

# Building Workplaces Where Women Can Thrive

Centering Equity at the Intersection of Gender and Race



**The U.S. economy** is at a crossroads. We have just gone through one of the worst economic disruptions in history due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which created unprecedented challenges for working families, particularly those on the frontlines doing essential work. This economic downturn was the first to have a greater impact on working women than men, being dubbed the “she-cession.” This comes on the heels of a growing social awareness of the pervasiveness and significant costs of sexism and racism in our country. Together these have highlighted the inequities and barriers in our workforce and economic systems that exist for women and particularly Women of Color. To ensure they are able to attract and retain great talent, businesses are increasingly considering their role in addressing these economic inequities through workforce policies and practices. At the same time, **American workers—women in particular—remain challenged in being able to find quality jobs while still caring for their families.** We must advance comprehensive and equitable solutions to support the dignity and economic security of all workers and allow them to maximize their potential and fully contribute to growing our economy. As the Aspen Institute highlighted in its “Four Employer Principles for Family Prosperity,” it is crucial for employers to create jobs for all caregivers and parents, since family health and well-being are drivers of economic growth, not only for individual children and families but for our communities, cities, and country.<sup>1</sup>

**Everybody deserves** to be valued, respected, and treated equitably at work. But too many low-paid and Black and Latina/o/x workers—and particularly women—are underpaid, undervalued, and impacted by systemic bias. And it’s costing us all. Research shows that racial and ethnic inequalities have cost the U.S. economy \$51 trillion in lost economic output in the past 30 years.<sup>2</sup> From labor alone, the losses add up to \$22.9 trillion since 1990. If the U.S. had family friendly policies that allowed prime-age (25–54) women to participate in the U.S. workforce at the same rate as in other developed nations, real U.S. GDP would be almost \$1 trillion higher in the next 10 years, or 4 percent above our baseline forecast. Even if women close only half of the 10–percentage–point gap with men’s participation, GDP would be 2 percent higher in the next 10 years.<sup>3</sup>

### Inequality is Costing the U.S. Economy



As the economy begins to recover from the economic stress of the global pandemic, companies are increasingly finding it difficult to attract and retain good employees. Many workers are leaving their jobs, often for ones that better meet their needs, in what has been called the “Great Resignation.” However, it turns out that attracting workers is largely dependent on improving job quality, providing better working conditions, and addressing gender and racial equity. Gallup recently asked 13,085 U.S. employees what was most important to them when deciding whether to accept a new job, and pay and wellbeing-related issues were the most important factors including good benefits and work-life balance. Workers are also looking for a job that allows them to best use their strengths and has stability and job security.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Gallup found that employees want COVID-19 policies that align with their beliefs, and an equitable and inclusive workplace. Thus, the need to attract workers goes hand in hand with diversity, equity, and inclusion plans.<sup>5</sup>

**For nearly 50 years,** Women Employed has been committed to increasing women's economic power and removing barriers to economic equity. To do that, we must ensure that workplaces are equitable for women—and especially for Black and Latina/x women who face the dual impacts of gender and racial bias at work. From the lowest-paid workers—often our essential workers—to corporate leaders, each type and level of job in our complex economy has its own set of issues that need to be addressed in order to best support working women and allow them to succeed at work while caring for themselves and their families.

**It is not realistic—nor has it ever been—to assume that employees' personal and professional lives can be compartmentalized and kept separate from one another.** The global pandemic has made this intersection of family and work more evident with employees needing to manage working, caregiving, and schooling all at the same time. Study after study has shown the impact of school, daycare, and eldercare closures on working parents—but on women in particular, who still bear the greatest responsibility for family caregiving. Employers must take the opportunity the pandemic has provided to redefine the status quo and ensure they are creating true equity for their workforce.

The best jobs engage their employees in meaningful work they can be proud of, recognize workers and their achievements, and encourage a sense of belonging to the workplace and workforce. These supports should address both basic needs like livable wages and safe working conditions, as well as higher-level concerns like equitable and inclusive work environments. All of these are necessary to ensure women can be effective, productive, and successful at work.

