

Women in the Workplace 2021

September 27, 2021 | Article

A year and a half into the COVID-19 pandemic, women in corporate America are even more burned out than they were last year—and increasingly more so than men. Despite this, women leaders are stepping up to support employee well-being and diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, but that work is not getting recognized. That's according to the latest Women in the Workplace report from McKinsey, in partnership with [LeanIn.Org](#).

DOWNLOADS



Special Report

Women in the Workplace 2021

[↓ Full Report \(62 pages\)](#)

This is the seventh year of Women in the Workplace, the largest study of women in corporate America. This effort, conducted by McKinsey in partnership with LeanIn.Org, analyzes the representation of women in corporate America, provides an overview of HR policies and programs—including HR leaders' sentiment on the most effective diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices—and explores the intersectional experiences of different groups of women at work. The data set this year reflects contributions from 423 participating organizations employing 12 million people and more than 65,000 people surveyed on their workplace experiences; in-depth interviews were also conducted with women of diverse identities, including women of color, LGBTQ+ women, and women with disabilities.

The state of women hangs in the balance

A year and a half into the COVID-19 pandemic, women have made important gains in representation, and especially in senior leadership. But the pandemic continues to take a toll. Women are now significantly more burned out—and increasingly more so than men.

Despite this added stress and exhaustion, women are rising to the moment as stronger leaders and taking on the extra work that comes with this: compared with men at the same level, women are doing more to support their teams and advance diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. They are also more likely to be allies to women of color. Yet this critical work is going unrecognized and unrewarded by most companies, and that has concerning implications. Companies risk losing the very leaders they need right now, and it's hard to imagine organizations navigating the pandemic and building inclusive workplaces if this work isn't truly prioritized.

There is also a disconnect between companies' growing commitment to racial equity and the lack of improvement we see in the day-to-day experiences of women of color. Women of color face similar types and frequencies of microaggressions as they did two years ago—and they remain far more likely than White women to be on the receiving end of disrespectful and “othering” behavior. And while more White employees see themselves as allies to women of color, they are no more likely than last year to speak out against discrimination, mentor or sponsor women of color, or take other actions to advocate for them. This points to the critical need for businesses to equip employees at all levels to challenge bias and show up as allies.

The path forward is clear. Companies need to take bold steps to address burnout. They need to recognize and reward the women leaders who are driving progress. And they need to do the deep cultural work required to create a workplace where all women feel valued.

“It’s the only time of my career that I seriously considered a less demanding job. I took another interview. I felt burned out so often. I felt caught in the middle of everyone’s emotional response to the pandemic and in between decision makers who have very, very different outlooks on how to respond. It was the first time I had to solve problems that so directly impacted people’s mental and physical health. It was the hardest working year of my life.”

— Straight White woman, senior vice president

The rest of this article summarizes the main findings from the 2021 *Women in the Workplace* report (and for an even deeper look, visit [our blog](#) to read a behind-the-scenes chat with one of the report’s coauthors).

Women made gains in representation in 2020, but burnout is still on the rise

In spite of the challenges of the [COVID-19 crisis](#), women’s representation improved across all levels of the corporate pipeline in 2020. This is an encouraging sign—and worth celebrating after an incredibly difficult year. But there are also persistent gaps in the pipeline: promotions at the first step up to manager are not equitable, and women of color lose ground in representation at every level.

There is still a “broken rung” at the first step up to manager. Since 2016, we have seen the same trend: women are promoted to manager at far lower rates than men, and this makes it nearly impossible for companies to lay a foundation for sustained progress at more senior levels. Additionally, the gains in representation for women overall haven’t translated to gains for women of color. Women of color continue to lose ground at every step in the pipeline—between the entry level and the C-suite, the representation of women of color drops off by more than 75 percent. As a result, women of color account for only 4 percent of C-suite leaders, a number that hasn’t moved significantly in the past three years.

The representation of women is only part of the story. The pandemic continues to take a toll on employees, and especially women. Women are even more burned out now than they were a year ago, and burnout is escalating much faster among women than among men. One in three women says that they have considered downshifting their career or leaving the workforce this year, compared with one in four who said this a few months into the pandemic. Additionally, four in ten women have considered leaving their company or switching jobs—and high employee turnover in recent months suggests that many of them are following through.

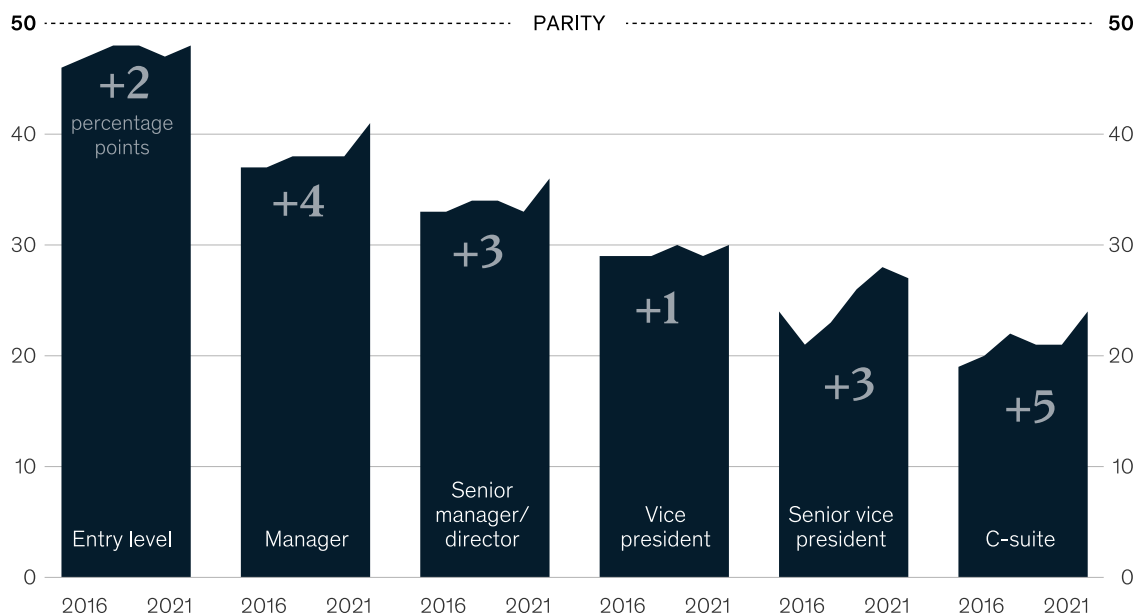
Although it’s not yet clear how the events of the past year and a half will affect the representation of women in corporate America in the long run, it’s very clear that this crisis is far from over. The risk to women, and to the companies that depend on their contributions, remains very real.

The state of the corporate pipeline

Women’s representation has increased across the pipeline since 2016. However, women—especially women of color—remain significantly underrepresented in leadership (Exhibit 1).

Despite small gains in the pipeline, women remain underrepresented across the corporate ladder.

Representation of women by level, 2016–21,¹ % of employees



¹Data as of end-of-year 2015 and end-of-year 2020.

Source: *Women in the Workplace 2021*, LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2021

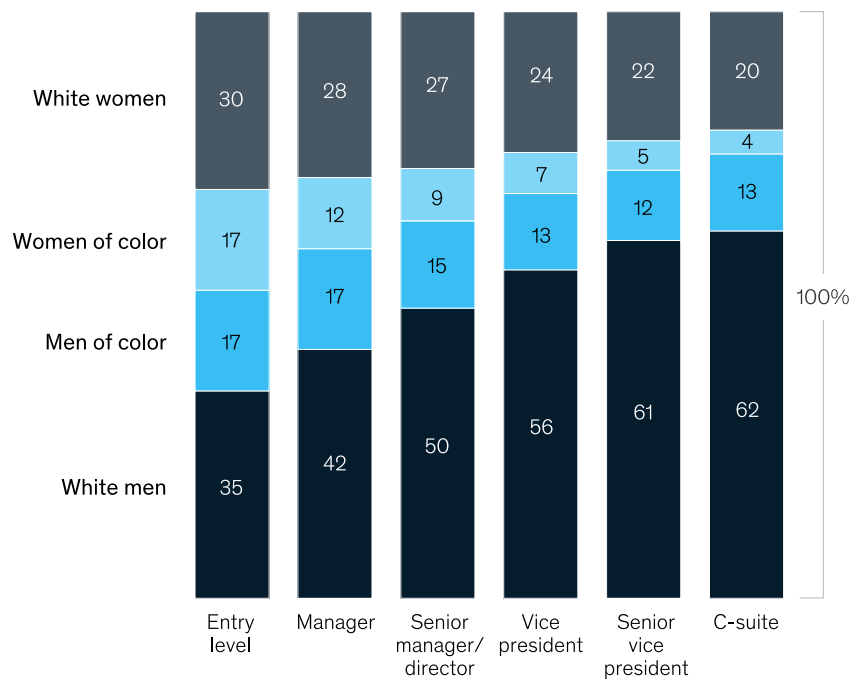
McKinsey
& Company

Women of color lose ground at every step

Representation of women of color falls off relative to White men, White women, and men of color at every step in the corporate pipeline, leaving them severely underrepresented at the top (Exhibit 2).

At every step up the corporate ladder, women of color lose ground to White women and men of color.

Representation by corporate role, by gender and race, 2021, % of employees



Note: Figures may not sum to 100%, because of rounding.

