

NEW MOMS[®]

HEALTHY RETURNS

by medela  | mamava

Embracing Gender Equity:

A Workplace Culture that Levels the
Playing Field for Women



Why Embrace Gender Equity?

At the beginning of 2020, the representation of women in corporate America was slowly trending in the right direction. This was most pronounced in upper management roles: between January 2015 and January 2020, the 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.¹ Although these are important gains, they still reflect a significant lack of female representation in influential leadership positions in the U.S.

Although women make up 47% of the U.S. workforce today,² many policies have not kept pace with the advancement of working women and there is still a general lack of support to ensure women have equal opportunities, when compared to men, to excel in their careers. Coupled with the challenges created and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, which forced millions of women to take a leave of absence, or exit the workforce¹ altogether to focus on family, employers are faced with the reality that they could be losing top talent in their organizations. 2020 has proved that if working women are forced to choose between their career and family, they will often choose their family, leaving companies worse-off when it comes to talent and diversity.

This paper discusses gender equity in the workplace and offers recommendations for how employers can create more equitable environments for working parents that will help attract, engage and retain women.

A Brief History of Women in the U.S. Labor Force

A century ago, women only made up about 20% of the U.S. labor force.² At that time, women often lacked meaningful education, and if they were employed it was commonly in factories or as domestic workers. In fact, when it came to education in general, fewer than two percent of all 18-24 year-olds, both male and female, were enrolled in an institution of higher education,

and just one-third of those were women.³ We have certainly come a long way since then; as of 2016 women were more likely to have earned a bachelor's degree by age 29 than men.⁴

It has taken decades of societal movements and new laws – such as women's suffrage and the 19th Amendment, the Equal Pay Act, and civil rights – to drive attitude shifts and increased educational opportunities that have slowly advanced the employment prospects for women.

Although we've made strides in female career advancement and equality in the workplace, women continue to carry an additional burden of responsibility for their household compared to their male counterparts – a holdover from those 100-year-old social standards. And there has historically been little acknowledgment by companies of this burden and the ways it can impact a woman's career. Instead of finding ways to help women accommodate these responsibilities and allow them to succeed at home and at work, women have often simply been held back in their careers. Biases against women often result in them not being hired or promoted due to their gender, leading to well-documented issues like the broken rung, the maternal wall, and the glass ceiling.



Definition of Terms:

- **Broken Rung:** Barriers that prevent the first step up in someone's career.
- **Maternal Wall:** Bias that occurs when colleagues view mothers—or pregnant women—as less competent or less committed to their jobs.
- **Glass Ceiling:** Barriers that prevent career growth into the upper levels of an organization.

These barriers, unique to women and other minorities, lead to both overt inequality in the workplace, as well as more subtle inequity, which together have perpetuated the lack of female leaders at the highest levels of organizations around the world. That isn't good for women, or for businesses.

Let's take a closer look at what this means.

Important Definitions: Equality vs. Equity

It is important to share our foundational definitions for equality and equity – and the difference between these terms. In this paper, we define them as follows:



Equality: The equal distribution of resources to everyone, regardless of their status or need.

Equity: The distribution of resources based upon need, which varies between individuals.

One of the most popular examples showcasing the difference between equality and equity is a picture of three people watching a ballgame over a fence. Equality means that each person has a crate to stand on to see over the fence – but given the significant height differences among them, that equality doesn't ensure all three can actually see the game. Instead, by adjusting the crate distribution equitably – giving two crates to the shortest person and none to the tallest – an equal opportunity is made available for all three observers to watch the game.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also helps define the very important distinction between Equality and Equity when it comes to gender:

"Gender equality, equality between men and women...does not mean that women and men have to become the same, but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they were born male or female. Gender equity means fairness of treatment for men and women according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different, but which is considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations, and opportunities." – (UNESDOC)

While gender equality in the workplace is focused on providing men and women with the same equal opportunities, gender equity works to develop and provide the necessary tools, programs, policies and laws that offer a level playing field for everyone.

As discussed, our country has made progress over the decades to establish more equitable environments for our citizens, with help from societal movements such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act in 1967, and the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) in 1993. The FMLA, which requires covered employers to provide job protection and unpaid leave for employees with qualified medical and family reasons, was enacted to help both women and men manage the demands of work and family, yet women are one third more