**Women Employed believes workplaces that work for women incorporate principles and practices that fall under three major areas:**

1. Quality jobs
2. Equitable work and workplaces
3. Equitable access and impact



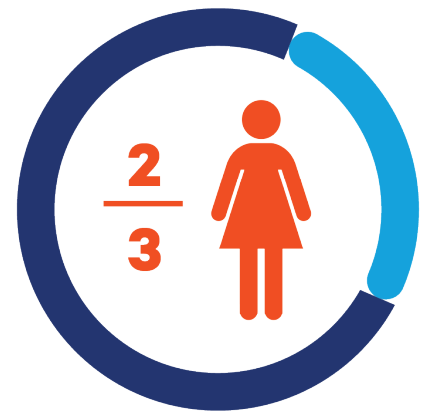
# QUALITY JOBS

At a basic level, all people should have access to a quality job: one that provides an employee and her family with economic security and stability in a safe working environment. This means a living wage, safe working conditions free from harassment and discrimination, and benefits like health insurance and paid leave. These basic needs are central to the health and well-being of all workers, but particularly important in addressing a more equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in Illinois and beyond. <sup>6</sup>

## A quality job pays a livable wage and offers opportunities for advancement.

Approximately two-thirds of minimum wage workers in the United States are women, and the federal minimum wage has not been raised since 2009 (the longest stretch in U.S. history), despite significant increases in inflation. Thus its value has eroded significantly over time and full-time minimum wage income is not enough to keep many families out of poverty.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the jobs that are dominated by women are often the lowest paid: for example, home health workers, daycare providers, and domestic workers. While essential work, these occupations have been traditionally seen as “women’s work” and over time less compensated due to societal biases and policy choices.<sup>8</sup> Those who work in subminimum wage jobs doing tipped work, such as restaurant servers and nail salon technicians, are even more vulnerable to poverty, sexual harassment, and wage theft. Nine of Illinois’ fifteen lowest-paying jobs are tipped occupations and women are the majority in over half of them.

### Minimum Wage Workers



Beyond a job meeting basic needs, all workers want to feel valued and that their contributions matter. Workers want to be recognized for their hard work and have the opportunity for advancement as well as a clear path to a career beyond their current job. Long-term employees should be rewarded for their loyalty and their invaluable on-the-job expertise by being considered for promotion—even if their education or career path may look different than your typical candidate—rather than a company defaulting to hiring from outside. Companies should invest in ongoing training and development for their employees, including incentivizing employees to seek additional education that may help advance their career and earning potential.

## A quality job provides safe working conditions, including freedom from harassment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the importance of having safe working conditions that reasonably protect workers from contagion, including adequate PPE and social distancing. But even in “normal” times, some jobs have great physical demands that may put workers at risk if proper safety precautions are not followed, such as standing for long periods of time, working with dangerous equipment, heavy lifting, or repetitive physical tasks. This may be particularly unsafe for pregnant workers who may need brief periods of rest or water breaks to stay healthy during pregnancy. During the pandemic we have also seen an increase in disruptive and/or combative customers who have threatened frontline workers both physically and verbally.<sup>9</sup> Employers must ensure that safety precautions are in place, give workers appropriate break times, are not put in dangerous situations, and provide reasonable accommodations for pregnant workers.

Safe working conditions also mean harassment-free workplaces. Nearly half of all working women have reported experiencing sexual harassment, though this is likely underreported as two-thirds of all employees believe that sexual harassment at work is a problem.<sup>10</sup> Sexual harassment is particularly rampant among women who work for tips, in isolated or predominantly male workplaces, and toward undocumented women.<sup>11</sup> Black women report experiencing sexual harassment at work at three times the rate of white women.<sup>12</sup> Sexual harassment also costs businesses legal costs, productivity loss, work absences, and employee turnover, as 80% of women who have been harassed leave their job within two years.<sup>13</sup>

