



WOMEN AND WORK

FINAL REPORT

Prepared for
Workforce Development Board of Central Ohio

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REAMBLE.

Late last year, the Workforce Development Board of Central Ohio issued an RFQ about conducting focus groups among women who have left the workforce during/due to the pandemic. As a project like this falls in our wheelhouse and sparks our intellectual curiosity, we were eager to apply. We too had been hearing many stories, local and national, about the millions of women who had exited the workforce. In our proposal, we posed the following question: *What has happened to the women?* We surmised at the time that there is no easy way to answer this question because the issues are complicated and complex. Because “women” are not a monolith, the issues are probably nuanced.

That one question led us to ask a few more: *Who are they? Why exactly did they leave? Where*

have they gone? How are they getting by? And will they ever return? Now that we have completed the Women and Work project, we have some answers which we present in this report. Some of what we found is new and surprising. Other findings reinforce issues we’ve long known about.

The information presented in this report reflects the needs and struggles of a self-selected, non-random sample of individuals who chose to participate in the focus groups. They are women whose work situation was impacted by the pandemic *and who felt compelled to share their experience with others.* It is also true that, because of the recruiting sources we used, the women who participated in our focus groups may be more inclined than the average person to access workforce development services. Without further study, it would be inappropriate to generalize the conclusions drawn in this report to the greater population of women and/or smaller subsets of women (e.g., all women of color, all single parents, all hourly workers, etc.). At the time of this report, many women are

returning to the workplace. Nevertheless, there are important lessons to be learned and strategies and tactics to be applied that will improve workforce outcomes for employers and the people who work for them.

The issues outlined in this report are not temporary nor will they resolve themselves without intervention. First, many of the attitudes and values expressed by focus group participants are similar to those articulated in surveys by the emerging workforce (e.g., Gen Z). Second, there is no going back to the way it was before the pandemic. The workplace and the workforce is irrevocably changed. Finally, regardless of what is happening in the broader economy, employers have been for decades challenged to attract, retain, and engage a skilled workforce.

On behalf of the WDBCO, we wanted to know what women think and what they need. They told us. What you read here is what these women said.

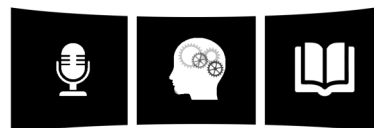


PROJECT PARTNERS, FUNDERS & ADVISORS

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PROJECT DIRECTOR. CONCEIVED OF AND IMPLEMENTED PROJECT. COORDINATED AND OVERSAW ALL PROJECT PARTNERS. SYNTHESIZED AND ANALYZED QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTED DURING FOCUS GROUPS. PREPARED REPORT.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It turns out, we were right. Women are not a monolithic group. Even though every adult alive today experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, not everyone experienced it in the same way – and not everyone was impacted to the same degree. We discuss these variations in **Section 1 titled, Experiencing the Same Things Differently.**

Section 2 presents our introduction to the findings of the Women and Work project. We expected to learn that some things have changed. Some of the things we learned were quite unexpected. For instance, there has been a fundamental shift in people's perceptions of – and connections to – work. Today, the women in our focus groups are thinking differently about where, when, and how work is done. And they want to have some degree of control. We found among focus group participants that **their connection to regular, full time W-2 employment is tenuous. It is not that they don't want to work. The issue is that they find the act of working is too difficult or too expensive.** It's just not worth it. Additionally, people talked about having lost faith in the traditional employer-employee relationship. While this thinking can be attributed to the lingering trauma from pandemic layoffs and shutdowns, it goes deeper than that. Focus group participants were clear. They feel they are treated poorly by their employers and, quite frankly, they are not going to stand for it any longer. They don't need to. They have options. Which leads to the second shift in thinking. **Many women we spoke to are turning to self-employment as a less risky option than the traditional W-2 arrangement.** With self-employment, they feel they have control of their financial future. Self-employment is a much safer option than the alternative, which is turning their lives upside-down to try to fit in an employer's rigid parameters only to get laid off during the scariest time of their lives or for being a regular person just trying to get by.

In Section 3, we present the research question as defined by the WDBCO and our methodology for the Women and Work project. We explain our rationale for the types of people we wanted to hear from in the focus groups, namely individuals who represent four major “employment situations”: unemployed, underemployed, out-of-the-workforce, and self-employed/started a business. We also considered whether or not childcare was an issue in how people worked and we offered an even split of in-person and virtual sessions to accommodate people's preferences. (In the end, far more Zoom sessions were conducted.) We conducted enough focus groups to reach the point of redundancy – or until we stopped hearing new information from participants.

Insights From Labor Force Data appear in Section 4. There is a popular belief that many of the women who were working prior to the pandemic have left the labor force and that efforts should be made to provide incentives to lure them back. As our analysis will show, that belief is largely false. The participation rate has reclaimed much of its loss from the pandemic-driven decline, and the net loss is at least partially due to the long-term decline in the participation rate charted in Figure 4.3 (labor force participation rates broken down by age). Aside from the pandemic, part of the explanation for the overall decline is in the aging of the population and early retirements. As with so many other things, the pandemic accelerated trends that were already in place. To wit, we've known for a long time that Baby Boomers would be retiring and that the impact on the workforce would be substantial. This section also presents the Demographic profile of focus group participants and survey completers, as well as data on Personal Challenges (including their current job situation, how happy they are with their job situation, and why they changed occupations and/or industries, if applicable), and information about their

Current Personal Status (mostly about children and childcare responsibilities).

Section 5 is where we first present what we learned from the focus groups, **starting with Challenges They Faced**. According to our coding of focus group transcripts, the most often cited challenges are COVID-specific things (like masks, safety protocols, vaccine requirements; and a general fear of uncertainty and change). Other items topping the list of challenges are Emotional Well-Being/Mental Health; Fair & Empathetic Management and Workplace Conditions; and Childcare. Also found in this section are data about participants' Financial Picture Before and Current as well as their Desired Future State, which presents their responses to "the three things employers should do" and "the supports they need to find and keep a job."

We continue our presentation of what we learned from the focus groups in **Section 6 with What They Need**. The most often cited items participants said they need from employers are Personal and Family Needs are Accommodated, followed by Fair & Empathetic Management and Workplace Conditions; Compensation and Benefits; Career Advancement; and Compassion/Leaders Who Empathize Beyond Work.

The challenges they faced and the things they need from employers leads directly to **Section 7, Choices They Are Making**. In this section, we discuss the different ways these women engage with work.

Interspersed throughout this document are groups of **Participant Profiles** that illustrate how different individuals are changing their connection with work. These profiles are presented as follows:

- ◆ New attitude about W-2 employment - pg. 23
- ◆ Self-selected out of the workforce (for now) - pg. 39
- ◆ Already made a change - pg. 53
- ◆ Looking for remote work - pg. 63
- ◆ Self-employed - pg. 72
- ◆ Working, but will quit - pg. 80
- ◆ Retired early - pg. 81

Section 8 presents What We Can Do, a combination of broad philosophical changes in thinking and practical tactical solutions. Some of the recommendations are things that WDBCO can implement. Others are things that fall on Employers.