Source: *Women in the Workplace 2021*, LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2021

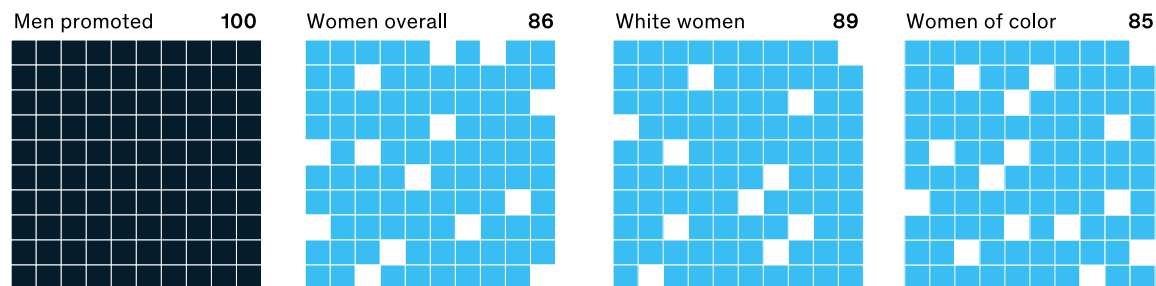
**McKinsey
& Company**

The 'broken rung' is still holding women back

Women continue to face a broken rung at the first step up to manager: for every 100 men promoted to manager, only 86 women are promoted (Exhibit 3). As a result, men outnumber women significantly at the manager level, which means that there are far fewer women to promote to higher levels. The broken rung likely explains why representation of women at the senior-manager, director, and vice-president levels has improved more slowly than the pipeline overall.

Until women move up to management at the same rate as men and are well represented at all levels, progress at the top will be uneven.

For every 100 men promoted to first-level manager at end of 2020, number of women promoted



Source: *Women in the Workplace 2021*, LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2021

McKinsey
& Company

Women are more burned out—and more so than men

Women are even more burned out now than they were a year ago, and the gap in burnout between women and men has almost doubled (Exhibit 4). In the past year, one in three women has considered leaving the workforce or downshifting their career—a significant increase from one in four in the first few months of the pandemic.

Exhibit 4

Women are rising to the moment as stronger leaders, but their work is going unrecognized

The events of 2020 put extraordinary pressure on companies and employees. The COVID-19 crisis shook the economy and turned people's lives upside down, both at work and at home. A heightened focus on racism and racial violence triggered a reckoning on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Companies' current priorities reflect these changes: an overwhelming majority of companies say that managers' efforts to promote employee well-being are critically important and that DEI is one of their key areas of focus.

Women leaders are meeting this moment and taking on the work that comes with it (Exhibit 5). They are doing more than men in similar positions in supporting the people on their teams—for example, by helping team members navigate work-life challenges, ensuring that their workloads are manageable, and checking in on their overall well-being. Women leaders also spend more time than men on DEI work that falls outside their formal job responsibilities, such as supporting employee resource groups and recruiting employees from underrepresented groups. Senior-level women are twice as likely as senior-level men to dedicate time to these tasks at least weekly. And finally, women leaders are showing up as more active allies to women of color. They are more likely than men to educate themselves about the challenges that women of color face at work, to speak out against discrimination, and to mentor or sponsor women of color.

When managers support employee well-being and companies prioritize DEI, employees are happier, less burned out, and less likely to consider leaving their jobs. In spite of all this, relatively few companies formally recognize employees who go above and beyond in these areas—and this needs to change.

Overlooking critical work around employee well-being and DEI has serious implications: It hurts women, who are investing disproportionate time and energy in these priorities. And it hurts companies and all employees, because progress is rarely made on efforts that are undervalued.

Women managers are stepping up to support their teams

Compared with men in similar positions, women managers are taking more consistent action to promote employee well-being—including checking in on their team members, helping them manage their workloads, and providing support for team members who are dealing with burnout or navigating work–life challenges.

Women leaders are champions of DEI

Compared with men at their level, women leaders are up to twice as likely to spend substantial time on DEI work that falls outside their formal job responsibilities—such as supporting employee resource groups, organizing events, and recruiting employees from underrepresented groups. They are also more likely than men to take allyship actions such as mentoring women of color, advocating for new opportunities for them, and actively confronting discrimination.

“In my industry, there’s not a lot of women. And most definitely in leadership roles, there’s not a lot of women and most definitely not many women of color. So I’ve always been intentional to try to give back and do what I could to inspire and encourage and motivate those who need an advocate.”

— Black woman, senior manager

The work women leaders are doing drives better outcomes for all employees

When managers support employee well-being, employees are happier, less burned out, and less likely to consider leaving. The same is true of employees who have strong allies and believe DEI is a high priority for their company.

This critical well-being and DEI work is going overlooked

Companies see the value of women leaders’ contributions. Almost 70 percent of companies say that the work employees do to promote DEI is very or extremely critical, and an even greater number say this is true of the work managers do to support employee well-being. But less than a quarter of companies are recognizing this work to a substantial extent in formal evaluations like performance reviews.

Women of color continue to have a worse experience at work

Even after a year of increased focus on DEI and [racial equity](#) in corporate America, women of color continue to face significant bias and discrimination at work. They are experiencing similar types of microaggressions, at similar relative frequencies, as they were two years ago. And although the number of White employees who identify as allies to women of color has increased over the past year, the number taking key allyship actions has not.

While all women are more likely than men to face microaggressions that undermine them professionally—such as being interrupted and having their judgement questioned—women of color often experience these microaggressions at a higher rate. And women of color are much more likely than White women to face disrespectful and “othering” microaggressions that reinforce harmful stereotypes or cast them as outsiders. These experiences can take a heavy toll: women who regularly experience microaggressions are twice as likely as those who don’t to be burned out, more than twice as likely to report feeling negatively about their job, and almost three times as likely to say that in the past few months they have struggled to concentrate at work as a result of stress.

Women of color not only still face higher rates of microaggressions, they also still lack active allies. We continue to see a troubling gap—although more than three-quarters of White employees consider themselves allies to women of color at work, less than half take basic allyship actions, such as speaking out against bias or advocating for new opportunities for women of color. What’s more, there is a notable disconnect between the allyship actions that women of color find most meaningful and the actions that White employees prioritize.

Given the day-to-day challenges they’re facing, it’s not surprising that women of color are less optimistic than White women about their companies’ commitment to DEI. And less than half feel their company has substantially followed through on commitments to racial equity.

Women of color face a wider range of microaggressions

All women are more likely than men to face microaggressions at work. But for women of color and women with other traditionally marginalized identities, these experiences are more frequent and reflect a wider range of biases (Exhibit 6). For example, Black women are almost four times as likely as White women—and Latinas and Asian women are two to three times as likely—to hear people express surprise at their language skills or other abilities, and we see a similar pattern for other common microaggressions, as well.

Exhibit 6

LGBTQ+ women and women with disabilities are also significantly more likely than women overall to experience microaggressions. Women with disabilities in particular are much more likely than women overall to have their competence challenged or to be undermined at work.

The ‘allyship gap’ persists

Allyship from more privileged colleagues can make a big difference in the experiences of women of color: when women of color feel like they have strong allies at work, they are happier in their jobs, less likely to be burned out, and less likely to consider leaving their companies. But although more than three-quarters of White employees consider themselves allies to women of color at work, far fewer are taking key allyship actions consistently.

There is a notable disconnect between the allyship actions that women of color say are most meaningful and the actions that White employees prioritize (Exhibit 7). Although White employees recognize that speaking out against discrimination is critical, they are less likely to recognize the importance of more proactive, sustained steps such as advocating for new opportunities for women of color and stepping up as mentors and sponsors.

Exhibit 7

Women who are ‘Onlys’ and ‘double Onlys’ have a much worse experience

Women who are “Onlys”—meaning, they are often one of the only people of their race or gender in the room at work—have especially difficult day-to-day experiences. Onlys stand out, and because of that, they tend to be more heavily scrutinized. Their successes and failures are often put under a microscope, and they are more likely to encounter comments and behavior that reduce them to negative stereotypes.

Being an Only for one dimension of identity is already incredibly difficult. But women of color sometimes have to contend with being Onlys on two dimensions: both as the only woman in the room and as the only person of their race in the room. “Double Onlys” face even more bias, discrimination, and pressure to perform, and they are even more likely to be experiencing burnout.

Being an Only or double Only can dramatically compound other challenges women are facing at work. Mothers of young children are one example of this—they already face more bias and barriers than fathers and women overall, and when they are often the only woman in the room in their workplace, their experience is even more difficult.

Compared with mothers of young children who regularly work with other women, those who are Onlys are significantly more likely to experience burnout or to consider leaving their companies. They are also more likely to feel judged or to be worried about how their career might be affected if they take advantage of options that make it easier to balance work and life, such as working from home or working nonstandard hours. And they are less likely to feel comfortable sharing their personal challenges with colleagues, which means they’re less likely to get the support they need.

The road to progress

Although we have seen important gains since 2016, women are still significantly underrepresented at all levels of management. And on top of this, women continue to have a worse day-to-day experience at work. Women are more likely than men to have their competence questioned and their authority undermined, and women of color and other women with traditionally marginalized identities are especially likely to face disrespectful and “othering” behavior.

To drive change, companies need to invest deeply in all aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This starts with taking bold steps to ensure that women of diverse identities are well represented, but diversity of numbers isn’t enough on its own. Companies also need to create a culture that fully leverages the benefits of diversity—one in which women, and all employees, feel comfortable bringing their unique ideas, perspectives, and experiences to the table. When women are respected and their contributions are valued, they are more likely to be happy in their jobs and to feel connected to their coworkers.

Although there are no quick fixes to these challenges, there are steps companies can and should take. First, they need to put more practices in place to ensure promotions are equitable. Companies are currently taking more steps to reduce bias in hiring, and they need to apply that same rigor to the performance review process. For example, less than half of companies provide bias training for employees involved in performance reviews, compared with two-thirds that do so for hiring. Expanding this training would likely lead to better promotion outcomes for women and other employees from underrepresented groups.

Second, companies need to track representation and hiring and promotion outcomes more fully. Although most companies track representation for women overall, far fewer do this for women of color, which means women of color are often overlooked in diversity metrics. Companies would also be well-served to track hiring and promotions to determine whether women, and especially women of color, are being hired and promoted at similar rates to other employees. If they see gaps at particular levels or in certain functions, they may need to make adjustments, including doubling down on best practices in those areas.

To accelerate progress for all women, on all fronts, companies need to double their efforts when it comes to accountability. Despite saying that gender and racial diversity are among their most important business priorities, only two-thirds of companies hold senior leaders accountable for progress on diversity goals, and less than a third hold managers—who play a critical role in hiring and promotions decisions—accountable. Moreover, among companies that say they hold leaders accountable, less than half factor progress on diversity metrics into performance reviews, and far fewer provide financial incentives for meeting goals. This means their accountability isn’t tied to material consequences—and it’s therefore much less likely to produce results.