# 80%

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In recent years women, People of Color, and older adults reported an increase in racial, gender, and age-related harassment both in person and when working remotely due to an increasingly negative sociopolitical climate. Due in part to inconsistent and subpar training, not all workplaces handle harassment complaints satisfactorily, exposing too many workers to retaliation because they file reports or raise concerns. Retaliation can take the form of reduced hours, less desirable work assignments, or even being fired, adding to stress and trauma. As a result, many choose to leave these jobs rather than reporting their abusers because of the challenges, and the personal and professional toll it takes on them. Companies should require regular sexual harassment training, provide trauma-informed resources, and implement policies to support employees experiencing harassment at work, and hold those committing harassment accountable.<sup>14</sup> This support for employees should also extend to workers experiencing intimate partner violence such as domestic violence and sexual assault, which has a disproportionate impact on women.<sup>15</sup>

## A quality job has a predictable and stable schedule and pays employees for the number of hours they are scheduled for.

Unfair scheduling practices have become the new normal in low-paid jobs. Fifty-nine percent of full-time hourly workers' schedules fluctuate.<sup>16</sup> Nearly 40 percent of retail workers report that they don't get set minimum work hours each week, and a quarter are scheduled for on-call shifts; this is particularly true for the service sector and for women of color.<sup>17</sup> This can make it impossible for workers to budget, to afford their basic needs, to plan their weekly schedule, to get an education or take a second job, or to balance work and home life. Workers who experience schedule unpredictability are more likely to experience income volatility, as well as hunger and housing, medical, and psychological hardships.<sup>18</sup> Women—over a third of whom work part time in order to juggle economic survival, family responsibilities, and advancing their careers—are at the greatest risk of being further marginalized in the workforce if ever-changing scheduling practices on the part of employers go unchecked. It is important for employers to understand how unpredictable schedules harm workers and provide adequate advance notice of work hours, avoid last minute changes, and try to keep schedules as regular and reliable as possible. This will also benefit companies as unpredictable scheduling leads to high employee absenteeism and turnover, hurting overall productivity.<sup>19</sup>

## A quality job provides benefits that allow workers to stay healthy and care for their families.

Traditionally, full-time work has come with benefits, often including health insurance, dental, disability, retirement savings plans, vacation days, paid holidays, and more. However, most part-time and low-paid jobs do not provide even the most basic benefits like healthcare and paid sick days.

A growing barrier to ensuring workers have benefits they need is appropriate worker classification since employers often offer benefits like health insurance only to full-time employees. However, some companies have come to rely on gig workers and temp workers to perform key functions, or improperly classify workers as independent contractors so they do not have to pay employment taxes or provide benefits. **Companies must classify their workers correctly to reflect the reality of their employee-employer relationship so that these workers can receive the benefits they are entitled to.** Better employers can follow the example of companies like Costco, Starbucks, and UPS and provide benefits to part-time workers, valuing the health and well-being of all their employees.

Healthcare, child care, paid sick time, and paid family and medical leave should be considered crucial infrastructure for working parents. One study estimated that if the United States had family support policies like paid leave and affordable child care, it would add \$650 billion to our economy each year. One of the most crucial benefits that employers should provide is paid leave—including both paid sick time and paid family and medical leave—to allow employees to care for themselves or their families. An estimated 61 percent of caregivers are women who have responsibility for taking care of family members while still holding a regular job outside the home.<sup>20</sup> And yet 24 percent of all U.S. workers do not earn any paid sick time, though access to this benefit varies greatly, primarily by income.

For example, 92 percent of workers in the top quarter of earnings have access to some form of paid sick time, while among the lowest-earning tenth, just 31 percent have paid sick time.<sup>21</sup> The importance of paid sick time became increasingly evident—and important—during the global pandemic, when employees and their families may have needed to quarantine, recover from illness, or care for other family members due to illness or school and child care closures. In fact, a lack of paid sick time has been cited as a reason that many employees did not comply with the recommended length for COVID-19 quarantine, as they simply could not afford to stay home.<sup>22</sup> Other studies have shown that access to paid sick time would reduce the number of flu cases,<sup>23</sup> including during a pandemic.<sup>24</sup> Providing paid sick time is, then, a critical public health measure and a way to curb the spread of illness.