Finally, find answers to the questions posed in the original proposal by jumping directly to these sections:

- ◆ *What has happened to the women?* – see **Section 4, Insights From Labor Force Data**
- ◆ *Who are they?* – see **Section 3, Demographics**
- ◆ *Why exactly did they leave?* – see **Section 5, The Challenges They Faced**
- ◆ *Where have they gone?* – see **Section 7, Choices They Are Making**
- ◆ *How are they getting by?* – see **Section 2, Introduction - Yes, things have changed. But in some unexpected ways.**
- ◆ *Will they ever return?* – see **Section 5, What They Need** and **Section 7, What We Can Do**



CODING EXPLAINED

When a focus group participant mentioned something, for instance, being a challenge, we added a tick mark next to that thing. If that thing was mentioned as a challenge by that same person multiple times, it was not ticked more than once. One person got one tick mark for one topic.

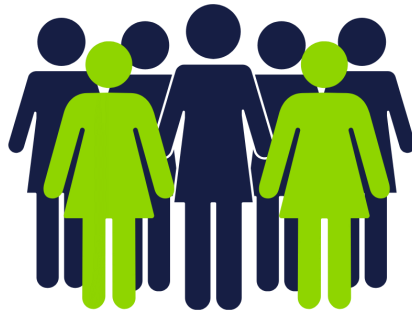
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SECTION 1

THE FIRST INTRODUCTION

Experiencing the Same Things
Differently



Section 1

EXPERIENCING THE SAME THINGS DIFFERENTLY

When considering the ways in which people experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, we are reminded of the famous opening line of Charles Dickens' classic, *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." Of course, there is no single way to experience global events, even those that are (let's hope!) once-in-a-generation. The reality is the pandemic has been tough on a lot of people – though it has not been equally tough. Everyone, it seems, has experienced the pandemic differently and to differing degrees.

For some, their pandemic experience has been devastating. Many have lost loved ones to the virus. At the time of this writing, just under one million people in the U.S. have died from COVID, more than 38,000 in Ohio, meaning that at least 38,000 of our neighbors have grieved the death of someone dear to them. More than 2.6 million Ohioans have themselves caught the virus.¹ Just as many have cared for (or watched helplessly) as family members became sick. Many delayed treatment for other illnesses. COVID has truly wreaked havoc on our physical, mental, and emotional health.

But wait. There's more. Not only is it hard to work when you're not well, the pandemic-induced shutdown of the economy had devastating consequences for many. Some have had their businesses go under. Many lost their jobs – not just their livelihoods and sense of self, but their long-term financial security. For some, the setback was immediate. For some, short-lived. For others, they have yet to recover what they lost. Many people still decide whether to pay the rent,

To obtain the best information, we conducted as many focus groups as was necessary until the point of redundancy – or until we no longer heard anything new or different from the next group of participants.

buy food or medicine today. When people got behind financially, they faced eviction. For those without options, they were left homeless.

Nearly everyone was forced to put plans on hold. Missing travel and celebrating milestones and life events with family and friends brings its own sadness. But the fear, anxiety, and stress

brought about by the uncertainty of the pandemic and the forced isolation had long term consequences for many. Some people saw their marriages end. Others watched their children struggle academically and emotionally. Too many continue to struggle with mental health issues.

Despite general hardship and uncertainty, some people have prospered. Some people found a new purpose in life. Others found within themselves a resiliency they didn't know existed.

Many have realized what is truly important to them and have reprioritized their lives to put their families first. Many people's wealth has increased. The stock market achieved record gains. Some improved their financial position, for instance, by using their stimulus money to pay off debts or invest. Others used those checks to finance new businesses. Some business owners responded to the economic conditions by pivoting. They found new markets or brought new ideas or services to the market and their business is flourishing. What has been devastating for some has been an opportunity for others.

Not everyone experiences the same things in the same way.

Just like there is no one way to have experienced the pandemic, there is no one way to be a woman living in Franklin County (Ohio) during a pandemic. Sure, by virtue of living in Columbus, women have a number of things in common, like our public transportation system, our particular mix of businesses, and our insufferable weather. They all live in a community where a lack of housing, especially affordable housing, is a problem. While some remain unaffected by the issue, a number of women talked during the focus groups about how their housing was in jeopardy. Some had been evicted, while others were on the brink. "It's a frightening possibility that my son and I will be living in my car." Others have come to the conclusion that, if push comes to shove, they will get a roommates – or "doubling up" – to share expenses and save their homes. A handful of participants said they are considering leaving Columbus.

Among the focus group participants with children, they have different reactions to their childcare situation. Some participants lack confidence in the quality of available childcare. "I can't imagine leaving my baby there." Most others talked about the difficulty with finding reliable and/or affordable childcare. "I can't afford to work and pay for

daycare."

Some of these were single parents who, without alternatives for childcare, simply cannot work. Many of these were living on the brink of financial ruin, even becoming homeless. Again, "It's a frightening possibility that my son

DESCRIBING THEIR OUTLOOK

The different ways people describe how they've experienced the pandemic

- ◆ I am pissed. I lost everything – what it took me 10 years to build.
- ◆ I have no choice but to succeed.
- ◆ I have gained everything.

Summary Box 1.1: Describing Their Outlook

and I will be living in my car." Others were in situations or relationships where they could afford not to work. One talked about finding a nanny one or two days a week. Still others have supportive family members they can rely on to watch their children while they are at work (whether regularly or in an emergency). There's no one way to experience childcare in

our community. But if you are working and you don't have a lot of resources, suffice it to say childcare is a serious challenge.

Some see the System is set up to make them fail. If they work too much they lose their benefits, but they need those benefits to be able to work. They can't find a job because of a years-old criminal conviction, but how are they supposed to pay their bills if they can't find a job? They describe their situation as futile. "I'll throw myself off a building" if things continue this way for too long.

For others, though, they see injustice and inequity and decide they are just going to go around it. Some of the women in our focus groups expressed fierce determination in the face of these hardships. "I've got no choice but to succeed."

Everyone is different. Even the exact same things are viewed as polar opposites. Some people describe the isolation of working from home as "suffocating." They thrive in the company of people. "I would've gone crazy if it weren't for those little Zoom boxes." Others relish the freedom that comes with working from home. They are grateful, for instance, to exchange the drudgery of the commute for time spent on something more productive, especially the flexibility to be with their kids.

How people react in certain situations is often determined by how they are wired. Some see the situation as hopeless. They fear that every day is going to bring more of the same. Others see hope. "As soon as my kids go back to school full time" or "as soon as I finish my degree" or "if I could just get a job that fits my kid's schedule" are all expressions of milestones that, though maybe far off in the future, are not forever. It will get better.

The women we spoke to had access to a range of financial, family, and other resources. Some had strong supports. These women seemed to fare better. Others talked about the kind support they aren't getting, from emotional and moral support to spiritual and financial. These women talked about needing at least occasional understanding from their family members about how hard life is sometimes. "I almost crashed my car for my family to step in."

Likewise, at work, they expect kindness and empathy from their supervisors. Those with children, especially the single parents, wished their employers had both policies and a sense of compassion to accommodate them in their roles as parents. "They just watch me struggle. You see I'm having a hard time. Can you of-

fer help instead of making me ask?"