How companies can make their workplaces more inclusive

Companies still have work to do to create a culture that fully embraces and leverages diversity. HR leaders say that two things are critical to this effort: senior-level sponsorship and high employee engagement.

Senior leaders need to fully and publicly support DEI efforts. When senior-level employees model inclusive leadership and actively participate in training and events related to DEI, they send a powerful signal about the importance of this work. Senior leaders also play a key role in ensuring that DEI initiatives are appropriately resourced across their organizations. This is just another reason why it is critically important to hold leaders accountable for progress on DEI efforts and to formalize this accountability.

But women's day-to-day experiences are shaped primarily by their interactions with managers and colleagues, which means that deep cultural change is possible only if all employees are empowered to be part of the solution. This starts with raising awareness. Employees need to understand the barriers that women face—particularly women with traditionally marginalized identities—and the benefits of a more inclusive culture. Companies can promote awareness by sharing data on the experiences of women in their organizations, bringing in thought-provoking speakers, and encouraging employees to openly share their experience and ideas for advancing DEI.

For employees to move from awareness to action, training is an important step. The number of employees who receive training on bias, antiracism, and allyship is on the rise—but only 34 percent of employees have received antiracism training in the past year, and just 14 percent have received allyship training. This suggests that companies may need to take bolder steps to encourage participation, such as offering incentives or making training mandatory. They should also invest in ongoing employee education; it takes consistent reinforcement to reshape deep-rooted biases and change behavior, so a one-and-done approach to training is not enough. And companies need to be sure that they are incorporating the new ideas and tools from training into everyday processes, too. For example, before hiring and promotion processes begin, companies can send out reminders about how bias can influence evaluations; research shows that this simple practice can improve outcomes for women and other people from underrepresented groups.

Finally, companies should clearly communicate what is expected of employees and what it means to have an inclusive culture. Building this thinking into company values is a good place to start, but organizations would benefit from articulating the specific behaviors and actions that promote inclusion. In addition to signaling the importance of this work, clear guidelines will help set managers and all employees up for success.

How companies can begin to address burnout

Companies have demonstrated strong commitment to employee well-being over the past year. They have taken a wide range of steps to help employees weather the pandemic, including increasing mental-health benefits, adding support for parents and caregivers, and offering more paid leave. These steps have led to better outcomes for all employees, and they have likely played a key role in allowing many women to remain in the workforce.

However, burnout is still on the rise, especially among women. There is no easy fix, so continued investment will be critical. Companies also should look for opportunities to expand on the successful policies and programs they have already established and try new approaches. It's also important that companies establish new norms and systems to improve employees' everyday work experiences—even with all the right policies and programs, employees will continue to struggle if the cadence and expectations of their work feel untenable.

Across all of their efforts to combat burnout, companies would benefit from embracing experimentation. There is no playbook for this unprecedented moment, but companies can make strides by listening closely to employees, exploring creative solutions, and trying something different if a new norm or program falls flat.

As companies embrace flexibility, they also need to set clear boundaries

Over the past 18 months, companies have embraced flexibility. More than three-quarters of senior HR leaders say that allowing employees to work flexible hours is one of the most effective things they've done to improve employee well-being, and there are clear signs it's working. Employees with more flexibility to take time off and step away from work are much less likely to be burned out, and very few employees are concerned that requesting flexible work arrangements has affected their opportunity to advance.

However, many companies are missing a crucial piece: without clear boundaries, flexible work can quickly turn into "always on" work. More than a third of employees feel like they need to be available for work 24/7, and almost half believe they need to work long hours to get ahead. Employees who feel this way are much more likely to be burned out and to consider leaving their companies.

The fact that so many employees feel "always on" signals that companies need to define expectations more explicitly. Right now, many companies are leaving it to employees to establish their own boundaries when they work remotely or work flexible hours—and while employees should be empowered to carve out personal time, companies have a responsibility to put formal boundaries in place across the organization. Only one in five

employees says that their company has told them that they don't need to respond to nonurgent requests outside of traditional work hours, and only one in three has received guidance around blocking off personal time on their calendar. Establishing or reinforcing work norms such as these would go a long way toward reducing the feeling of being always on.

“Someone saying, ‘Hey, go take a couple days off to deal with this’ would go a long way. The company I work for is really strict about time off, which I think has led a lot of people in the organization to become really burned out. I know it’s caused me to get overly stressed and work more than I should to save up time to take off later, which just means you never recover from burnout.”

— White trans woman, entry level

As companies navigate the transition to increased remote and hybrid work—with more employees working different schedules across different time zones—the risk of feeling always on will likely increase. Establishing clear boundaries now can help companies ease this transition.

Managers have an important role to play in fighting burnout

Managers are on the front lines of employees' day-to-day experiences, which means their actions have a significant impact on employee burnout and well-being. To improve outcomes, managers should focus their attention in three key areas: modeling work–life boundaries, supporting employee well-being, and ensuring that performance is evaluated based on results.

Employees often look to their manager to understand unspoken company norms and expectations. This means that managers need to respect company-wide boundaries around flexible work. For example, if employees aren't expected to respond to emails during certain hours, managers need to abide by that norm. Managers can further reinforce the importance of these norms by celebrating employees who push back when boundaries are crossed and by encouraging candid conversations and problem solving across the team if boundaries start to erode.

To underscore that employees are not expected to be “always on,” companies and managers need to work together to make sure all employees are evaluated based on results rather than when or where they work. A results-oriented lens is critical in formal performance reviews, and managers should be mindful of the day-to-day feedback they deliver to ensure they aren't inadvertently signaling that long hours and face time are unspoken measures of performance.

It's also important that managers actively monitor employees for signs of burnout and adjust workloads as needed. Although some managers are stepping up on this front—especially women—a majority of employees report that their manager doesn't check in on their well-being or help them shift priorities and deadlines on a regular basis. This suggests that managers need to touch base with their teams more consistently, and that these check-ins should be more explicit. Prompting employees to rate their level of stress and exhaustion on a one-to-ten scale, as opposed to generally asking them how they're doing, creates more space for open, honest discussion.

Finally, companies need to impress upon managers that the work they do to support employee well-being is critical to the health and success of the business. For this work to feel like a real priority, it needs to be tied to concrete outcomes for managers, including performance ratings and compensation.

Looking ahead

The immediate challenge for companies is to help employees get through the pandemic—and the work to get this right is far from over. But companies also need to start to plan for the future. The disruption of the past year and half is driving a fundamental change in the way people work. Companies are embracing flexibility and remote work at levels that would have seemed impossible just a few years ago—and employees are fully on board. It will take time for the full impact of the pandemic to come into focus, but one thing is clear: hybrid work is here to stay.

What's unclear is whether companies can capitalize on this seismic shift—and the growing cultural focus on employee well-being and racial equity—to create more caring, connected, and inclusive workplaces. This is a rare opportunity to change the workplace for good. Doing so will require pushing for bigger gains in representation of women, recognizing and rewarding women's contributions as people-focused leaders and champions of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and doing the deep cultural work necessary to create a workplace where all women, and all employees, feel like they belong.

This will demand a level of investment and creativity that may not have seemed possible before the pandemic, but companies have shown what they can do when change is critical. Now, they need to treat women's equality and diversity, equity, and inclusion with the same sense of urgency—and they need to reward the leaders taking us into the future.

This is an edited extract from [Women in the Workplace 2021](#), a study undertaken by McKinsey and LeanIn.Org. The study builds on the [Women in the Workplace](#) reports from 2015 to 2020, as well as similar research conducted by McKinsey in 2012. For more information, visit [womenintheworkplace.com](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Tiffany Burns](#) is a partner in McKinsey's Atlanta office; [Jess Huang](#) is a partner in the Silicon Valley office; [Alexis Krivkovich](#) and [Lareina Yee](#) are senior partners in the San Francisco office, where [Ishanaa Rambachan](#) is a partner; and [Tijana Trkulja](#) is a consultant in the New York office.

The authors would like to thank Sofia Alvarado, David Corfield, Nawel Gabouge, Worth Gentry, Alison Gerard, Beatriz Go, Sanchika Gupta, Anne Marie Hawley, Melinda Lee, Yuan Qu, Stephanie Yeh, and Zhengren Zhu for their immense contribution to this report.

[View the reports](#)

1. **Women in the Workplace 2020**
2. **Women in the Workplace 2019**
3. **Women in the Workplace 2018**
4. **Women in the Workplace 2017**
5. **Women in the Workplace 2016**
6. **Women in the Workplace 2015**

Women in the Workplace 2020

In a year marked by crisis and uncertainty, corporate America is at a crossroads. The choices companies make today will have consequences on gender equality for decades to come.

This is the sixth year of the Women in the Workplace study—in a year unlike any other. This effort, conducted in partnership with LeanIn.Org, tracks the progress of women in corporate America. The data set this year reflects contributions from 317 companies that participated in the study and more than 40,000 people surveyed on their workplace experiences; more than 45 in-depth interviews were also conducted to dive deeper on the issues. These efforts were in the field from June to August of 2020, although the pipeline data represents employer-provided information from calendar year 2019.

The events of 2020 have turned workplaces upside down. Under the highly challenging circumstances of [the COVID-19 pandemic](#), many employees are struggling to do their jobs. Many feel like they're "always on" now that the boundaries between work and home have blurred. They're worried about their family's health and finances. Burnout is a real issue.

Women in particular have been negatively impacted. Women—especially women of color—are more likely to have been laid off or furloughed during the COVID-19 crisis,^[1] stalling their careers and jeopardizing their financial security. The pandemic has intensified challenges that women already faced. Working mothers have always worked a “double shift”—a full day of work, followed by hours spent caring for children and doing household labor. Now the supports that made this possible—including school and childcare—have been upended. Meanwhile, Black women already faced more barriers to advancement than most other employees.^[2] Today they’re also coping with the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 [on the Black community](#). And the emotional toll of repeated instances of racial violence falls heavily on their shoulders.