While paid sick time is a critical short-term support, working people also need paid family and medical leave in order to manage longer-term care needs. The United States is the only industrialized nation that does not guarantee its workers access to any kind of paid family and medical leave—which allows workers paid time off to bond with a new child, including adopted or foster children; to manage a long-term disability; to care for themselves or a family member who is seriously ill; or for someone who is experiencing a domestic violence situation. Paid family and medical leave is particularly important for those who care for elderly relatives, since other support programs are often focused on children specifically. It is also important that these policies have an inclusive definition of family not limited to biological or immediate family, in order to truly be equitable for all types of families, including LGBTQ+ families. theSkimm's #ShowUsYourLeave database showcases 500+ companies and organizations who are leading the way in bringing more transparency and insight into paid leave policies in the private sector rather than waiting for state or federal policy.<sup>25</sup>

Women in states that have paid leave are able to stay in the workforce at higher rates than those without it. An Illinois study showed that access to paid leave increased the probability that a working mother remained employed by 10 percent and reduced her likelihood of experiencing a loss of income by 14 percent.<sup>26</sup> Data from California's paid leave program, the oldest in the country, showed that paid leave increased mothers' probability of being employed 9 to 12 months after childbirth, as well as an increased probability that workers in low-skilled jobs return to their employers after taking paid leave. Paid leave also increased employment among workers 45-64 who have a disabled spouse, and is particularly important for domestic violence survivors and those with disabilities.<sup>27,28</sup>

Paid leave is also good for business. Research has shown that paid leave policies would add \$28.5 billion more to our economy each year.<sup>29</sup> In California, labor costs for small businesses have gone down as a result of their program. Paid leave also helps retain workers and ultimately reduces costs for employers.



While support for child care may not be a typical benefit offered by companies, it is increasingly seen as crucial economic infrastructure rather than a luxury. Access to affordable and quality child care was already a key challenge for working parents before the pandemic, particularly for low-paid women. However, the widespread closing of schools and child care centers during the pandemic brought to the forefront how important child care is to keep our workplaces fully functioning, as it affected nearly every working parent regardless of occupation. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, 53 percent of women with young children cited child care as a reason they left the workforce temporarily, took on fewer hours, or moved to a less demanding job.<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, it is estimated that over 25 million women are caregivers for friends and family members, many of whom also have a job outside the home.<sup>31</sup> Many of these women are in the “sandwich generation,” meaning that they care for both their children and aging parents. This unpaid caregiving poses many challenges to working women who are often pushed out the workforce without some caregiving support or family-friendly policies like child care and paid leave.



Affordable child care contributes to higher workforce participation rates and wages for women.<sup>32</sup> Expanded child care benefits can help companies attract, retain, and advance women—69 percent of women job-seekers with young children said that child care benefits would make them more likely to choose an employer, and over 80 percent of men and women with young children said that child care benefits would be an important factor in deciding whether to stay at their current employer or switch to another. However, research shows that only about 11 percent of employees receive any child care<sup>33</sup> assistance through their employer.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, for 20 years the federal government has been offering a child care credit to businesses which has remained mostly unused. This benefit not only provides tax credits to offset costs for businesses offering on-site child care or access to off-site providers, but also provides tax credits for parents with employer-provided child care as well.<sup>35</sup>

The Marshall Plan for Moms suggests a four-step approach for businesses to provide child care supports which can increase company loyalty and boost workplace morale, starting with 1) understanding employee needs, 2) understanding that one size does not fit all, 3) designing in consideration of business factors, and 4) building awareness.<sup>36</sup> These can be further translated into tangible actions and policies employers can take to better support working parents.<sup>37</sup>