Because childcare is a barrier to employment for many of the women we spoke to, they talked about the necessity of having a job that matches their children's schedule. For some, that means aligning with the school day or the daycare's hours of operation. Others need their work hours to correspond to the availability of family members who provide care or assistance. Those who don't have any support talked about how they have no alternative if their childcare plans are interrupted. They cannot work that day.

A few of the focus group participants spoke about wanting support from other women, and many expressed appreciation for having it during the 90 minute focus group. In fact, this was one of the reasons some chose to participate. Some exchanged contact information with each other to continue the conversation. Many just want "hope."

To obtain the best information, we conducted as many focus groups as was necessary until the point of redundancy – or until we no longer heard anything new or different from the next group of participants. We organized the project so we would be listening to and asking questions

of people in different "employment situations." People had different reactions to working and not working. Some people were very unhappy while others were optimistic that their unemployment was temporary. Likewise, among those who were working, some were very happy and some were very unhappy. It would be a mistake to assume that everyone who is working was happy or that everyone who is not working is unhappy. What we *didn't* hear is that the people who are not working are happy about it.





SECTION 2

THE SECOND INTRODUCTION

Yes, Things Have Changed. And In
Some Unexpected Ways.



Section 2

YES, THINGS HAVE CHANGED. AND IN SOME UNEXPECTED WAYS

The pandemic has been tough on a lot of people. Especially women. Especially those who have children. Especially those who are single parents. Of course, things were hard for some people even before the pandemic. It seems, though, that the experience of living through this particular event has been a tipping point. Many of the women we spoke to have a new attitude about how they want work and what they want out

of work. And now that they see this new way, they can't go back to the way it was. Some focus group participants surely came to this realization of their own volition. Others, it was clear, were backed into a corner by circumstance. Nevertheless, the common sentiment articulated by so many of the women we talked to is: "Enough. I am not doing this. I can't do this anymore."

Though women are returning to work — and they want to work, there continues to be a labor shortage. This is the challenge employers are facing. What

is new and different in this particular moment in history is that, even when women are working, their view about work has substantially changed. Women have a new attitude about what they expect from work and what they will tolerate from employers. Whereas before, they may have put up with things, not so much anymore. They have more options and they

are the things that women seek.

We learned that, for many of the women we spoke to, working is really, really hard. It's hard at home and it's hard at work. Many in our focus groups talked about how they get hassled at work for what's happening at home — as if what happens at home doesn't matter. These women ended up feeling defensive. They resented

having to advocate for themselves to be treated with basic fairness and decency. Many focus group participants used the same lan-

guage to describe what was lacking: "humanity" and being treated "like a human being." For these women, the degradation and humiliation was just not worth the hassle.

We also learned that working is too expensive for many women. Obviously, daycare is expensive. When it costs more than they make in wages, it doesn't make economic sense to work. Putting daycare aside, work can be costly in terms of time, effort, and emotional well-being. Many of the women we spoke to recounted stories about having to

Man's mind, stretched to a new idea, never goes back to its original dimension.

- Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr, (1809 – 1894)
American Physician, poet, and polymath

are exercising them. Regardless of whether or not they have returned, their attachment to traditional W-2 employment is not what it once was. They are quick to leave — even start their own business. Employers are no longer competing with other employers for talent. They are competing with the women themselves. Financial incentives are not what these women require to entice them back to traditional W-2 employment. They need accommodation, empathy, fair wages, opportunities for growth, and ability to have their voices heard. These

fly around from this thing to that trying to keep all the balls in the air. They spoke of the indignities they faced at work. The lack of respect. The microaggressions. And for what? they asked rhetorically. The sacrifice to their well-being is more than they are willing to give in exchange for whatever wages and benefits their employer offers.

Finally, we learned that many women no longer view traditional W-2 employment as the pathway to financial security. Sure, some of this is lingering trauma from the economic collapse during the pandemic. Nevertheless, many of the women in our focus groups now believe that self-employment is the best way to protect their interests – financial and otherwise. Through self-employment, by starting their own business or being their own boss, they can choose when, where, and how they will work.

While consistent across all the focus groups, six themes emerged and were communicated in varying degrees and in various combinations. Overall, the focus group participants expressed a desire for **stability in their lives**. They seek **better bosses** and they expect **fair wages**. They want **autonomy** over their work as well as to have **something to show** for their efforts. The thread running through each of these is the need for a **sense of well-being**. In whatever combination and to whatever degree for each individual, these six items have been expressed as non-

negotiables.

Stability. The women who participated in the focus groups spoke about stability and how much they want and need stability in their lives and will do whatever it takes to achieve it. Stability (or lack thereof) shows up for these women both at home and at work. The

REASONS FOR CHANGE IN EMPLOYMENT

- ◆ Kids at home because schools/daycares closed - **quit/fired**
- ◆ Couldn't handle the stress - **quit**
- ◆ COVID protocols not enforced at work/fear for self or family - **quit**
- ◆ Job **eliminated/furloughed**
- ◆ Opportunity for new approach to life - **quit**
- ◆ Chose not to get vaccinated - **quit/fired/not hired**
- ◆ Criminal background - **fired/not hired**

Summary Box 2.1: Reasons for Change in Employment

most common cause of instability at home is childcare or other family obligations. One of the lessons we learned during the pandemic is that schools are de facto childcare in this country. When schools closed, it made it impossible for many parents to work – a major

cause of instability that transcended both home and work. Instability at work is usually caused by not having the kind of job they want and/or the kind of boss they need. While prior to the pandemic, they would likely put up with instability at work because that's *just the way it is*. The women in our focus groups talk about how now they can no longer tolerate instability, it's too much for them to endure. Relative to work, they believe they have many more options than traditional W-2 employment. Trend toward self-employment (self-sufficiency and control over when and how they work) is an example of solving the stability problem in new ways.

The focus group participants also connect stability to their emotional well-being. They discussed how having enough time and money would enable them to manage things, thereby removing a lot of the stress and strife from their lives.

Bosses. Almost to a person, the women in the focus groups recounted stories about the many ways in which their superiors failed them at work. Their bosses failed them because there were insufficient policies in place to support them or because the company's policies were inappropriately or incorrectly applied. Bosses failed these women because they (the bosses) failed to understand and empathize with them as human beings. Focus group participants often used the

word *humanity* to describe what was missing in their relationship with their bosses. One shift is that, among the women we spoke to, more of them are clear they “aren’t going to take it anymore.” Many saw their bosses as an obstacle, rather than a trusted ally who would remove obstacles.

Many focus group participants feel they were victims of discrimination. Several experienced blatant racism at work. “I am your master. You are all black.” Others felt that their age or their disability was preventing them from finding employment. Many of the women who are parents felt they were treated poorly, unfairly or unjustly because they have children. Indeed, it was a common experience among the people we spoke to that they were either fired or felt their jobs were in jeopardy because their children got sick or had other emergencies that must be attended to. “I couldn’t come to work so they fired me.” “I had to get my kid, so they fired me.” “I felt pressured to quit.” Upon requesting accommodation from her employer, one woman said she was asked by her boss, “Why do you need to breastfeed? Can’t you just give it formula?”