As a result of these dynamics, more than one in four women are contemplating what many would have considered unthinkable just six months ago: downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce completely. This is an emergency for corporate America. Companies risk losing women in leadership—and future women leaders—and unwinding years of painstaking progress toward gender diversity.

The crisis also represents an opportunity. If companies make significant investments in building a more flexible and empathetic workplace—and there are signs that this is starting to happen—they can retain the employees most affected by today’s crises *and* nurture a culture in which women have equal opportunity to achieve their potential over the long term. The rest of this article summarizes the report’s main findings (and you can go even deeper with a [behind-the-scenes chat](#) with one of the report’s coauthors on our blog).

Progress toward gender parity remains slow

At the beginning of 2020, the representation of women in corporate America was trending in the right direction. This was most pronounced in senior management: between January 2015 and January 2020, representation of women in senior-vice-president positions grew from 23 to 28 percent, and representation in the C-suite grew from 17 to 21 percent (Exhibit 1). Women remained dramatically underrepresented—particularly women of color—but the numbers were slowly improving.

Exhibit 1

The ‘broken rung’ is still holding women back

Despite gains for women in leadership, the “broken rung” was still a major barrier in 2019. For the sixth year in a row, women continued to lose ground at the first step up to manager. For every 100 men promoted to manager, only 85 women were promoted—and this gap was even larger for some women: only 58 Black women and 71 Latinas were promoted. As a result, women remained significantly outnumbered in entry-level management at the beginning of 2020—they held just 38 percent of manager-level positions, while men held 62 percent (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2

The COVID-19 crisis could set women back half a decade

Before this year, Women in the Workplace research had consistently found that women and men leave their companies at comparable rates. However, due to the challenges created by the COVID-19 crisis, as many as two million women are considering leaving the workforce^[3]. If these women feel forced to leave the workplace, we’ll end up with far fewer women in leadership—and far fewer women on track to be future leaders. All the progress we’ve seen over the past six years could be erased (see sidebar, “A closer look at the challenges that could force women out of the workforce”).

Companies are stepping up—but many aren't addressing the likely underlying causes of stress and burnout

Many companies have taken important steps to support employees during the COVID-19 crisis. They are sharing valuable information with employees, including updates on the business's financial situation and details about paid-leave policies. Almost all companies are providing tools and resources to help employees work remotely. Many have also expanded services related to mental health, such as counseling and enrichment programs, and offered training to help managers support employees' mental health and well-being.

However, fewer companies have taken steps to adjust the norms and expectations that are most likely responsible for employee stress and burnout. Less than a third of companies have adjusted their performance review criteria to account for the challenges created by the pandemic, and only about half have updated employees on their plans for performance reviews or their productivity expectations during COVID-19. That means many employees—especially parents and caregivers—are facing the choice between falling short of pre-pandemic expectations that may now be unrealistic, or pushing themselves to keep up an unsustainable pace (Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3

There is also the issue of financial anxiety. Companies are putting policies and programs in place to ease employees' financial stress. More than half have increased paid leave—which is an important option for employees who need time off but can't afford to miss a paycheck—and about a third have added or expanded stipends to offset the costs of working from home. However, companies that are struggling financially may not be able to address the issue employees are most concerned about: the possibility of being laid off or furloughed. Sadly, for companies struggling financially or rethinking their business, it may not be possible to reassure their employees on this front.

COVID-19 could push many mothers out of the workforce

Decades of research shows that women do significantly more housework and childcare than men—so much so that women who are employed full-time are often said to be working a "double shift."^[4] Now women, and mothers in particular, are taking on an even heavier load. Mothers are more than three times as likely as fathers to be responsible for most of the housework and caregiving during the pandemic. In fact, they're 1.5 times more likely than fathers to be spending an additional three or more hours per day on housework and childcare (Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4

Meanwhile, for the one in five mothers who don't live with a spouse or partner, the challenges are even greater. Unsurprisingly, single mothers are much more likely than other parents to do all the housework and childcare in their household, and they are also more likely to say that financial insecurity is one of their top concerns during the pandemic.

One in three mothers have considered leaving the workforce or downshifting their careers because of COVID-19

Given the enormous challenges mothers are facing at work and at home, two things should come as no surprise: many mothers are considering downshifting their career or leaving the workforce, and mothers are significantly more likely to be thinking about taking these steps than fathers (Exhibit 5). Among mothers who are thinking about downshifting or leaving, a majority cite childcare responsibilities as a primary reason.

Companies are at risk of losing women in leadership

Senior-level women are under the same pressure to perform right now as senior-level men—and then some. Women are often held to higher performance standards than men, and they may be more likely to take the blame for failure—so when the stakes are high, as they are now, senior-level women could face higher criticism and harsher judgement. Senior-level women are also nearly twice as likely as women overall to be “Onlys”—the only or one of the only women in the room at work. [That comes with its own challenges](#); women who are Onlys are more likely than women who work with other women to feel pressure to work more and to experience microaggressions, including needing to provide additional evidence of their competence.

Not surprisingly, senior-level women are significantly more likely than men at the same level to feel burned out, under pressure to work more, and “as though they have to be ‘always on.’” And they are 1.5 times more likely than senior-level men to think about downshifting their role or leaving the workforce because of COVID-19. Almost three in four cite burnout as a main reason.

Companies can’t afford to lose women leaders

The possibility of losing so many senior-level women is alarming for several reasons.

The financial consequences could be significant. [Research shows](#) that company profits and share performance can be close to 50 percent higher when women are well represented at the top.^[5] Beyond that, senior-level women have a vast and meaningful impact on a company’s culture. They are more likely than senior-level men to embrace employee-friendly policies and programs and to champion racial and gender diversity: more than 50 percent of senior-level women say they consistently take a public stand for gender and racial equity at work, compared with about 40 percent of senior-level men (Exhibit 6). And they’re more likely to mentor and sponsor other women: 38 percent of senior-level women currently mentor or sponsor one or more women of color, compared with only 23 percent of senior-level men.

If women leaders leave the workforce, women at all levels could lose their most powerful allies and champions.

Black women are less likely to feel supported at work during COVID-19

Black women have always faced huge barriers to advancement. Now, in addition to the heightened pressures that Black women who are mothers and senior leaders are experiencing, they are also dealing with distinct issues because of their race. The COVID-19 crisis has disproportionately affected Black people, and incidents of violence toward Black people in the United States have exacted a heavy emotional and mental toll on Black women. On top of all this, many Black women do not feel supported by managers and coworkers (Exhibit 7).

The workplace has always been more unequal for Black women

Compared with their colleagues of other races and ethnicities, Black women have always had distinct, and by and large worse, experiences at work. They are promoted more slowly than other groups of employees and are significantly underrepresented in senior leadership. 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. Given these challenges, it's not surprising that Black women are less likely than employees of other races to report they have equal opportunity to advance at work.

Black women also deal with more day-to-day bias in their workplaces. They face a wider range of microaggressions, from having their judgment questioned to hearing demeaning remarks about themselves or people like them. Additionally, half of Black women are often Onlys for their race. Black women who are Onlys are especially likely to feel scrutinized, under increased pressure to perform, and as if their actions reflect positively or negatively on people like them.

Now, Black women are facing even more challenges

Black women are being disproportionately affected by the difficult events of 2020. They are more than twice as likely as women overall to say that the death of a loved one has been one of their biggest challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. And incidents of racial violence across the United States are exacting a heavy emotional toll.

Ideally, work would be a supportive place for Black women amid these national and global crises. Unfortunately, for many, that's not the case. Black women are less likely than women overall to report that their manager has inquired about their workload or taken steps to ensure that their work-life needs are being met.^[6] Fewer than one in three Black women report their manager has checked in on them in light of recent racial violence or [fostered an inclusive culture](#) on their team. Plus, Black women are far less likely than White colleagues to say they have strong allies at work.

All of this is having an impact on Black women. They are more likely than employees of other races and ethnicities to feel uncomfortable talking with colleagues about the impact current events have had on their community and [about their own grief and loss](#). They also feel more reluctant to share their thoughts on racial inequity. And compared with other employees, Black women feel more excluded at work and are less likely to say they can bring their whole selves to work.

How companies can better support Black women

Black women were already having a worse experience in the workplace than most other employees. Now they're facing the same challenges other women are—plus painful and isolating challenges rooted in racism. To better support Black women, companies need to take action in two critical areas.

1. Address the distinct challenges of Black women head-on

Companies need to address the distinct experiences of Black women, who face obstacles rooted in both racism and sexism. The first step is making a public and explicit commitment to advancing and supporting Black women. This commitment should be communicated to employees, along with a clear explanation of why it's important. Many employees don't realize that Black women are having a markedly worse experience at work. But for six years, this study has shown this to be true: compared with women of other races and ethnicities, Black women face more systemic barriers, receive less support from managers, and experience more acute discrimination. If employees understand this, they will be more likely to champion the Black women in their organization.

To effectively turn their commitment into action, companies should adopt an intersectional approach to their diversity efforts. Many corporate diversity efforts focus on either race or gender, which means women of color may end up being overlooked. In contrast, when companies set goals and track outcomes by gender and race combined, they can more clearly see how Black women and other women of color are progressing. For example, if companies evaluate access to formal mentorship, sponsorship, and management training this way, Black women are more likely to get equal access to these critical opportunities.

2. Foster a culture that supports and values Black women

Companies need to foster a culture in which Black women—and other traditionally marginalized employees—feel like they belong. There are two equally important parts of this: making it clear that disrespectful behavior won't be tolerated and taking proactive steps to make sure that Black women feel valued and welcome.

Many companies have specific guidelines for conduct that is not acceptable, which is a good first step. But it's also important to articulate what positive, inclusive behavior looks like and celebrate examples of it in practice. Employees will be better equipped to do their part if they receive antiracism and allyship training; this will give them a more complete understanding of how to combat racial discrimination and how to show up for Black women as allies.