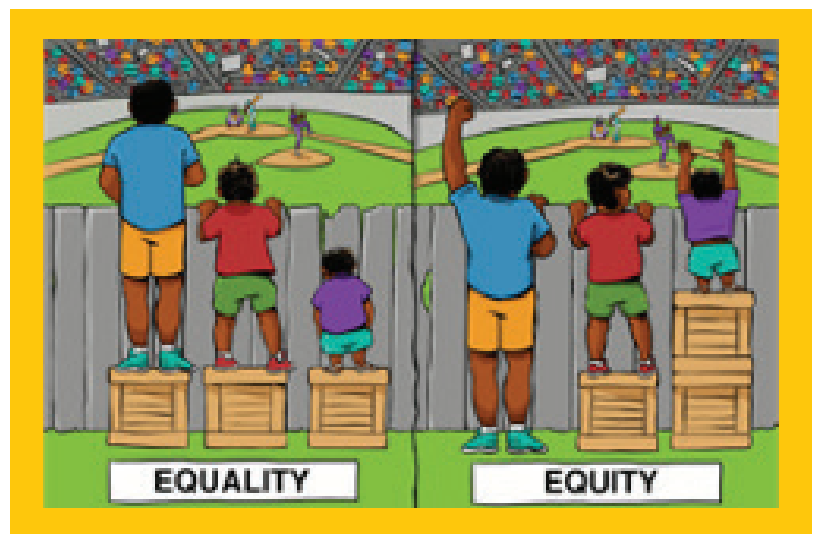


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likely to take FMLA,⁶ as the burden to care for children or other family members still falls mainly on them. While women and men are being treated equally when it comes to legislation, allowing them to take care of their families when needed, there is unequal use of these benefits due to both biological and social reasons, leading women to take more time away from their career than men. Policies that promote gender equity are important to ensure that women are not unfairly penalized in their pay and career advancement due to these constructs.

Cultural and societal movements are helping to keep women's rights front and center, but the pace of progress isn't fast enough, and has now slowed considerably as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. From closing gender pay gaps to placing more emphasis on diversity and inclusion initiatives, to seeking more qualified female candidates for C-level positions, organizations have been taking notice and creating policies designed to move the needle on gender equity—and they need to stay committed.

a far greater rate. In the U.S. in September 2020 alone, 865,000 women left the workforce²—more than four times the rate of men—and many of them cited the new and significant demands of managing children, family, and a household alongside their career during the pandemic as the reason. Because of the perpetually unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities, these burdens were falling mainly on the shoulders of women, fueled by (and ultimately further exacerbating) wage disparities that influence a couple's decision on whose career takes priority.

During the pandemic, mothers took on even more responsibilities at home, notably due to education facilities being fully or partially



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The Benefits of a Diverse Workforce

- A 2019 report found that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 25% more likely to have above-average profitability than companies in the fourth quartile.⁷
- When women make up more than one-third of promotions at a company, workers gave higher favorability scores in a variety of areas such as teamwork, performance evaluation, retention, company image and senior leadership.⁸
- Research has shown that female managers are more likely to be engaged than male managers (41% to 35%, respectively) and employees who work for a female manager are also 6% more engaged, on average, than those who work for a male manager.⁹

2020 Changed the Landscape for Companies and Their Employees

The coronavirus pandemic was a catalyst for change and a disruptive force. Companies were forced to furlough and lay-off workers, and many businesses closed for good. For women in the workforce, the impacts were felt at

closed and children needing at-home care and schooling. A study of working women conducted in September 2020 by Milk Stork revealed that 74% of respondents had considered quitting their jobs in the last six months due to the stress of working and parenting during the pandemic. In addition to an increased workload at home, 62% of respondents said their work hours increased, 74% said their workload increased as

the pandemic has progressed, and 84% of working mothers were frequently working at night to “catch up.”

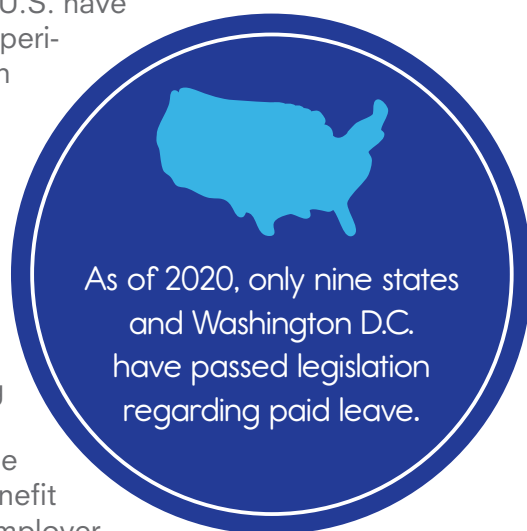
And according to a recent McKinsey and LeanIn.org report conducted during the pandemic, more than 70% of fathers felt they were splitting household labor equally with their partner, but only 44% of mothers said the same.¹

How Employers Can Create More Equitable Environments

Now more than ever, organizations need to focus on creating family-friendly cultures for working parents and develop actionable, measurable policies and benefits that provide a more level playing field—in turn creating more equitable environments. Let’s look at some of the main areas where organizations can make long-term changes that can help create more gender equity in the workplace.