The focus group participants connect their re-

I DON’T WANT TO PUT ALL MY EGGS IN ONE BASKET, BECAUSE THINGS CAN CHANGE. MY SUPERVISOR COULD BE SWITCHED OUT AND THAT PERSON DON’T LIKE ME AND I’M BACK TO SQUARE ONE.

lationships with their boss to their emotional well-being.

Wages. It has long been true that wages must be fair and equitable. These women spoke about how important it is that they are compensated fairly and that it makes economic sense to work. According to the focus group participants, many feel they are stuck. They can’t afford to work but they can’t afford not to work. Inflation, too, is hurting their ability to stay even, let alone get ahead. As we’ve already noted, women experience things differently. Likewise, they have different measures and different standards. In response to our question about “what wages do you need,” one woman said she couldn’t possibly survive on less than \$90,000 per year while another woman said \$15 per hour was, for her, a livable wage. The most frequently cited wage deemed “reasonable” by focus group participants was \$20 per hour.

The focus group participants connect their compensation to their emotional well-being. It is stressful to not have financial stability. They express fear and anxiety about not being able to pay their bills, about facing eviction, about the inability to afford childcare.

Autonomy. This shows up for focus group participants in how well they are treated at work as well as how much control they

I WANT TO BE IN CONTROL OF MY INCOME AND FAMILY STABILITY....AS WOMEN, WE NOT ONLY NEED TO HAVE PLAN A, BUT PLAN B AND C.

have over their work. How much agency do they have? How much decision-making power? Do they at least have input on the decisions that directly affect them? Do they have a seat at the table when decisions about them are being made? Do they feel they have recourse? Are they trusted? Are they treated fairly? Are they treated humanely? Are they given the respect they feel they deserve? They want to take care of themselves and their families. They don’t

want to rely on anyone. When they need help, they want it to be helpful, respectfully offered, and not punitive. They want to feel empowered in

their choices. Self-employment allows them to choose their hours – when, where and how to work.

The focus group participants connect the degree to which they have autonomy at work to their emotional well-being.

Something to show. The participants of the focus groups talked about their interest in doing something important, something that matters. Their children and their families are something important, which is why they want to be there for them. The women in the focus groups want to keep moving forward. They don’t want

I RESENT PEOPLE TITLING IT THE GREAT RESIGNATION OR THAT WE ARE OUT OF THE LABOR MARKET. WE ARE WORKING. WE ARE DOING WHAT WE CAN TO PUT FOOD ON THE TABLE AND PAY OUR BILLS AS BEST WE CAN WITH WHAT WE GOT.

to feel like they are “standing still,” “moving backward,” “running on a treadmill.” They want to be role models and do things their children can be proud of. It's not just about job satisfaction and career advancement, it's about how important their family is to them. They want to be the one to take care of their kids. They don't want to conform to work. They want work to conform to them. The focus group participants connect their need to have something to show to their emotional well-being.



PARTICIPANT PROFILE—Group No. 1
New Attitude About Work

"When work doesn't love you back."

Many of the women in our focus groups described having some sort of epiphany, awareness, or new outlook about work. They were asked about challenges they faced and support or information they needed to find or keep a job. Instead, what many of them described was an entirely new outlook toward work. They spoke about their need to have a voice in what happens to them. They spoke about wanting to be "at the table when decisions about their work are made." Many spoke about doing "gig work" as a bridge to starting their own businesses. Regardless of their choices, many are no longer expecting their employer to provide stability. Some who have returned to work say they are still seeking remote work or a job with hours that work better for them. Unlike in the past, when they may have been likely to put up with it, they now say they will be quicker to leave a bad boss or a job that doesn't meet their needs.

Employment Situation: Working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Somewhat happy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 40s
Race/Ethnicity: White
Education: Bachelor's degree
Home Situation: Domestic partnership and has no children at home

She was a professional in the travel and tourism industry, which was hit hard when the economy shut

down. She lost her job, which, as she described it, meant "I lost my career." During this period she "popped around a bit" doing this and that. It wasn't until recently, when she started in a manager-level position for a local college, that she feels she found something that satisfies her and is at her level professionally. She expresses pride about this new job and optimism about the future. However, right now, she has lost trust in both the economy and in employers. It doesn't matter how much you love your job, she remarked, "**work won't love you back.**" Her cynicism was evidenced in a bit of advice she gave a fellow focus group participant, "Don't let them put you back. It didn't work before." She put in a lot of effort and extra hours to her former employer only to be laid off, which hurt her both financially and emotionally. She had a serious health scare, so lack of medical insurance was a source of stress, lamenting, "Benefits tied to employment is ridiculous."

Employment Situation: Working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Somewhat happy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 40s
Race/Ethnicity: White
Education: Some college
Home Situation: Single with a pre-teen at home

She enjoyed her job at a clothing distribution center. However, when the pandemic hit, her employer was not understanding about her need to supervise her child. She requested to work remotely, but they declined. She continued to have issues with micromanagement and lack of understanding until she finally quit. They hired someone without children. She did not qualify for unemployment since she quit. She is grateful that there were safety nets around

COVID. She likens her situation to being in a relationship: she wants to feel assured her employer is committed to her and will be there for her when there are problems. She would like mutual respect and trust and would like to be “at the table” when businesses are working on solutions. She is working “gig” jobs with less stability, but **feels she is better off taking responsibility for herself since her employer wasn’t. She is excited to see what the future brings for everyone as “we re-evaluate what we are doing.”**

Employment Situation: Not working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Neither happy nor unhappy
Next Month’s Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 20s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: H.S. diploma
Home Situation: Domestic partnership and has two babies at home

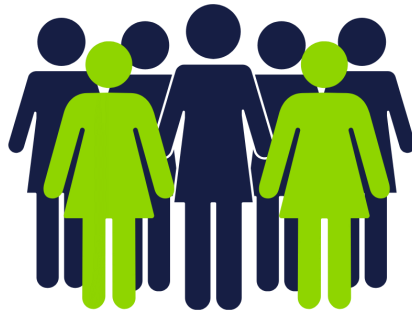
She likes doing focus groups because it “helps me and helps other moms” because “they listen to what we say about the struggle of being a single mom.” Currently pregnant with her second child, her first baby was born in February 2019. When the pandemic began, she was working at a daycare where her son was enrolled and she was studying to become a nurse. When daycares shut down, not only did she lose childcare for her son, she also lost her job. She moved with her son into her mother’s home to help out with the care of her grandmother. Her college courses moved entirely to virtual learning, which did not conform to her learning style. She says she soon realized, **“I can’t do this.”** Not only were there too many distractions at home (her baby, her mother, and her grandmother), but she is also a people person. “I’m the kind of person who is always in front of my teachers.” Her grades slipped and she was put on academic probation. Eventually, she was kicked out. Since then, she’s done gig work, like Instacart and DoorDash. She’s not employed but looking and

her preference is working from home, such as babysitting from home or doing “call center work.” The reason why she wants to work from home is that, in her experience, employers are unsympathetic to the difficulties of having young children. “They don’t give you enough PTO,” she says, “and then you’re getting fired” when something comes up with your kid. And when she’s asked by her boss to work outside regular hours, she says, “They don’t understand when I say I can’t make it in. I don’t have support [to watch my child]. I can either quit or pay childcare.” The biggest challenge, she says, “is being a Black woman forced by The System to only work minimum wage jobs in order to get public assistance.” She says, “You can’t make too much or you have to pay out-of-pocket,” which, she says, she can’t afford and she doesn’t have anyone (like parents) to provide support or contribute financially. **She anticipates going back to nursing school once her second baby is born, but she articulates an understanding that working for yourself is the best way to protect your interests.** She’d like employers to be more sympathetic towards workers with children, offering “onsite daycare or discounts.” She also suggests daycare hours that align with employers’ hours. Nevertheless, she is fearless in her optimism. “I have to stick it out, focus on making ends meet, and don’t stress.” Her son, she says, keeps her going and keeps her motivated.