Finally, it's important to reflect on organizational customs, rituals, and norms to make sure they're inclusive. For example, are Black women being included in informal gatherings? Are team events held in spaces where everyone feels welcome and safe? Gathering input from Black women on what is and isn't working for them is critical to this process—as is giving Black women a voice in shaping new company norms. The more that companies take into account the unique perspectives and experiences of different groups of employees, the more effectively they can create an inclusive culture.

The path forward

The choices companies make could shape the workplace for women for decades to come—for better or for worse.

The challenges facing companies right now are serious. Up to two million women are considering leaving the workforce. The “broken rung” that held millions of women back from being promoted to manager has not been repaired. Black women are dealing with additional challenges—including long-standing issues of racial bias—and getting less support from managers and coworkers.

There are two paths ahead. If companies recognize the scale of these problems and do all they can to address them, they can help their employees get through this difficult time and even reinvent the way they work so it's more flexible and sustainable for everyone. If not, the consequences could badly hurt women, business, and the economy as a whole. This moment requires long-term thinking, creativity, strong leadership, and a laser focus on the value of women to their organizations.

To retain the women most affected by the challenges of COVID-19, companies need to take steps to reduce the additional pressures they're experiencing. Here are six key areas where companies should focus or expand their efforts.

1) Make work more sustainable

A sustainable pace of work is essential to helping mothers, senior-level women, and all employees facing burnout get through this crisis. To make this happen, leaders and managers need to look at productivity and performance expectations set before COVID-19 and ask if they're still realistic. They may also need to reset goals, narrow project scopes, or keep the same goals and extend deadlines. Currently, only a small number of managers are doing this.

Additionally, companies have found creative ways to give employees extra time off. For example, we've heard from companies that have offered “COVID-19 days” to give parents a chance to prepare for the new school year and from companies that close for a few Fridays each quarter to give everyone an opportunity to recharge.

2) Reset norms around flexibility

COVID-19 has made it much harder for employees to draw clear lines between work and home, and many employees feel like they are “always on.” Companies should look for ways to reestablish work–life boundaries. For many, this may require setting new work norms—for example, establishing set hours for meetings, putting policies in place for responding to emails outside typical business hours, and improving communication about work hours and availability within teams.

Companies can also encourage employees to set their own boundaries and take full advantage of flexible work options. Even when these options are available, some employees worry there may be a stigma attached to using them. To mitigate this, leaders can assure employees that their performance will be measured based on results—not when, where, or how many hours they work. Leaders can also communicate their support for workplace flexibility—57 percent of employees say senior leaders at their company have done this during COVID-19. Better yet, leaders can model flexibility in their own lives, which sends a message to employees that it's OK to take advantage of flexible work options. When employees believe senior leaders are supportive of their flexibility needs, they are less likely to consider downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce.

3) Take a close look at performance reviews

Performance reviews are an important part of running an effective organization and rewarding employees for their contributions. But given the shift to remote work and the heightened challenges employees are coping with in their personal lives, performance criteria set before COVID-19 may no longer be appropriate. Managers can relieve employees' stress—and refocus on key priorities—by reassessing performance criteria set before the pandemic to make sure those criteria are still attainable. Bringing criteria into line with what employees can reasonably achieve may help to prevent burnout and anxiety—and this may ultimately lead to better performance and higher productivity.^[7]

4) Take steps to minimize gender bias

The pandemic may be amplifying biases women have faced for years: higher performance standards, harsher judgment for mistakes, and penalties for being mothers and for taking advantage of flexible work options.^[8] These biases could show up in new ways during COVID-19: for example, when colleagues see young children playing in the background on video calls; when coworkers assume, consciously or unconsciously, that women are less committed to their jobs; or when managers are evaluating women in performance reviews. Given that managers and team members now have less visibility into their colleagues' day-to-day work, they may be more likely to make assumptions about their performance, and this increases the chance of bias creeping in.

To mitigate the biases that women are up against, companies need to make sure that employees are aware of them. Leaders and employees should speak publicly about the potentially outsize impact of bias during COVID-19. [Bias training](#) can also help. In the past year, just one in four employees have participated in unconscious-bias training, and even employees who have participated in the past would benefit from a refresher. And finally, it's important to track outcomes for promotions and raises by gender—as well as the breakdown of layoffs and furloughs by gender—to make sure women and men are being treated fairly.

5) Adjust policies and programs to better support employees

Many companies have extended policies and programs to support employees during COVID-19, from offering more paid time off to providing resources for homeschooling. Companies should make sure employees are aware of the full range of benefits available to them. Right now, there's a significant gap between what companies offer and what employees are aware of. For example, almost all companies offer mental-health counseling, but only about half of employees know this benefit is available. The same trend holds for other valuable programs such as parenting resources, health checks, and bereavement counseling.

As organizations settle into the next normal, they should determine how effectively they are addressing employees' biggest challenges and reallocate resources to the programs that are most valuable. Given how unprecedented this crisis is, they should also consider whether their benefits go far enough to support employees.

6) Strengthen employee communication

Open and frequent [communication with employees is critical](#), especially in a crisis; when employees are surprised by decisions that have an impact on their work, they are three times more likely to be unhappy in their job. Yet one in five employees have consistently felt uninformed or in the dark during COVID-19. This suggests that companies should share more regular updates on the state of the business and key decisions that affect employees' work and lives—and they should directly address what difficult news means for employees. It's also critical that leaders and HR teams communicate with empathy, so employees feel valued and understood. Research shows that this kind of openness and understanding reduces anxiety and builds trust among employees.^[9]

The road to progress

The COVID-19 crisis has prompted companies to rethink fundamental beliefs about remote work. Ninety-three percent of companies now say more jobs can be performed remotely, and close to 70 percent predict a significant share of their employees will regularly work remotely a year from now. ^[10] Employees see the benefits of remote work, too—almost eight in ten say they want to continue to work from home more often than they did before COVID-19.

This could be the beginning of a seismic shift in the way we work, with enormous implications. Companies may be able to tap into larger and more diverse talent pools, as opposed to limiting their recruiting to specific regions. And they already anticipate these benefits: 70 percent think remote work will allow them to increase diversity in their hiring. Moreover, remote work will open up opportunities for existing employees—particularly

mothers, caregivers, older employees, and people with disabilities. If companies can create a culture [that supports both in-person and remote workers](#), these employees will be able to take on jobs that previously would have required them to relocate, travel extensively, or manage a long commute.

The building blocks of a more empathetic workplace may also be falling into place

Many companies have made [employee mental health and well-being](#) a much higher priority in the face of this crisis. Employees have more visibility than ever before into what's going on in one another's personal lives. And companies say that the crisis has created a feeling of solidarity and fostered empathy and understanding among employees.

Taken together, these dynamics point to an increased focus on supporting employees as "whole people." And when employees feel like they can bring their whole selves to work, good things happen: they are happier with their job, more optimistic about their company's commitment to gender and racial equality, and less likely to consider downshifting their role or leaving the workforce. They're also more comfortable sharing challenges with managers and coworkers, giving companies the visibility to make changes that improve employees' experiences. It's a positive cycle: the more employees can bring their whole selves to work, the more the workplace will work for them—and for everyone.

This is an edited extract from [Women in the Workplace 2020](#), a study undertaken by McKinsey and LeanIn.Org. It builds on the [Women in the Workplace](#) reports from 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019, as well as similar research conducted by McKinsey in 2012. For more information, visit [womenintheworkplace.com](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

Sarah Coury is consultant in McKinsey's Chicago office; [Jess Huang](#) is a partner in McKinsey's Silicon Valley office; **Ankur Kumar** is an associate partner in the New York office; [Sara Prince](#) is a partner in the Atlanta office; [Alexis Krivkovich](#) is a senior partner in the San Francisco office; and [Lareina Yee](#) is a senior partner in the San Francisco office.

[View the reports](#)

- 1. Women in the Workplace 2020**
- 2. Women in the Workplace 2019**
- 3. Women in the Workplace 2018**
- 4. Women in the Workplace 2017**
- 5. Women in the Workplace 2016**
- 6. Women in the Workplace 2015**

Women in the Workplace 2019

By [Jess Huang](#), [Alexis Krivkovich](#), Irina Starikova, [Lareina Yee](#), and Delia Zanoschi

Five years in to our research, we see bright spots at senior levels. But companies need to focus their efforts earlier in the pipeline to make real progress.

This year marks the fifth year of our research on Women in the Workplace, conducted in partnership with LeanIn.Org. We look back on data and insights since 2015 from close to 600 companies that participated in the study, more than a quarter of a million people that were surveyed on their workplace experiences, and more than 100 in-depth one-on-one interviews that were conducted. (See our infographic below for top-level findings from the past five years.)

Infographic

In the last five years, we've seen more women rise to the top levels of companies. An increasing number of companies are seeing the value of having more women in leadership, and they're proving that they can make progress on gender diversity. This is an important step in the right direction.

Still, women continue to be underrepresented at every level. To change the numbers, companies need to focus where the real problem is. We often talk about the "glass ceiling" that prevents women from reaching senior leadership positions. In reality, the biggest obstacle that women face is much earlier in the pipeline, at the first step up to manager. Fixing this "broken rung" is the key to achieving parity.

The culture of work is equally important. All employees should feel respected and that they have an equal opportunity to grow and advance. Employees care deeply about opportunity and fairness, not only for themselves but for everyone. They want the system to be fair.

Done right, efforts to hire and promote more diverse candidates and create a strong culture reinforce each other. A more diverse workforce will naturally lead to a more inclusive culture. And when a company's culture feels fair and inclusive, women and underrepresented groups are happier and more likely to thrive.

By fostering diversity, building a culture of opportunity and fairness, and focusing their attention on the broken rung, companies can close their gender gaps—and make progress on the road to equality.

In this article, we share highlights from the full *Women in the Workplace 2019* report, diving deep on the parts across pipeline and employee experience that will be most critical for companies to drive change in the next five years.

Despite progress at senior levels, gender parity remains out of reach

Over the past five years, we have seen signs of progress in the representation of women in corporate America. Since 2015, the number of women in senior leadership has grown. This is particularly true in the C-suite, where the representation of women has increased from 17 percent to 21 percent (Exhibit 1).