## The Marshall Plan for Moms<sup>36</sup>

1. Understand employee needs
2. Understand that one does not fit all
3. Design in consideration of business factors
4. Build awareness



## A quality job encourages workers to provide input around working conditions.

Businesses should seek the input of workers on working conditions and practices and ensure job protection for workers who speak up with concerns and suggestions. This is particularly important as union jobs and membership have declined, often leaving workers—especially in low-paid jobs—with no outlet to express their concerns. And it is vital to ensuring employees feel valued. **Workers should have multiple avenues for providing input and feedback and should not be retaliated against for speaking up.** According to the Aspen Institute, worker voice is “a critical tool for sharing prosperity, invigorating productivity, correcting injustice and healing divides...and is essential to closing the racial equality gap.”<sup>38</sup> Empowering workers contributes to a sense of dignity, respect, and belonging and strengthens productivity and morale.



# EQUITABLE WORK AND WORKPLACES

A quality job is the foundation on which women's economic security and potential can be built. The next step beyond the basics is the need for equitable workplaces to enable women and People of Color to truly thrive, with equal opportunities to succeed and live up to their full potential while being their authentic selves at work.

Growing attention to racial disparities in the U.S. has caused many companies to take a hard look at diversity and inclusion within their workplaces. According to an Indeed survey, 55 percent of job seekers said it's "very" or "extremely" important to work at a company that prioritizes diversity and inclusion.<sup>39</sup> However, diversity is not just the right thing to do; it's a business imperative, and is a part of the growing movement for companies to address environmental, social, and governance (ESG) issues as central to their reputation, financial performance, and attractiveness to employees.<sup>40</sup> **In order to recruit the best candidates, develop innovative ideas, strengthen leadership, and appeal to consumers and the public, our workforces must reflect the reality of our diversifying society at all levels—including on corporate boards.** In fact, a recent Gallup poll showed that a company "diverse and inclusive of all types of people" is one of the top things employees are looking for in a new position.<sup>41</sup> However, other research has found that less than a quarter of workers reported their employer invested in any diversity recruiting-related initiatives during the second half of 2020.<sup>42</sup>

However, diversity alone is not enough: getting people in the door without fostering a culture where ALL individuals to have equal influence and participation does not guarantee equity. When teams are equipped to promote equal opportunity for success and innovation—when women, people of color, and other underrepresented groups have an equal voice—better ideas will emerge.<sup>43</sup> Just Capital tracks best practices and policies from corporate America related to racial equity in the workplace, providing an overview of some of the **many ways that companies can take action, including pay equity analyses by race/ethnicity to workforce demographic disclosure to local community investments.**<sup>44</sup> Other policies that advance diversity and equitable workplaces include explicit diversity hiring and promotion goals, streamlined and simplified job descriptions and recruitment procedures, anti-harassment training, targeted mentoring, tuition assistance, and apprenticeship programs. It is clear there is no shortage of evidence-based diversity and inclusion practices for companies who are truly committed to making their workplaces inclusive.



## An equitable workplace has equal pay.

At a basic level, people work so they can support themselves and their families. A recent Gallup poll<sup>45</sup> showed that pay was at the top of the list of considerations for accepting a job offer for both men and women, having risen in importance over the years. Yet, the **data clearly shows that employers in every industry still pay women less than men for the same work.** In addressing equal pay, it is important to define terms central to this issue. Pay equality is the idea that equal work—or substantially similar work—should receive equal pay, regardless of who performs it. Pay equity includes equal pay, but also considers the systemic issues, biases, social norms, educational opportunities, financial barriers, and other factors impacting women who are frequently overrepresented in lower paid occupations and underrepresented in higher paid, more sustainable jobs.