Employment Situation: Not working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Somewhat unhappy
Next Month’s Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 20s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Some college
Home Situation: Single and has two young children at home

A single mom of two wants to share her point of view as a “homemaker” and in the workforce. It seems as if “no one understands.” She had already worked at a locally-owned logistics company for a year prior to the pandemic. When schools and daycares shut down, she had to be home with her kids (ages 7 and 3). She asked her work, “What can I do?” Their response, she says, was to ask, “Isn’t there anyone else to help you?” This, she felt, was insensitive. She was deemed ineligible for COVID FMLA. Since then, she is pursuing cosmetology through OhioMeansJobs. She’ll likely delay enrolling in school until after her younger child goes to school full-time so the hours align. She’s not comfortable with others watching her kids. She feels childcare benefits are not set up for people to succeed. “I’m working just to pay for childcare.” Inflation makes it even harder. She articulates a conundrum: she can’t get a job unless she has someone to watch her children. She can’t afford childcare unless she has a job. PTO is a big deal for her because, “with kids, it’s always an emergency.” She experienced unfair treatment as an employee with children. She was required to attend mandatory Saturday meetings that are outside what’s supposed to be a Monday through Friday job. “I have had to pay for childcare to attend.” On other occasions, her PTO was not approved for her kid’s appointment. “I had to work around them, doing weekend and evening appointments.” Her frustration is evident. Furthermore, she laments, “Why do we work if we’re getting PUA?” She’s pragmatic about the future, ultimately, leveraging her cosmetology degree to open her own salon and be her own boss. That will allow her to set her own hours so she can “work around my kids.” Based on what she experienced during the pandemic, she’s cynical about the relationship between workers and employers: **“Jobs will replace you. I can’t depend on a job.”**





SECTION 3

Research Question and
Methodology



Section 3

RESEARCH QUESTION & METHODOLOGY

The Research Question established by the Workforce Development Board of Central Ohio: *To listen to and learn from women who have left the workforce during/due to the pandemic to understand **the challenges they face**, their **desires about returning to the workforce**, the **types of support they need to obtain and maintain employment**, and the **information and assistance they want**.*

The possible universe for the Women and Work project started with the population of women in Franklin County who were employed in February 2020 and who, as a result of the pandemic, are not employed now (whether involuntarily or voluntarily). To solicit participation in the 18 focus groups, we narrowed the possible universe into four broad categories:

1. Unemployed (but actively looking)
2. Underemployed (by wages, hours, and/or qualifications)
3. Out of the workforce (but could come back)
4. Self-employed/started a business

While ensuring demographic diversity of participants, we kept the focus groups homogeneous (i.e., only unemployed, only self-employed, etc.). This attention to shared experiences allowed for common and focused themes to emerge during the facil-

itated discussion. Because the designated topic is so broad and there are so many factors influencing why women are not employed, each of the above broad categories were further segmented by the differentiator of having young children at home versus not:

- ◆ women with young school-age children
- ◆ women with older children or no children

To accommodate the greatest number of people, we conducted both in-person and Zoom focus groups. In-person sessions were targeted to have between 8 and 12 participants, while virtual

sessions had between 3 and 6. The goal was to conduct 16 focus groups with a total of 120 participants with options for virtual or face to face sessions. Best practices for conducting in person² and virtual focus³

Table 3.1: Scheduled versus Action Focus Group Attendance

Session No.	Location/Host	Employment Situation	Caregiving?	Scheduled	Actual
1	CRIS	Unemployed	Yes	3	3
2	New Directions	Unemployed	No	4	4
3	Goodwill Columbus	Under-employed	No	7	7
4	Virtual	Unemployed	Yes	4	4
5	Virtual	Self-employed	No	6	2
6	Virtual	Out of the Workforce	No	7	5
7	Virtual	Unemployed	Yes	5	4
8	Virtual	Self-selected out	Yes	6	2
9	Virtual	Underemployed	Yes	6	3
10	Virtual	Un- or Underemployed	Yes	6	3
11	Virtual	Unemployed	No	6	4
12	Virtual	Underemployed	Yes	7	5
13	Virtual	Underemployed	No	7	6
14	Virtual	Self-employed	No	7	1
15	Advanced Technology Education	Unemployed	Yes	7	4
16	Dress for Success @ Northside Library	Self-selected out	Yes	6	5
17	Virtual	All situations	All	9	4
			Total	103	66

groups were followed.

Table 3.1 shows the planned versus actual number of focus groups. We intended an even split between in-person and virtual. In the end, the Zoom sessions were more popular. It is not necessarily true that people were less likely to come to the Zoom sessions as some of the in-person sections were rescheduled and converted to Zoom because of low registration. Those sessions aren't reflected in the chart below. The reason for the low attendance for the session No. 14 was due to confusion on video links (Google vs. Zoom).

Outreach. Purposive sampling was utilized, by targeting individuals who were representative of the population likely to participate in future programming planned by WDBCO. Existing programs and agencies were leveraged to host and promote the sessions. Champions within the organizations were identified to enhance outreach efforts. Recruitment flyers were sent to a wide and diverse distribution list, promoted on LinkedIn and Facebook. Promotional videos were produced shared via LinkedIn.

A virtual information session was conducted to broadly share the opportunity for non-profit organizations who serve women to participate as hosts and promoters. Organizations chose dates and times they could host in person sessions.

Outreach to potential focus group participants was promoted through partner organizations, and on LinkedIn and Facebook. Benefits to participating, including a \$50 gift certificate were promoted. WDBCO provided half of this money and United Way of Central Ohio provided the other half. The amount was determined to be sufficient to reimburse participants for the cost of their time, but not so great to make them feel uncomfortable that they would feel compelled to participate if they were not comfortable doing so.

Screening and Group Assignment. Interested individuals called a telephone number to be prescreened for eligibility and assigned to the group they fit

most closely, to increase their comfort level and the likelihood of deeper conversations. They were offered the option to participate in an in-person or Zoom session.

All applicants were prescreened for inclusion/exclusion against the established criteria for participation (i.e., only unemployed, self-employed, etc.). A diverse group of participants was successfully recruited (i.e., age, race/ethnicity, income levels, marital status, LGBTQ+, citizenship status, etc.). Ultimately 103 women met the criteria for participation and were assigned to a group. Sixty-six women participated (a 36% no-show rate). About 70% of participants were women of color.