Although this is a step in the right direction, parity remains out of reach. Women—and particularly women of color—are underrepresented at every level.^[11] And without fundamental changes early in the pipeline, gains in women's representation will ultimately stall.

Exhibit 1

Companies are adding more women to the C-suite

Today, 44 percent of companies have three or more women in their C-suite, up from 29 percent of companies in 2015 (Exhibit 2). Adding even one woman can make a material difference given the critical role top executives play in shaping the business and culture of their company. Still, the overall representation of women in the C-suite is far from parity. About 1 in 5 C-suite executives is a woman—and only 1 in 25 C-suite executives is a woman of color.

There are signs the glass ceiling is cracking . . .

More women are becoming senior leaders. This is driven by two trends. First, more women are being hired at the director level and higher than in the past years. Second, senior-level women are being promoted on average at a higher rate than men.

Additionally, men at the SVP and C-levels are slightly more likely to leave their companies, creating more open positions for women to fill.

. . . But a “broken rung” prevents women from reaching the top

Progress at the top is constrained by a “broken rung.” The biggest obstacle women face on the path to senior leadership is at the first step up to manager (Exhibit 3). For every 100 men promoted and hired to manager, only 72 women are promoted and hired. This broken rung results in more women getting stuck at the entry level, and fewer women becoming managers. Not surprisingly, men end up holding 62 percent of manager-level positions, while women hold just 38 percent.

This early inequality has a long-term impact on the talent pipeline. Since men significantly outnumber women at the manager level, there are significantly fewer women to hire or promote to senior managers. The number of women decreases at every subsequent level. So even as hiring and promotion rates improve for women at senior levels, women as a whole can never catch up. There are simply too few women to advance.

The case for fixing the broken rung is powerful. If women are promoted and hired to first-level manager at the same rates as men, we will add one million more women to management in corporate America over the next five years.

To get to gender parity, companies must fix the broken rung

For many companies, diversity efforts in hiring and promotions are focused at senior levels, and we’re encouraged by the gains that we are seeing in senior leadership. Now companies need to apply the same rigor to addressing the broken rung. Fixing it will set off a positive chain reaction across the entire pipeline. As more women become managers, there will be more women to promote and hire at each subsequent level. Put another way, more entry-level women will rise to management, and more women in management will rise to senior leadership.

Five steps companies can take to fix their broken rung—and ultimately their pipeline

1. Set a goal for getting more women into first-level management

About a third of companies set targets for the representation of women at first-level management, compared to 41 percent for senior levels of management. Companies should use targets more aggressively. Given how important it is to fix the broken rung, companies would be well served by setting and publicizing a bold goal to grow the number of women at the manager level. Moreover, companies should put targets in place for hiring and promotions, the processes that most directly shape employee representation.

2. Require diverse slates for hiring and promotions

Companies are more likely to require diverse candidate slates for promotions at senior levels than at the manager level. But outside research shows that diverse slates can be a powerful driver of change at every level. When two or more women are included on a slate, the likelihood that a woman will get the position rises dramatically.^[12]

3. Put evaluators through unconscious bias training

Unconscious bias can play a large role in determining who is hired, promoted, or left behind. Companies are less likely to provide unconscious bias training for employees who participate in entry-level performance reviews than senior-level reviews, but mitigating bias at this stage is particularly important. Candidates tend to have shorter track records early in their careers, and evaluators may make unfair, gendered assumptions about their future potential. There is also compelling evidence that this training works: In companies with smaller gender disparities in representation,^[13] half of employees received unconscious bias training in the past year, compared to only a quarter of employees in companies that aren't making progress closing these gaps.

4. Establish clear evaluation criteria

Companies need to make sure they have the right processes in place to prevent bias from creeping into hiring and reviews. This means establishing clear evaluation criteria before the review process begins. Evaluation tools should also be easy to use and designed to gather objective, measurable input. For example, a rating scale is generally more effective than an open-ended assessment.

Even with the right systems in place, processes can break down in practice. Employees are less likely than HR leaders to say that evaluation criteria are defined before candidate reviews begin, and they report that participating employees do not typically flag bias when they see it. This points to the need for companies to put additional safeguards in place to encourage fair, unbiased evaluations. Without exception, candidates for the same role should be evaluated using the same criteria. Employees should feel empowered to surface bias in the moment and have the training and resources to act when they observe it. In addition, outside research shows that it can help to have a third party in the room when evaluators discuss candidates to highlight potential bias and encourage objectivity.^[14]

5. Put more women in line for the step up to manager

It is critical that women get the experience they need to be ready for management roles, as well as opportunities to raise their profile so they get tapped for them. The building blocks to make this happen are not new—leadership training, sponsorship, high-profile assignments—but many companies need to provide them with a renewed sense of urgency.

Together, opportunity and fairness are the biggest predictors of employee satisfaction

Employees universally value opportunity and fairness. Across demographic groups, when employees feel they have equal opportunity for advancement and think the system is fair, they are happier with their career, plan to stay at their company longer, and are more likely to recommend it as a great place to work. In fact, we looked at a number of factors that prior outside research has shown influence employee satisfaction and retention—including leadership accountability and manager support—and together opportunity and fairness stand out as the strongest predictors by far.

Many employees think they have equal opportunity to advance—but they are less convinced all employees do

A majority of employees believe they personally have equal opportunity to grow and advance, but they are less convinced the system is fair for everyone. Fewer than half of women and men think the best opportunities go to the most deserving employees, and fewer than a quarter say that only the most qualified candidates are promoted to manager. On both fronts, women are less optimistic than men.

A few key practices shape how employees view opportunity and fairness

Manager support, sponsorship, and impartial hiring and promotion practices are key elements in creating a workplace that delivers opportunity and fairness to everyone. Managers and sponsors open doors that help employees advance. And when hiring and promotions are unbiased, the most deserving employees can rise to the top—and employees feel more confident that the process for advancement is fair.

1. Manager support

Managers have a big impact on how employees view their day-to-day opportunities. Employees are more likely to think they have equal opportunities for growth and advancement when their manager helps them manage their career, showcases their work, and advocates for new opportunities for them on a regular basis.

Most managers provide this type of career support, and women and men report receiving similar amounts of help from their manager. However, managers don't do these things with enough consistency: only about one in four employees say managers help them manage their career and about one in three say managers advocate for new opportunities for them a great deal.

Companies can help by making sure managers have the tools and training they need to more fully support their team members—and by rewarding them when they do.

2. Sponsorship

Sponsorship can open doors, and more employees need it. Fewer than half of the employees at the manager level or higher serve as sponsors, and only one in three employees say they have a sponsor—and this is equally true for women and men. Moreover, less than a third of employees say they get the sponsorship needed to advance their career. Fortunately, sponsorship is trending in the right direction—just a year ago, a quarter of employees reported having a sponsor.

Companies would be wise to double down on sponsorship. Outside research shows that sponsorship accelerates career advancement,^[15] and employees with sponsors are far more likely to say they have opportunities to grow and advance.

3. Inclusive and unbiased hiring and promotions

When companies have strong hiring and performance review processes in place, employees are more likely to think the system is fair and the most deserving employees are able to rise to the top. Over the past five years, more companies have adopted these best practices, but progress toward full adoption is slow. This year only 6 of 323^[16] companies report they do all of the following: set diversity targets, require diverse slates for hiring and promotions, establish clear and consistent evaluation criteria before review processes begin, and require unconscious bias training for employees involved in hiring and performance reviews.

In combination, these are the building blocks needed to foster diversity and minimize bias in decision-making. Given that hiring and promotions are powerful levers in driving pipeline diversity and employee satisfaction, there's a strong business case for adopting more of these best practices.

Some groups of women receive less support and see less opportunity to advance

There is no one story of women in the workplace. Gender is one of many aspects of women's identity that shapes their experiences. Women of color, lesbian and bisexual women, and women with disabilities are having distinct—and by and large worse—experiences than women overall.^[17] Most notably, Black women and women with disabilities face more barriers to advancement, get less support from managers, and receive less sponsorship than other groups of women. Not surprisingly, Black women and women with disabilities are far less likely to feel they have an equal opportunity to grow and advance and are far less likely to think the best opportunities go to the most deserving employees. They are also less happy at work and more likely to leave their company than other women are. It's important for companies to understand that all women are not having the same experience and to directly address the unique challenges that different groups of women face.

Commitment to gender diversity has increased significantly

Today, 87 percent of companies are highly committed to gender diversity, compared to 56 percent in 2012, when McKinsey & Company first conducted a similar study on the state of women at work. Since 2015, senior leader and manager commitment to gender diversity has also increased, and employee commitment—especially among men—has risen significantly (Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4

It is encouraging that so many companies prioritize gender diversity. However, it's worth noting that employees are less convinced: only half of employees think gender diversity is a high priority to their company, and that number hasn't changed over the last five years.

What employees think matters. When employees say their company is highly committed to gender diversity, they are happier and plan to stay at their company longer. This is equally true for women and men.^[18] There are also signs that commitment will continue to trend in a positive direction. Younger generations are more likely to see bias in the workplace—for example, managers under 30 are more likely to say they see bias than older employees at the same level.

Turning commitment into action

Many companies need to do more to put their commitment into practice and treat gender diversity like the business priority it is. This starts with taking concrete actions like setting diversity targets and sharing diversity metrics—not just at senior levels, but with all employees.

It also means holding leaders accountable and rewarding them when they make progress. In most organizations, what gets measured and rewarded is what gets done.

Over time, more companies are putting the right mechanisms in place, and employees are noticing this progress. Compared to last year, employees are almost twice as likely to say their companies have gender diversity targets in place for hiring. However, there is more to be done. When companies have the right foundation for change—clear goals, obvious accountability, a reward system—they are in a better position to drive systemic change. Gender diversity efforts shift from a nice-to-have to a must-have, and that leads to broad-based action across the organization.

The right policies can have a big impact: Engaging senior leaders is driving change

More than half of companies hold senior leaders accountable for progress on gender diversity metrics, up from a little over a third in 2015. And it's making a difference. Seventy-three percent of senior leaders are highly committed to gender diversity, and close to half say they're working to improve gender diversity. Senior leaders set the priorities in organizations, so when they're engaged, it has a positive trickle-down effect: Managers are more likely to support diversity efforts, and employees are more likely to think the workplace is fair.