Paid Parental Leave

The United States is the only developed country without a federal policy on parental leave, so employees in the U.S. have vastly different experiences based upon their state government and employer at the time they have a child. Until all states or the federal government passes legislation, a working parent’s experience will largely be defined by the benefit policies of their employer.



Women on average take ten times as much temporary leave from work as men upon the arrival of a child, and in many cases women are using that time away to deliver their baby, recover from birth, and establish a breastfeeding routine. This usually means that women are taking home less money

(and sometimes none at all) during their time off, which can lead to long-term financial consequences, due to loss of income and benefits, missed raises and promotions, and the inability to fund their retirement accounts and Social Security—and that in turn creates more inequitable environments for women in the workplace.¹⁰

Paid leave policies are critical in allowing parents to develop the important bond with their new child, because they help ensure parents are not worrying about a source of income during a time of significant adjustment. Giving parents enough bonding time with a new child enables them to be more successful as a parent and as an employee. And there is increasing evidence that having access to paid leave increases the likelihood that mothers will return to work and continue progressing in their careers.¹¹

Companies can help break down gender stereotyping by encouraging male workers to take paid leave for the arrival of a child, too. This can involve both formal policies on employee leave, as well as cultural structures that enable employees to be away from their job when needed without feeling guilty or at-risk of a future penalty. When men take paid leave, it can promote parent-child bonding, improve outcomes for children and increase gender equity at home and in the workplace. In one study of working fathers in the U.S., those who took leave of two weeks or more were much more likely to be actively involved in their child’s care nine months after birth—including feeding, changing diapers, and getting up in the night.¹² This creates important gender equality at home, alleviating some of the burden that falls on women and may increase the ability of mothers to engage in paid work, which has a positive effect on female labor force participation and wages. Additionally, when men and women take parental leave in equal measures, it removes the perceived notion that working mothers are less committed, or less valuable to their companies than working fathers. Over time, this is how organizations will help shift the gender equity movement to the status quo.

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Lactation Accommodation

In 2010, the government enacted the federal Break Time for Nursing Mothers law that requires employers covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) to provide basic accommodations for breastfeeding mothers at work. These accommodations include time and a private space that is not a bathroom for non-exempt (hourly) employees each time they need to pump. While this only provides bare-minimum protections, and only for some working mothers (those who are paid hourly), it was an important first step. Since that time, several states have stepped up to provide additional rights for breastfeeding mothers and expand them to cover all working employees.

Most new moms who want to continue providing breast milk to their babies still feel they're not getting the right support, products or educational resources to meet their needs when they return to work.¹³ Despite the progress in federal and state requirements, too many women still say they don't have time in their schedules, or a clean, dignified place to pump. These women are looking for companies that offer a family-friendly culture that supports their choice to continue feeding their baby breast milk once they return from maternity leave. That means having a clean, secure, and intentional lactation space, whether a dedicated room or a free-standing pod, and a lactation accommodation policy that expressly outlines the policies and resources for breast milk pumping employees.

Employees whose companies provide breastfeeding support consistently report improved morale, better satisfaction with their jobs, and higher productivity.¹⁴ In a study of corporations with lactation support programs, they found 94% of employees returned to their company after maternity leave, compared with the national average at the time of only 59%.¹⁵ And because breastfed infants tend to be ill less often, working moms who can successfully pump when they return are likely to miss fewer days of work to look after a sick baby.¹⁶ Studies have also shown that companies that provide comprehensive lactation support programs see additional healthcare cost savings

thanks to the short- and long-term health benefits of breast milk.¹⁴

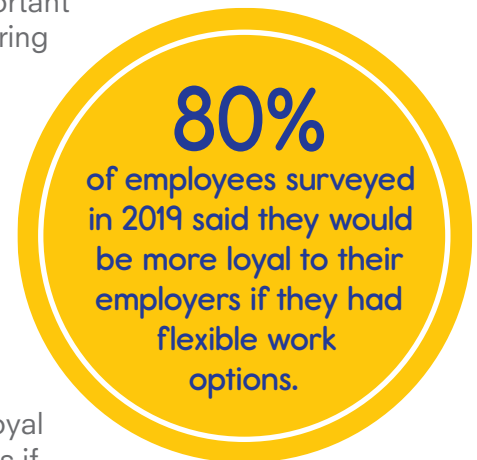
Flexible Work Arrangements

In a recent Society for Human Resource Management survey, 91% of human resource professionals agreed that flexible work arrangements positively influence employee engagement, job satisfaction and retention.¹⁷ Many U.S. workers now consider flexibility to be the most important factor in considering job offers when it comes to how they can balance their personal and professional lives. In fact, 80% of employees surveyed in 2019 said they would be more loyal to their employers if they had flexible work options.¹⁸

This flexibility could mean job sharing, a compressed work week, shifting from full-time to part-time work, or having the option of working remotely.