**On average, women are paid 83 percent of what men get paid, and those who are mothers only make 70 percent. However, the situation is even worse for Women of Color. Black women get paid 63 percent of what white men get paid and Latina/x women only 58 percent.**<sup>46</sup> According to AAUW, at the current rate of progress the gender pay gap will not close until at least 2111.<sup>47</sup> In Illinois the wage gap is actually worse than the national average, with women getting paid only 78 percent of what men are paid (Black women 62 percent compared to white men, and Latina/x women 49 percent),<sup>48</sup> leading to an average lifetime loss of over \$500,000.<sup>49</sup>

A new report issued by the National Association of Colleges and Employers finds gender pay gaps begin at the start of one's professional career<sup>50</sup> and other research has shown that the pay gap exists at every career stage and in fact grows with higher levels of education and also with age.<sup>51</sup> These **pay inequities compound over time, making it harder for women to pay back debt, leaving them with less retirement savings, and contributing to gender and racial wealth gaps.** The pay gap follows women into retirement: as a result of lower lifetime earnings, they receive less in Social Security and pensions.<sup>52</sup>

However, fair pay is not just good for employees. It benefits business as well. A recent study found that even a small amount of gender discrimination can result in significant economic and productivity losses for businesses.<sup>53</sup> Other research has associated more diverse companies with higher credit ratings, increased innovation, and better financial outcomes.<sup>54</sup> In fact, Moody's determined that closing the gender wage gap in the U. S. could increase the GDP by \$1 trillion.<sup>55</sup>

**There are multiple ways for companies to address pay equality.**<sup>56</sup> A pay equity audit is a good first step, but not enough companies do it. A recent survey examining the disclosures of the 922 largest public U.S. companies found that only 22 percent reported performing a salary audit between 2016 and 2020.<sup>57</sup>

Banning the use of salary history to set pay during hiring process is a crucial way to reduce gender- and race-based wage inequities.<sup>58</sup> Because many women and People of Color have experienced pay discrimination in previous jobs that can follow them throughout their career, a job applicant's prior salary may not accurately reflect existing labor market conditions or their level of experience. Basing a new hire's starting salary on their prior wages may perpetuate wage discrimination, and it will also affect subsequent raises, bonuses, promotions, retirement savings, and other factors that are tied to salaries. Research has shown that salary history bans benefit women (particularly older women), Workers of Color, and even employers.<sup>59</sup> For this reason, an increasing number of companies are announcing that they are no longer seeking salary histories from job applicants, including American Express, Bank of America, Cisco Systems, Google, Progressive, and Starbucks. Some states and municipalities, including Illinois, have passed laws banning the practice of asking job applicants for current or prior wages, so employers who wish to be ahead of the curve should update their policies proactively rather than waiting until they are required by law.<sup>60</sup>

Pay transparency is another crucial way to address wage gaps and growing income inequality. In fact, Bloomberg highlights how pay transparency is one of the critical early steps in the path to a living wage.<sup>61</sup> Transparency around compensation of workers is also important for investors, who are increasingly interested in the treatment of workers and believe companies' environmental, social, and governance policies impact their bottom lines. For example, 3 years ago, 180 chief executive officers of the biggest U.S. companies signed a statement redefining the purpose of a corporation to include furthering the interests of not just shareholders but all stakeholders—including workers—a recognition that businesses cannot thrive if the economic, political, and social environment crumbles around them.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, Indeed found that job seekers are 68 percent more likely to apply for a position if it lists pay.<sup>63</sup> Employers should be up front about pay in job announcements and recruitment to be transparent to job seekers, reduce potential for biased financial offers, and save everyone's time in the hiring process.



## An equitable workplace provides equal opportunities for growth and advancement.

Hiring employees from diverse gender and racial backgrounds is a first step; retaining and promoting them is another, given there is a huge gap between the diversity of the workforce and representation in leadership roles in most companies. Even though women make up almost half of the U.S. labor force, outnumber men in earning both bachelor's and master's degrees, and are almost at parity in earning professional degrees, they make up less than 25 percent of corporate leadership roles, and fare not much better in academic or political leadership.<sup>64</sup> Women of Color are particularly underrepresented in leadership roles. All of this despite evidence that women leaders drive better outcomes for all employees given a greater focus on employee well-being, mentorship and sponsorship, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.<sup>65</sup>