Training. The Project Manager and Cultural Competency Advisor created and conducted an information session with Focus Group Facilitators to review best practices of focus groups and the processes that would be followed.

Conducting Focus Groups. Each focus group lasted about 90 minutes. The Observer greeted participants, ensured comfort of participants, set up a food table for catering (from Freedom A La Cart). The Observer ensured consent forms and demographic surveys were completed and distributed the \$50 gift card at the conclusion of the session.

A Facilitator read guidelines for participation and led the discussion using a prescribed format and predetermined questions. The Observer took notes,

recorded the session for transcription, and made suggestions for additional probing questions, as necessary.

Questions were structured and went from general to specific to allow a free flowing conversation with the richest information.

QUESTIONS—Part 1. Feelings About Their Present Situation

(How do they feel about working? Especially in comparison to the way they were pre-pandemic?)

- ◆ Thinking back to the beginning of the pandemic, when did you know things had changed regarding your job situation?
- ◆ What is going well? How is it meeting your needs?
- ◆ There are a lot of open jobs right now. Employers are having a hard time filling them. What prevents you from taking one?

QUESTIONS—Part 2. Desire for Change - Future Goals

(What would enable them/get them interested in returning to the workforce again?)

- ◆ Can you tell us about the type of job situation would you like?

QUESTIONS—Part 3. Desire for Support

(What do they need to accomplish what they want? How can we help people think about “support” and what that could be?)

- ◆ What keeps you from getting where you want to go?
- ◆ What information would be helpful to you? What access

Table 3.2: Demographics of Focus Group Participants (N = 66)

Age	Relationship status	Education	Race/ethnicity
21-29 (15)	Married (14)	Graduate degree (8)	White (16)
30-39 (15)	Divorced (15)	Bachelor degree (19)	Black/African American (46)
40-49 (21)	Single, never married (26)	Associate degree (7)	American Indian/Alaskan Native (0)
50-59 (9)	Single, but significant other (3)	Some college (22)	Hispanic/Latinx (1)
60 or older (5)	Domestic partner/ civil union (2)	H.S. or equivalent (9)	Asian/Pacific Islander (1)
No answer (1)	Separated (4)	Less than H.S. diploma (1)	Multiple race/ethnicity (1)
	Widowed (1)		
	No answer (1)		

do you need to make happen?

- ◆ What could your employer do that would help make it easier for you to stay with them?

QUESTIONS—Part 4. Wrapping Up and Clarifying (What do they wish for?)

- ◆ If nothing changes for you this year related to your work, what will happen?
- ◆ If you woke up tomorrow and something had changed for the better, what would your life look like?

Many of the focus groups concluded with expressions of gratitude and relief from participants for having the opportunity to share their stories. For example, one participant stated, "Thank you for your time and thank you for the space to allow us to express our opinions and whatever we are going through. Sometimes I feel like women, particularly Black women, don't have that space or that voice. I'm grateful for it."

Documentation. Each session was recorded and later transcribed for accuracy of documentation.

The Cultural Competency Advisor reviewed all the transcripts to check for bias. Observers completed a written "Snapshot" within a few days of each session to describe each individual's situation. This is when common themes begin to emerge.

Analysis. Immediately after the session, the Facilitator and Observer held a private debriefing session to confirm observations and begin analysis. Recordings were transcribed and then transcripts were coded for common themes relative to challenges and needs. These were discussed by the Research Team through multiple iterations. The results are shared throughout this report.

Demographics. While the women who participated in our focus groups didn't exactly reflect the diversity of our community, we had a decent mix of professional women and those who did hourly work. Tables 3.2 above and 3.3 on the following page provide details on the demographic composition of the focus groups. (Tables 3.4 and 3.5 provide demographics for the individuals who responded to the survey.)

Far more women (43)

had at least one child under 18 living in the home than not (22). Of the women with children, 12 were married or living with their significant other and another 12 were divorced or separated. Eighteen described themselves as having never been married. All but three of the women described themselves as being primarily responsible for childcare.

Twenty-four focus group participants are working. Of those not working, 10 say it's due to "family commitments" and 16 attribute it to "daycare issues." When we asked, "How happy are you with your current job situation?"

- ◆ Very happy = 11 (of these, two opted out, one started a business, the rest are working)
- ◆ Somewhat happy = 12 (of these, seven are working)
- ◆ Neither happy nor unhappy with current job situation = 16
- ◆ Somewhat unhappy = 10 (of these, six are not working while two are working full-time; the remaining are "inconsistent hours" and "not enough hours")

Table 3.3: Additional Focus Group Demographics (N = 66)

Immigrant/ Refugee?	Disability?	LGBTQ+?	Children <18 in household?	Responsible for childcare?	Does childcare impact ability to work?	
Yes (9)	Yes (9)	Yes (4)	Yes (43)	Yes (42)	None at all (5)	A lot (9)
No (56)	No (56)	No (59)	No (22)	No (3)	A little (8)	Great deal (14)
Unsure (1)	Unsure (1)	Unsure (3)		No children (20)	Moderate (11)	No children (18)

◆ Very unhappy = 17 (of these, 15 are not working)

Cultural and Linguistic Considerations.

A Cultural Competency Advisor was contracted for the project to provide input on all training, methodology, communication, analysis, and report writing. Promotional flyers were translated into Arabic, Nepali and Somali languages for promotion. Pre-screening questions asked about the need for accommodations. An interpreter was utilized for Somali speakers at two of the session. Focus group sessions were offered virtually and face to face to accommodate diverse needs.

Comparative Survey. A SurveyMonkey was released the

last week of March to increase the sample size of data collected. The questionnaire, which was open for a week, was promoted through LinkedIn. Workforce partners were also asked to forward the survey to their constituents. Survey respondents were able to enter a drawing for a \$100 Amazon gift card. Over 250 participants initially submitted surveys. However, over 100 respondents were rejected because they were duplicate submittals, they did not correspond to other required criteria, or the answers were gibberish. In total, 131 responses remain. This is a little over double the focus group sample size.

The survey questions captured the following:

- ◆ Demographic data
- ◆ Pre-pandemic and current job, number of hours, and position
- ◆ Reasons employment ended
- ◆ Challenges with obtaining employment
- ◆ Support needed
- ◆ What employers need to change

Tables 3.4 and 3.5 below show demographics of survey responders. Over half were white, compared to about 33% of the focus group participants. Nonetheless, the challenges and needs expressed by the survey responders were similar (but not the same) as focus group participants.

