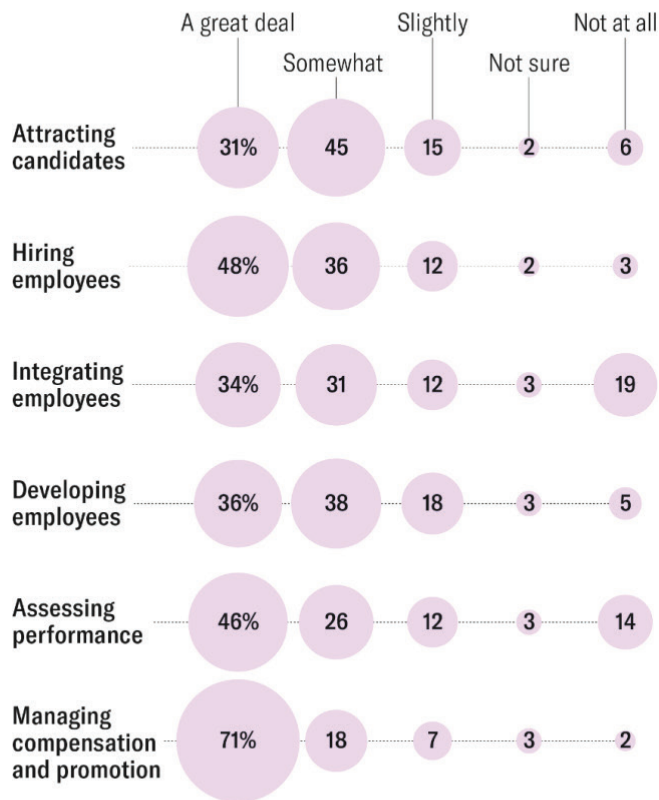
Do Women Still Face Bias and Discrimination?

Apparently so. A study published in the Harvard Business Review (HBR) from 2018-2019 illustrates this in the chart below: (3)

Perceptions of Barriers for Working Women

A global, multi-industry survey of female executives found broad agreement that women face bias and discriminatory practices in key areas of talent management.

“How much are women disadvantaged in organizational processes?”



Source: Authors' 2018-2019 survey of more than 150 female executives in North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and New Zealand

HBR



Many employees report that primary retention factors go beyond a paycheck. Factors such as having greater flexibility in their work and location, strong psychological safety, sufficient time off, and trust in their leadership are key. Employees prefer to work in environments that recognize diversity, celebrate differences, and have functional, healthy, and respectful cultures.

The global work environment will challenge employers to continually adapt to change. Part of that change means removing barriers and expanding workplace practices to be more equitable and inclusive for all.

Summary

Narrowing the gender and diversity leadership gap should be a deliberate and continuous process for any organization. Measuring outcomes - such as turnover, hiring rates, compensation, and promotions, are essential. All managers must commit intentionally to better DE&I and reduce unconscious bias.

Sexual harassment, discrimination, and bullying should never be accepted. Zero tolerance should mean precisely that - zero tolerance, regardless of whether your high performer is engaged in unacceptable workplace behavior. Toxic behavior swept under the rug impacts everyone and depletes the psychological safety necessary for a strong workplace culture. It also conveys that women's well-being is less important than keeping shareholders and stakeholders happy. Evidence shows us that when more women are in positions of power, sexual harassment—a huge drain on retention—also declines. (To be an employer of choice in 2023 and beyond, management must actively be working to build inclusive and respectful cultures.)

Epilogue - Global Impacts

This 2022 report from the World Economic Forum measures gender disparities in 146 countries. It tracks their progress over time, focusing on gaps between women and men across four key dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. The latest edition indicates that it will take 132 years to close the global gender gap, finding that gender parity is not recovering after substantial losses between 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of those gaps are noted in economic participation, opportunities, and political empowerment.

This year's report examines the state of gender gaps in the workforce as structural barriers and economic shocks continue to largely – and disproportionately- impact women's workforce outcomes. While women have increasingly moved into paid work, they are still met with societal expectations, limited availability of care, lesser pay, and employer policies that impact their education and career growth. The report provides data and figures for gender gaps in labor force participation, care work, leadership, political representation, wealth accumulation, and more. A summary of key findings, a digital version of the report, shareable infographics, and country profiles accompany the report.

Resources

1. Global Gender Gap Report 2022 | World Economic Forum ([weforum.org](https://www.weforum.org))
2. WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf ([weforum.org](https://www.weforum.org))
3. How to Close the Gender Gap (hbr.org)
4. All of the Jobs Lost in December Were Women's Jobs - National Women's Law Center (nwlc.org)
5. 7 Striking Facts About Women in the Workplace | The Muse
6. American Women Lost 140,000 Jobs In December 2020 | Marie Claire
7. How doing better for women means doing better for everyone (trust.org)
8. 2018 Women in the Workplace report - McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org
9. What Matters More to Your Workforce Than Money – HBR

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