It is crucial for companies to look not just at who they are hiring, but at who's in leadership positions and evaluate their recruitment, promotion, and talent management systems for bias. Companies should take a close look at who is getting promoted and examine if there truly is equal opportunity for employees from all racial and gender backgrounds. For example, research shows that Women of Color are more likely than white women to feel they must compromise their authenticity if they want be leaders.<sup>66</sup> Seventy-two percent of Black women, 53 percent of Latina/x women, and 52 percent of Asian American women say that "executive presence" at their company is defined as conforming to traditionally white male standards. In contrast, only 44 percent of white women felt that way.<sup>67</sup>

This may also include providing additional support and encouragement for women and People of Color, such as targeted mentoring programs that acknowledge and address the unique challenges they face in the workplace. Women should be provided the same opportunities and promotional pathways for prime work assignments, professional development, mentoring, and leadership development to prepare them for leadership roles throughout an organization.

## An equitable workplace allows flexible work arrangements.

Flexible work arrangements—which allow space to pick up or drop off children from school, schedule and attend medical appointments, or manage other family issues—are a critical way equitable employers can help employees care for themselves and their families. While flexibility typically refers to hours (not being tied to a traditional 9-5 schedule) it can also refer to location (hybrid or work from home options). Flexibility is one of the most desired benefits for working women, so companies who offer flexible work arrangements are able to attract more applicants. In May 2022, AirBnB announced that employees will be able to live and work anywhere they feel is most productive, which resulted in over 800,000 prospective hires visiting their human resources website.<sup>68</sup>

An Illinois-based study showed that flexible work scheduling increased the likelihood of a working mother remaining employed by nine percent and boosted productivity, reduced absenteeism, and reduced worker turnover.<sup>69</sup> During the pandemic, work-from-home or hybrid models became common, and despite concerns by employers, multiple studies have shown that employees were just as productive, if not more so, working from home.<sup>70,71</sup> Hybrid work can also be seen as anti-racist and a key component of an equitable workplace given the ways in which Black people often have to negotiate daily expectations, cultural norms, and racist stereotyping in an office setting that may make work more challenging.<sup>72</sup> It is likely other non-white workers face these same challenges. Companies should implement flexible work arrangements to make work-life balance more manageable for their employees, moving away from strict hour and in-person attendance requirements if not necessary for the work at hand. It is also important to provide resources to facilitate success like laptop computers, financial support for cell phone and internet service, and reimbursements for equipping a home office. However, it is important to ensure that workers utilizing flexible working arrangements are not disadvantaged in the workplace or judged by lack of face time in the office, “water-cooler” talk, and after-work socials, etc. that have often been used as spaces not just to socialize but to informally mentor and select workers for prime assignments or promotional opportunities.

# EQUITABLE ACCESS AND IMPACT

For many women, particularly Women of Color, work cultures perpetuate stereotypes and marginalization that keep them from succeeding and advancing in their careers. This may take the form of being treated as incompetent, being ignored and overlooked in meetings and social settings, or receiving less support from leadership.

**Studies have shown** that working mothers are often discriminated against compared to working fathers in the same workplace—a phenomenon known as the “motherhood penalty,” which results in lowered salaries and perceived incompetence due to gendered stereotypes.<sup>73</sup> A recent study of women in tech found that Asian American women, who were numerically well-represented in the industry, experienced the most frequent negative experiences related to stereotyping, racism, and sexism.<sup>74</sup> A recent Harris Poll found that Americans of Color—and particularly Women of Color—struggle to feel safe, valued, and supported in the workplace.<sup>75</sup>

For a workplace to be equitable, **companies must actively examine whether all employees truly have equal opportunity and if the work culture allows employees to be their authentic selves and feel like they belong.** This means a commitment to the hard work of self-examination and ongoing cultural competence training. The growing attention to race-related news, protests, and company responses since 2020 has caused two-thirds of Americans to take a closer look at what is acceptable and unacceptable corporate behavior related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. At the same time, however, less than half of currently or previously employed Americans report having any DEI resources at their current or most recent employers.<sup>76</sup> Perhaps even more concerning, this same poll found a huge disconnect between employees who felt their companies were not adequately addressing diversity issues compared to HR professionals who believed they were doing a good job in implementing successful strategies to diversify their companies and change cultures.