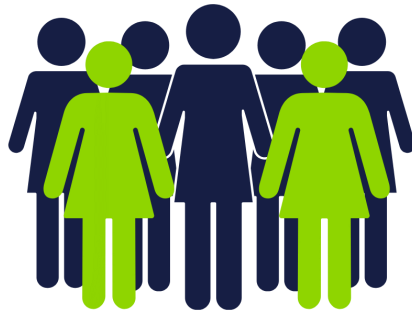


Table 3.4: Demographics of Survey Responders (N = 131)

Age	Relationship status	Education	Race/ethnicity
18-20 (3.10%)	Married (89)	Graduate degree (13)	White (90)
21-29 (34.11%)	Divorced (11)	Bachelor degree (50)	Black/African American (16)
30-39 (50.39%)	Single, never married (8)	Associate degree (32)	American Indian/Alaskan Native (14)
40-49 (8.53%)	Single, but significant other (8)	Some college (25)	Hispanic/Latinx (5)
50-59 (2.33%)	Domestic partner/ civil union (7)	H.S. or equivalent (10)	Asian/Pacific Islander (5)
60 or older (1.55%)	Separated (6)	Less than H.S. diploma (1)	Multiple race/ethnicity (1)
	Widowed (2)		

Table 3.5: Additional Survey Respondent Demographics (N = 131)

Immigrant/ Refugee?	Disability?	LGBTQ+?	Children <18 in household?	Responsible for childcare?	Does childcare impact ability to work?	
Yes (32)	Yes (28)	Yes (44)	Yes (110)	Yes (86)	None at all (13)	A lot (18)
No (95)	No (101)	No (79)	No (20)	No (24)	A little (35)	Great deal (26)
Unsure (2)	Unsure (2)	Unsure (8)		No children (21)	Moderate (18)	No children (21)



SECTION 4

Insights From Labor Force Data



Section 4

INSIGHTS FROM LABOR FORCE DATA

There is a popular belief that many women who were working prior to the pandemic have left the labor force. Only the correct incentives are necessary to lure them back. As this analysis will show, that belief is largely false. While there is some growth potential, this potential is limited.

Specific local information on women's labor force participation is limited, with only annual data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey and no Franklin County or Columbus MSA information available for the pandemic period. While Franklin County participation trends will be considered, most of the discussion of women's status in the labor force must focus on national data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Current Population Survey (CPS) — the survey that generates the monthly labor force and unemployment rates. This source offers detailed data on the labor force, employment, and unemployment by gender, age, race, and ethnicity.⁴

BLS defines employment and labor force status for the noninstitutional civilian population 16 years and older. Thus, it excludes employment in the Armed Forces and the population in institutions: prisons, jails, other detention facilities, and residential care facilities such as nursing homes. (Note that college dormitories, rooming houses, and similar quarters are not considered institutions, so these residents are included in the noninstitutional population.)

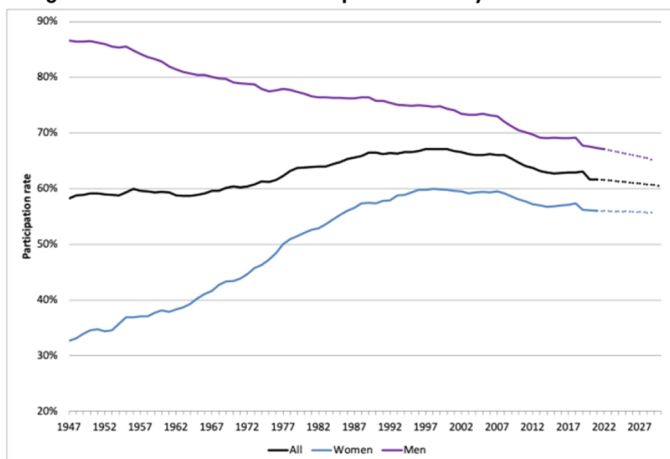
The participation rate is the percentage of the noninstitutional population that is in the labor

force. The labor force is defined as the sum of employment and unemployment. Employment includes those who worked, even for one hour, during the week containing the 12th of the month in question (the reference week). To be counted as unemployed, one must not be employed and must have made at least one specific, active effort to obtain a job during the four weeks ending with the reference week.

Changes in women's labor force participation over time have had a major impact on overall participation rates. This is a key reason for working to increase the participation rate now. Figure 4.1 charts total participation rates in total since 1947 and by gender since 1948. Also included are projected participation rates from BLS through 2030 (Dubina, Ice, Kim & Rieley, 2021).⁵ As illustrated in Figure 4.1, male participation rates have declined throughout the period. This has mostly resulted from the increase in lifespans that have allowed more men to retire.

Only about a third of adult women worked in 1948, but this rate increased steadily before topping out at 60% in 2000. The increase in this rate more than offset the ongoing decline in the male rate, leading to an increase in the total participation rate from 58% in 1947 to 67% by 2000. This represented an increase in the labor force from 59.3 million to 142.6 million. Since 2000, though, the increasing number of women's retirements have caused the female participation rate to decline as well. These trends are expected to continue through this decade. Only increases in the working age population have allowed continuing increases in the labor force.

Figure 4.1: U.S. Labor Force Participation Rates by Gender: 1947-2030

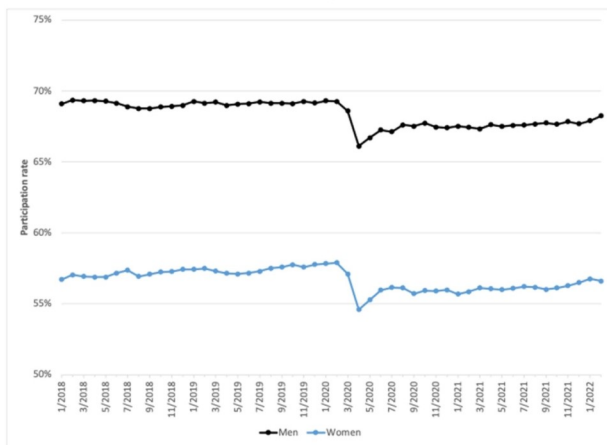


Source: United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022); Dubina et al. (2021).

Declines paused in the 2010s as increasing employment and longer lifespans kept people in the labor force. The COVID-19 pandemic caused sharp break in the trend in 2020. This break will be explored in greater detail below. Figure 4.1 implies that this break, as is true of so many other changes brought about by the pandemic, merely accelerated a trend that was already present.

Figure 4.2 shows monthly U.S. participation rates for men and women since January 2018. Consistent with employment trends, labor force participation declined sharply in March and April 2020 but then began to recover. The noteworthy insight from Figure 4.2 is that although the female participation rate is consistently lower than the male rate and its 2020 decline is proportionally greater, its degree of recovery is actually greater than the male rate. Specifically, the male rate fell from 69.3% in February 2020 to 66.1% in

Figure 4.2: Figure 2: U.S. Male and Female Participation Rates January 2018-February 2022
Seasonally adjusted



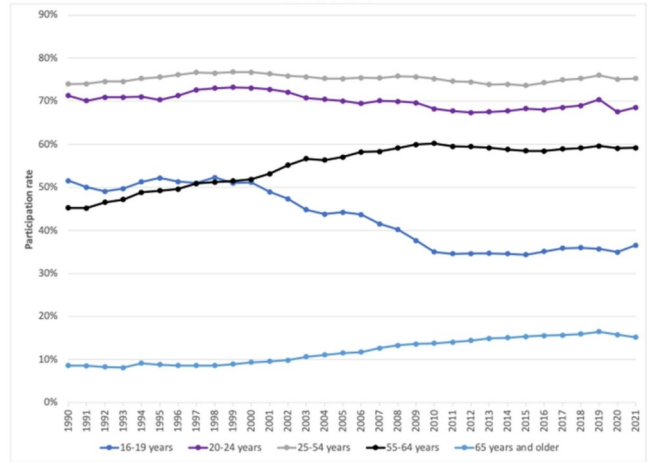
Source: United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022).