As a next step, companies should push deeper into their organization and engage managers to play a more active role. Compared to senior leaders, fewer managers say gender diversity is a high priority, and far fewer managers say they are actively working to improve diversity and inclusion (Exhibit 20195).

Exhibit 5

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

[Jess Huang](#) and [Irina Starikova](#) are partners in McKinsey's Silicon Valley office, where [Delia Zanoschi](#) is a consultant; [Alexis Krivkovich](#) and [Lareina Yee](#) are senior partners in the San Francisco office.

Women in the Workplace 2018

By [Alexis Krivkovich](#), [Marie-Claude Nadeau](#), [Kelsey Robinson](#), Nicole Robinson, Irina Starikova, and [Lareina Yee](#)

Progress on gender diversity at work has stalled. To achieve equality, companies must turn good intentions into concrete action.

Companies report that they are highly committed to gender diversity. But that commitment has not translated into meaningful progress. The proportion of women at every level in corporate America has hardly changed. Progress isn't just slow. It's stalled.

That's what we found in *Women in the Workplace 2018*, a study conducted by McKinsey in partnership with LeanIn.Org. In the fourth year of our ongoing research, we probe the issues, drawing on data from 279 companies employing more than 13 million people, as well as on a survey of over 64,000 employees and a series of qualitative interviews.

Women are doing their part. For more than 30 years, they've been earning more bachelor's degrees than men. They're asking for promotions and negotiating salaries at the same rates as men. And contrary to conventional wisdom, they are staying in the workforce at the same rate as men.

Now companies need to take more decisive action. This starts with [treating gender diversity like the business priority it is](#), from setting targets to holding leaders accountable for results. It requires closing gender gaps in hiring and promotions, especially early in the pipeline when women are most often overlooked. And it means taking bolder steps to create a respectful and inclusive culture so women—and all employees—feel safe and supported at work.

This article presents highlights from the full report and presents six actions that could spark progress.

Revisiting the pipeline

Based on four years of data from 462 companies employing more than 19.6 million people, including the 279 companies participating in this year's study, two things are clear: one, women remain underrepresented, particularly women of color. Two, companies need to change the way they hire and promote entry and manager-level employees to make real progress.

Women remain underrepresented

Since 2015, [the first year of this study](#), corporate America has made almost no progress improving women's representation. Women are underrepresented at every level, and women of color are the most underrepresented group of all, lagging behind white men, men of color, and white women (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1

For the fourth year in a row, attrition does not explain the underrepresentation of women. Women and men are leaving their companies at similar rates, and they have similar intentions to remain in the workforce. Over half of all employees plan to stay at their companies for five or more years, and among those who intend to leave, 81 percent say they will continue to work. It's also worth noting that remarkably few women and men say they plan to leave the workforce to focus on family.

Hiring and promotion will be crucial to progress

The two biggest drivers of representation are hiring and promotions, and companies are disadvantaging women in these areas from the beginning. Although women earn more bachelor's degrees than men, and have for decades, they are less likely to be hired into entry-level jobs. At the first critical step up to manager, the disparity widens further. Women are less likely to be hired into manager-level jobs, and they are far less likely to be promoted into them—for every 100 men promoted to manager, 79 women are (Exhibit 2). Largely because of these gender gaps, men end up holding 62 percent of manager positions, while women hold only 38 percent.

Exhibit 2

This early inequality has a profound impact on the talent pipeline. Starting at the manager level, there are significantly fewer women to promote from within and significantly fewer women at the right experience level to hire in from the outside. So even though hiring and promotion rates improve at more senior levels, women can never catch up—we're suffering from a "hollow middle." This should serve as a wake-up call: until companies close the early gaps in hiring and promotion, women will remain underrepresented.

If companies continue to hire and promote women to manager at current rates, the number of women in management will increase by just one percentage point over the next ten years. But are companies start hiring and promoting women and men to manager at equal rates, we should get close to parity in management—48 percent women versus 52 percent men—over the same ten years.

Considering an uneven playing field

Many factors contribute to a lack of gender diversity in the workplace. This year, our report took a closer look at some of them. Beyond issues such as managerial support and access to senior leaders, it's interesting to look at a few areas that play a role—including everyday discrimination, sexual harassment, and the experience of being the only woman in the room.

Everyday discrimination

Everyday sexism and racism, also known as microaggressions, can take many forms. Some can be subtle, like when someone mistakenly assumes a coworker is more junior than they really are. Some are more explicit, like when someone says something demeaning to a coworker. Whether intentional or unintentional, microaggressions signal disrespect. They also reflect inequality—while anyone can be on the receiving end of disrespectful behavior, microaggressions are directed at people with less power, such as women, people of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people.

For almost two-thirds of women, microaggressions are a workplace reality (Exhibit 3). Most commonly, women have to provide more evidence of their competence than men and have their judgment questioned in their area of expertise. They are also twice as likely as men to have been mistaken for someone in a more junior position. Black women, in particular, deal with a greater variety of microaggressions and are more likely than other women to have their judgment questioned in their area of expertise and be asked to provide additional evidence of their competence.

Exhibit 3

Lesbian women experience further slights: 71 percent have dealt with microaggressions. The nature of these encounters is often different for them: lesbian women are far more likely than other women to hear demeaning remarks in the workplace about themselves or others like them. They are also far more likely to feel like they cannot talk about their personal lives at work.

These negative experiences add up. As their name suggests, microaggressions can seem small when dealt with one by one. But when repeated over time, they can have a major impact: women who experience microaggressions view their workplaces as less fair and are three times more likely to regularly think about leaving their jobs than women who don't.

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment continues to pervade the workplace. Thirty-five percent of women in corporate America experience sexual harassment at some point in their careers, from hearing sexist jokes to being touched in a sexual way.^[19]

For some women the experience is far more common. Fifty-five percent of women in senior leadership, 48 percent of lesbian women, and 45 percent of women in technical fields report they've been sexually harassed. A common thread connects these groups: research has found that women who do not conform to traditional feminine expectations—in this case, by holding authority, not being heterosexual, and working in fields dominated by men—are more often the targets of sexual harassment.

Ninety-eight percent of companies have policies that make it clear sexual harassment is not tolerated, but many employees think their companies are falling short putting policies into practice. Only 62 percent of employees say that in the past year their companies have reaffirmed sexual harassment won't be tolerated, and a similar number say that they've received training or guidance on the topic. Moreover, only 60 percent of employees think a sexual-harassment claim would be fairly investigated and addressed by their company—and just one in three believe it would be addressed quickly.

There are also stark differences in how women and men view their company's efforts to create a safe and respectful work environment. Only 32 percent of women think that disrespectful behavior toward women is often quickly addressed by their companies, compared with 50 percent of men. Women are far less confident that reporting sexual harassment will lead to a fair investigation. And they are twice as likely as men to say that it would be risky or pointless to report an incident.

These numbers indicate the urgent need for companies to underscore that bad behavior is unacceptable and will not go overlooked. Leaders at all levels should set the tone by publicly stating sexual harassment won't be tolerated and by modeling inclusive behavior. HR teams should receive detailed training so they know how to thoroughly and compassionately investigate claims of harassment, even if they involve senior leaders. And companies would benefit from putting an audit process in place to ensure that investigations are thorough and sanctions are appropriate.

The 'Only' experience

Being "the only one" is still a common experience for women. One in five women say they are often the only woman or one of the only women in the room at work: in other words, they are "Onlys." This is twice as common for senior-level women and women in technical roles: around 40 percent are Onlys.

Women who are Onlys are having a significantly worse experience than women who work with other women. More than 80 percent are on the receiving end of microaggressions, compared with 64 percent of women as a whole. They are more likely to have their abilities challenged, to be subjected to unprofessional and demeaning remarks, and to feel like they cannot talk about their personal lives at work (Exhibit 4). Most notably, women Onlys are almost twice as likely to have been sexually harassed at some point in their careers.

Exhibit 4

Far fewer men are Onlys—just 7 percent say that they are often the only or one of the only men in the room—and regardless of their race and ethnicity, they face less scrutiny than women Onlys. By and large, White men who are Onlys have a better experience than any other group of Onlys, likely because they are broadly well represented in their company and are a high-status group in society.

Women Onlys have a more difficult time. Because there are so few, women Onlys stand out in a crowd of men. This heightened visibility can make the biases women Onlys face especially pronounced. While they are just one person, they often become a stand-in for all women—their individual successes or failures become a litmus test for what all women are capable of doing. With everyone's eyes on them, women Onlys can be heavily

scrutinized and held to higher performance standards. As a result, they most often feel pressure to perform, on guard, and left out. In contrast, when asked how it feels to be the only man in the room, men Onlys most frequently say they feel included.

Being an Only also affects the way women view their workplace. Compared with other women, women Onlys are less likely to think that the best opportunities go to the most deserving employees, promotions are fair and objective, and ideas are judged by their quality rather than who raised them. Not surprisingly, given the negative experiences and feelings associated with being the odd woman out, women Onlys are also 1.5 times more likely to think about leaving their job.

Mapping a path to gender equality

The vast majority of companies say that they're highly committed to gender and racial diversity—yet the evidence indicates that many are still not treating diversity as the business imperative it is. That's apparent in the lack of progress in the pipeline over the past four years (Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 5

Take gender diversity as an example. In contrast with what companies say about their commitment, only around half of all employees think that their company sees gender diversity as a priority and is doing what it takes to make progress. Around 20 percent of employees say that their company's commitment to gender diversity feels like lip service. And few companies are making a strong business case for gender diversity: while 76 percent of companies have articulated a business case, only 13 percent have taken the critical next step of calculating the positive impact on their business.