Employees are seeking a wider variety of flexible workplace options from their companies. In a study from 2017, before many more Americans were forced to work from home as a result of the pandemic, 26% of those surveyed said the flexibility to work from home was their first preference, second to flexible arrival and departure times (21%). Although schedule flexibility remains a higher priority among female candidates (57%) than men (43%), millennials in general continue to express the need for more flexibility in their work life and feeling less tied to a physical workplace.¹⁹

Most companies are already planning for what their workplace mix will look like when they welcome employees back to the office post-pandemic. Remote work environments are likely part of the conversation, and many employees working from home have become used to the



flexibility that remote work allows. They have been able to better integrate their work with their responsibilities as a parent and may expect that same flexibility as they return to the office environment.

And, if they do write new flexible scheduling policies, leadership must encourage both men and women to take advantage of the flexibility. When men don't feel any stigma associated with taking time off to bring a child to a doctor's appointment or pick up an ill child from daycare, the playing field becomes more level.

Shift Toward Telehealth Benefits

A 2016 survey by the National Business Group on Health, which publishes an annual survey of employee health benefits offered by large firms, found that 76% of companies included telehealth as part of their benefit plan, but only 3% of workers used it.²⁰ The pandemic has brought heightened awareness to the benefits of telehealth, with a recent survey citing that 59% of consumer respondents are more likely to use telehealth services now than previously, and 33% would even leave their current physician for a provider who offered telehealth access.²¹ As organizations look at health programs that include telehealth services, they need to consider the specific needs of the working parents in their organization, which includes the needs of new parents returning to work after the birth of a child.



33%

of consumers said they would leave their current physician for a provider who offered telehealth access

A study of emergency room staff found that 80% of pediatric emergency room visits were dismissed as non-urgent, and the leading causes of visits were persistent fevers, rashes and gastrointestinal problems.²² Offering virtual health benefits that enable parents to speak with pediatric experts around the clock for non-critical questions about their baby's health and nutrition is key to helping new parents manage their career and parenting

needs. These pediatric experts should always include lactation consultants, because a mother who has chosen to breastfeed cannot delay feeding her baby for hours or days while waiting for an appointment. Real-time telehealth can easily connect her to help when she needs it.

Employers that give working parents the ability to access pediatric experts when needed demonstrate their support of families' choices—an important cultural signal for companies that aim to create an inclusive and equitable environment.

Leadership Buy-In and Parental Support Champions

Developing work-life initiatives with the commitment to creating more gender equitable environments for women takes buy-in and visible leadership from top executives. Employers need to ensure that those designated to work on policy development are gender diverse. Men are parents, too, and their perspective and advocacy will be necessary to drive organizational change.

Organizations should assign a human resource lead and create teams to own the development of new parent policies, including paid leave, lactation accommodation, flexible scheduling and remote work, telehealth services, and any others that fit into the culture. Once policies are written, employers need to train all leaders and managers throughout the company and ensure that the policies are communicated and supported at all levels in the organization. It is important to keep parental support champions engaged and informed so they can answer questions from employees, enhance policies as needed, and ensure that all employees are aware of any changes. Companies should also publicly show pride in organizational accomplishments and progress, and communicate policies throughout the organization, reminding people that their employer is committed to giving every employee a fair and equal chance at career success.

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Gender Equity Starts with Culture, and is Key to Attracting and Retaining Talent

In a National Study of Employers, companies were asked about the main reasons they implemented work-life initiatives. Of those who responded, 39% said it was to help them retain employees followed by 21% responding that it was to help employees manage work and family life. In a recent survey of HR professionals, recruiting and hiring was selected as the biggest challenge facing employers as they head in to 2021.²³ Creating family-friendly policies can help. These investments are in-line with what today's generation of employees want: an organizational culture that offers more help balancing work, home, health and more. They care less about salary than they do about benefits that support their lifestyle choices—including

when making the choice to start a family. In fact, among millennials, 60% said that being a parent is extremely important to their overall identity.²⁴

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These kinds of supportive policies can help attract and retain talented women in particular, who are looking for employers who understand and support their choice in wanting both a career and family. Organizations that are ready to step up for working parents, and help level the playing field for working women, will continue to demonstrate that gender equity is good for business.

This paper was sponsored by Medela and Mamava—the partners behind New Moms' Healthy Returns. The New Moms' Healthy Returns program offers a single source for benefits that employers need to attract, support, and retain working parents. This customizable solution offers breastfeeding products and educational resources from Medela; freestanding lactation pods by Mamava; 24/7 virtual support from pediatric experts and lactation consultants; and breast milk shipping services from Milk Stork. For more information contact us at NewMomsHealthyReturns.com.

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