## **Equitable access and impact means proactively committing to fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion.**

Companies truly committed to addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion must financially invest in resources, personnel, and strategies to make sure that hiring, promotion, and work environments facilitate everyone's success.

Every member of management needs to be committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion. This work cannot be delegated to junior managers or to women and People of Color themselves, who are often asked to contribute in unpaid ways to support diversity work through committees and mentoring.

## **Equitable access and impact means building a work culture where employees can be who they are.**

It is important to build work environments that do not require women and other historically and systematically disenfranchised peoples to change who they are to fit a work culture built by white men.<sup>77</sup> Employee resource groups or affinity groups based on social identities may be helpful in providing a structure of support for women and People of Color navigating a workplace that may not center their identities. It is also important to consider your definition of “diversity” to include often overlooked communities outside of just race and gender, such as people with disabilities or formerly incarcerated individuals. An inclusive definition of family should be applied to use of family-supporting policies such as paid leave, bereavement, and other related benefits.

## **Equitable access and impact means ensuring work policies and practices are equitable and inclusive.**

Equitable employers should be continuously assessing the use and impact of their policies and practices for access and equity to make sure that all employees are able to benefit from them. Programs should be accessible to all employees and not require burdensome application processes or upfront costs. Companies must foster a culture that encourages all employees to utilize family-friendly policies or flexible work arrangements and not penalize those who do so. Hybrid policies should be implemented thoughtfully to make sure they complement rather than inhibit overall diversity and inclusion.<sup>78</sup>

# CONCLUSION

If we want to live in a society where ALL individuals, families and communities can truly thrive, workplaces must build environments that are truly supportive of women, from the top of the org chart all the way to the bottom. But getting there will require hard work and intentionality on the part of companies and organizations.

Our traditional workplaces have been built on a model with systemic bias at its core—centering the needs of white men who have wives at home. It is an outdated and inherently discriminatory model, and one that has created difficult and lasting barriers for women, People of Color, and other historically underrepresented groups.

As this paper has made clear, there are many solutions to address the longstanding inequities in our workforce and economy, which have been exacerbated by the she-cession. The wage gap, decreasing job quality, and lack of family-supporting infrastructure for working women will not go away without intentional, focused action to address equity in the workplace. As we continue to emerge from the She-cession and the pandemic, we cannot go back to the status quo. Now is the time for employers and policymakers to commit to implementing these evidence-based practices and policies to provide dignity, economic security, and opportunity for all workers.

We also strongly encourage employers to put in the necessary effort to assess their work cultures, make sure all employees have access and opportunity to thrive, and ultimately build truly equitable workplaces. These steps will not only help companies recruit and retain workers but will allow working people to better support their families while realizing their full potential. It's something that we all deserve—no matter where our job falls on the corporate ladder.



# Acknowledgements

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## About Women Employed & Our Consultancy

For nearly 50 years, Women Employed (WE) has been a leading advocate for fair, inclusive workplaces for women, including women in low-paid jobs and Black and Latina/x women. We are committed to using our decades of expertise to support employers to build equitable workplace practices for the women in your organization.

WE can help you take the next step towards building equity at the intersection of gender and race. WE will enable you to take paper to practice, and practice to culture, by providing trainings, workshops, and more consultative custom services to facilitate the creation of an inclusive and welcoming work environment centered on closing the wealth gap for women at the intersection of gender and race.

**For more information on our workshop offerings and our consultancy,**  
or to schedule a training, contact Ibie Hart,  
Director of Business Development, at [ihart@womenemployed](mailto:ihart@womenemployed).

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