There are six actions companies need to take to make progress on gender diversity. Without action on these fronts, the numbers will not move:

- Get the basics right—targets, reporting, and accountability.
 - Ensure that [hiring and promotions are fair](#).
 - Make [senior leaders](#) and managers champions of diversity.
 - Foster an inclusive and respectful culture.
 - Make the Only experience rare.
 - Offer employees the flexibility to fit work into their lives.
-

We know many companies—especially those that participate in this study—are committed and taking action. But this year's findings make it clearer than ever that companies need to double down on their efforts. This report includes concrete, evidence-based steps that companies can take right now that will make a major difference. We hope companies seize this opportunity. We can't get to equality until they do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

[Alexis Krivkovich](#) and [Irina Starikova](#) are partners in McKinsey's Silicon Valley office; [Marie-Claude Nadeau](#) and [Kelsey Robinson](#) are partners in the San Francisco office, where [Nicole Robinson](#) is a consultant and [Lareina Yee](#) is a senior partner.

Women in the Workplace 2017

By [Alexis Krivkovich](#), [Kelsey Robinson](#), Irina Starikova, Rachel Valentino, and [Lareina Yee](#)

More companies are committing to gender equality. But progress will remain slow unless we confront blind spots on diversity—particularly regarding women of color, and employee perceptions of the status quo.

Women remain underrepresented at every level in corporate America, despite earning more college degrees than men for 30 years and counting. There is a pressing need to do more, and most organizations realize this: company commitment to gender diversity is at an all-time high for the third year in a row.

Despite this commitment, progress continues to be too slow—and may even be stalling. [Women in the Workplace](#), a study conducted by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, looks more deeply at why, drawing on data from 222 companies employing more than 12 million people, as well as on a survey of over 70,000 employees and a series of qualitative interviews. One of the most powerful reasons for the lack of progress is a simple one: we have blind spots when it comes to diversity, and we can't solve problems that we don't see or understand clearly.

Many employees think women are well represented in leadership when they see only a few. And because they've become comfortable with the status quo, they don't feel any urgency for change. Further, many men don't fully grasp the barriers that hold women back at work. As a result, they are less committed to gender diversity, and we can't get there without them.

Many companies also overlook the realities of women of color, who face the greatest obstacles and receive the least support. When companies take a one-size-fits-all approach to advancing women, women of color end up underserved and left behind. This year we take a deeper look at women of color to better understand the distinct challenges they face, shaped by the intersection of gender and race.

This article presents highlights from the full report and suggests a few core actions that could kick-start progress.

Taking a closer look at the corporate pipeline

[As in years past](#), we examined the corporate pipeline, starting from entry-level professional positions and leading all the way to the C-suite. Two themes emerge this year:

Inequality starts at the very first promotion. This is even more dramatic for women of color. Women remain significantly underrepresented in the corporate pipeline (Exhibit 1). From the outset, fewer women than men are hired at the entry level, despite women being 57 percent of recent college graduates. At every subsequent step, the representation of women further declines, and women of color face an even steeper drop-off at senior levels. As a result, one in five C-suite leaders is a woman, and fewer than one in 30 is a woman of color. Moreover, compared with the modest gains women made in prior years, there are signs this year that [women's progress may be stalling](#).

Exhibit 1

Women are not leaving their companies at higher rates than men, and very few plan to leave the workforce to focus on family. Compared with men of the same race and ethnicity, women are leaving their companies at similar rates: White women are leaving as frequently as white men, and we see the same pattern among women and men of color. However, there is a large racial gap: people of color are significantly more likely to leave their organizations.

Women and men also have similar intentions to stay in the workforce. Roughly 60 percent of all employees plan to remain at their companies for five or more years. Moreover, among those who are planning to leave, about 80 percent intend to find a job elsewhere and remain in the workforce. Notably, just as many men as women say they'll leave to focus on family, and the number for both genders is remarkably low: 2 percent or less.

Changing the workplace experience

Based on the results of a survey of more than 70,000 employees from 82 of this year's participating companies, three trends that disadvantage women are clear:

Women experience a workplace skewed in favor of men. On average, women are promoted at a lower rate than men. The biggest gender gap is at the first step up to manager: entry-level women are 18 percent less likely to be promoted than their male peers. This gender disparity has a dramatic effect on the pipeline as a whole. If entry-level women were promoted at the same rate as their male peers, the number of women at the senior vice president and C-suite levels would more than double. And the disparity in promotions is not for lack of desire to advance. Women are just as interested in being promoted as men, and they ask for promotions at comparable rates.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, women are less optimistic about their prospects. They are less likely than men to aspire to be a top executive. And even the women who aspire to be a top executive are significantly less likely to think they'll become one than men with the same aspiration.

Women of color, particularly Black women, face even greater challenges. The intersection of race and gender shape women's experiences in meaningful ways. Women of color face more obstacles and a steeper path to leadership, from receiving less support from managers to getting promoted more slowly (Exhibit 2). For instance, although women in general are more likely than men to report they never interact with senior leaders, Black women are the most likely of all to report they never have senior-level contact. This may affect how they view the workplace and their opportunities for advancement. Perhaps because of the challenges they face in the workplace, for example, Black women are also the most interested in going out on their own. Compared with other groups of women, they're significantly more likely to say they intend to start a business when they leave their current job. And yet: despite facing more pitfalls to advancement, women of color have higher ambitions to be a top executive than White women.

Exhibit 2

Women and men see the state of women—and the success of gender-diversity efforts—differently. Men are more likely to think the workplace is equitable; women see a workplace that is less fair and offers less support (Exhibit 3). Men think their companies are doing a pretty good job supporting diversity; women see more room for improvement. Indeed, nearly 50 percent of men think women are well represented in leadership in companies where only one in ten senior leaders are women. And perhaps unsurprisingly, [men are less committed to gender-diversity efforts](#), and some even feel that such efforts disadvantage them: 15 percent of men think their gender will make it harder for them to advance, and White men are almost twice as likely as men of color to think this.

Exhibit 3

A road map to gender equality

Companies need a comprehensive plan [for supporting and advancing women](#). Building on findings from previous years—and incorporating new insights into what top-performing companies are doing—companies should start with these core actions:

- Make a compelling case for gender diversity.
- Invest in more employee training.
- Ensure that hiring, promotions, and reviews are fair.
- Give employees the flexibility to fit work into their lives.

- Focus on accountability and results.

Additionally, it is critical that companies understand their particular pain points and tackle them directly. For most if not all companies, this includes addressing the distinct barriers women of color face and getting sufficient buy-in from men. Until they do, companies' gender-diversity efforts are likely to continue to fall short.

Efforts to achieve equality benefit us all. [Diversity leads to stronger business results](#), as numerous studies have shown. When the most talented people can rise to the top, regardless of what they look like and where they're from, we all end up winning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

[Alexis Krivkovich](#) and [Irina Starikova](#) are partners in McKinsey's Silicon Valley office; [Kelsey Robinson](#) is a partner in the San Francisco office, where [Rachel Valentino](#) is a consultant, and [Lareina Yee](#) is a senior partner.

Women in the Workplace 2016

In corporate America, women fall behind early and keep losing ground with every step.

More than 75 percent of CEOs include gender equality in their top ten business priorities, but gender outcomes across the largest companies are not changing. Women are less likely to receive the first critical promotion to manager—so far fewer end up on the path to leadership—and they are less likely to be hired into more senior positions. As a result, the higher you look in companies, the fewer women you see.

[Women in the Workplace](#), a study conducted by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, elaborates on these patterns, provides some explanations for them, and suggests priorities for leaders seeking to speed the rate of progress. Key findings, based on data from more than 130 companies and over 34,000 men and women, include the following:

- Women remain underrepresented at every level in the corporate pipeline. Corporate America promotes men at 30 percent higher rates than women during their early career stages, and entry-level women are significantly more likely than men to have spent five or more years in the same role.
- Women negotiate for promotions and raises as often as men but face more pushback when they do. Women also receive informal feedback less frequently than men—despite asking for it as often—and have less access to senior-level sponsors. Not surprisingly, women are almost three times more likely than men to think their gender will make it harder to get a raise, promotion, or chance to get ahead.
- The challenge is even more pronounced for women of color. Our research finds that, compared with White women, women of color face the most barriers and experience the steepest drop-offs with seniority despite having higher aspirations for becoming a top executive. Women of color also report they get less access to opportunities and see a workplace that is less fair and inclusive.

Exhibit 1

The report suggests that we are falling short in translating top-level commitment into a truly inclusive work environment. Even when top executives say the right things, employees don't think they have a plan for making progress toward gender equality, don't see those words backed up with action, don't feel confident calling out gender bias when they see it, and don't think frontline managers have gotten the message. Only 45 percent of employees, for example, think their companies are doing what it takes to improve diversity outcomes. And even though more than 70

percent of companies say they are committed to diversity, less than a third of their workers see senior leaders held accountable for improving gender outcomes. Faced with these challenges, it's time to rewrite our gender playbooks so that they do more to change the fabric of everyday work life by encouraging relentless execution, fresh ideas, and courageous personal actions.

This is an edited extract from Women in the Workplace 2016, a study undertaken by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey. It builds on the [Women in the Workplace 2015](#) report, as well as similar [research conducted by McKinsey in 2012](#). For more information, visit [womenintheworkplace.com](#).

Women in the Workplace 2015

Women remain underrepresented across organizations—especially at senior levels of leadership—a new survey by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey finds.

From entry level to the C-suite, women are underrepresented at US corporations, less likely to advance than men, and face more barriers to senior leadership. In fact, at the rate of progress of the past three years, it will take more than 100 years for the upper reaches of US corporations to achieve gender parity.

These are the principal findings of [Women in the Workplace](#), a study undertaken by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey to encourage female leadership and gender equality in the workforce. Some 118 companies and nearly 30,000 employees participated in the study, building on a similar effort conducted by McKinsey in 2012. The new study revealed that despite modest improvements, the overarching findings were similar: women remain underrepresented at every level of the corporate pipeline, with the disparity greatest at senior levels of leadership.

Women in the Workplace found that for numerous reasons, women are simply less likely than men to advance: they experience an uneven playing field, with their odds of advancement lower at every level; there is a persistent leadership gap in the most senior roles; gender diversity is not widely believed to be a priority; and while employee programs designed to help balance work and family are abundant, participation is low among both sexes due to concerns that using them will negatively affect their careers.