April, a 4.6% decline. The female rate fell from 57.9% to 54.6%, a 5.7% decline. Male participation in February 2022 stood at 68.3%, up 3.3% from April 2020, while female participation was up 3.7%, at 56.6%. Neither participation rate has fully recovered.

Figure 4.3 reveals long-run trends in women's labor force participation by age. The two noteworthy features of these trends are in the younger and older groups. The 16-year through 19-year participation rate declined 15 percentage points between 2000 and

2010 and the 20-year through 24-year rate declined somewhat as well. This was likely an effect of women in these age groups focusing on their secondary and postsecondary education. At the other end of the

Figure 4.3: U.S. Female Participation Rates by Age 1990-2021

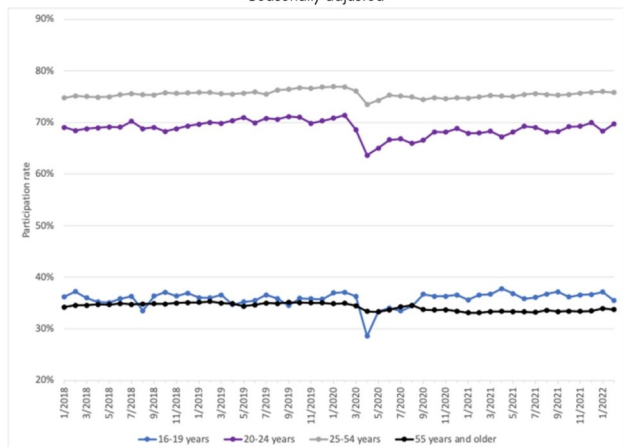


Source: United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022).

age distribution, participation of the two oldest age groups increased markedly. The 65 years and older group's participation remains comparatively low but is now nearly double its level 30 years ago. Some of these women are choosing to remain in the workforce, while others must for financial reasons.

Figure 4.4 charts monthly women's participation rates for these same age groups by month. (The 55-64 and the 65 and older groups are combined because seasonally adjusted rates for the two individual groups are not reported.) The two younger age groups suffered large losses from the workforce in the

Figure 4.4: U.S. Female Participation Rates by Age January 2018-February 2022
Seasonally adjusted

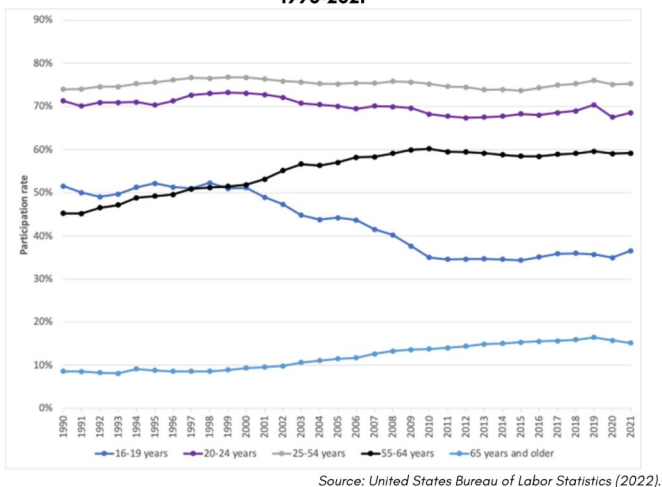


Source: United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022).

initial months of the pandemic: the labor force between 16 and 19 years fell 23% between February and April 2020, while the labor force between 20 and 24 years fell 11%. The labor force between 25 and 54 years declined a comparatively mild 6.2%. However, the most surprising finding in Figure 4.4 is the scant 4.2% decline among older women during those two months. This is particularly unexpected because of the greater vulnerability of older individuals to the initial strains of the virus. However, the labor force participation of the 55-plus age group has shown a slow drift downward while that of younger age groups largely recovered. As a result, the number of women in the labor force in both the 16-19 and 20-24 age groups was 2.2% less in February 2022 than in February 2020. The labor force between 25 and 54 years was 1% less than in February 2020, but the number of women 55 years and older in the labor force was down 2.5%.

Differences exist in women's labor force participation by race and ethnicity, and can provide additional insight into the causes of the trends illustrated in Figure 4.1. The annual average rates beginning in 1990

Figure 4.5: U.S. Participation Rates by Race and Ethnicity 1990-2021



are shown in Figure 4.5, which track participation by White women, Black women, Asian women (available beginning in 2000), and Hispanic women, who can be of any race.

Members of minority populations comprise an

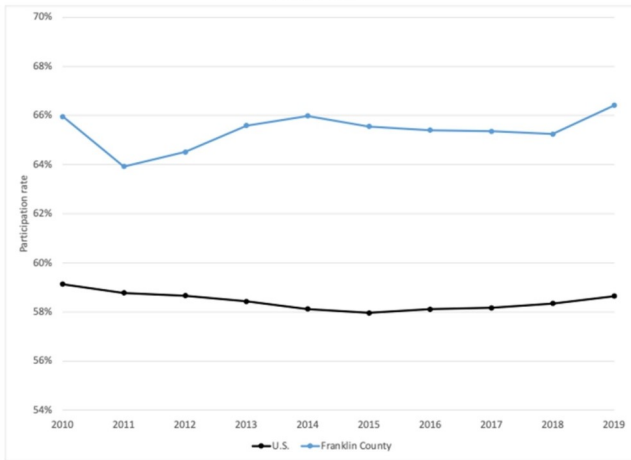
increasing share of the workforce. Nonwhite women accounted for 24.6% of the U.S. civilian female labor force in 2021, up from 15.9% in 1990. The share of Black/African American women increased from 12.2% in 1990 to 14.1% in 2021. The large increase in the Hispanic population has been a key engine of growth in the workforce and in the overall population. Hispanic women comprised 16.6% of the female labor force in 2021, compared to only 7.3% of the female labor force in 1990. Asian women account for 6.6% of the female labor force.

As stated earlier, local labor force statistics are far more limited than these national estimates. However, the Census Bureau's American Community Survey includes labor force estimates.⁶ These show that African American women accounted for 23% of the total Franklin County resident labor force in 2019, while Asian women were 5% and Hispanic women were 4%. These are inconsistent with the U.S. estimates because of the earlier year of the most recently available estimates and because these totals were derived from a different source. However, they are consistent with the fact that African Americans comprise a far greater-than-average share of the Franklin County population, the Asian population is close to the national average, and the Hispanic population is less than average – but growing rapidly.

White women's labor force participation rose through the 1990s, was stable in the 2000s, and fell in the 2010s. In contrast, African American female participation increased more than five percentage points between 1990 and 1999, translating to a 16% increase in that component of the labor force. Participation then fell back nearly to its 1990 level. Hispanic participation increased during the 1990s to an extent similar to African American participation. But unlike African American women, Hispanic women maintained their participation through 2021. Given the massive increase in the Hispanic population over the past 20 years, the stability of Hispanic women's participation has been a

Figure 4.6 graphs trends of total Franklin County and U.S. women's participation rates between 2010 and 2019. These trends are derived from a different

Figure 4.6: Franklin County and U.S. Female Participation Rates 2010-2019

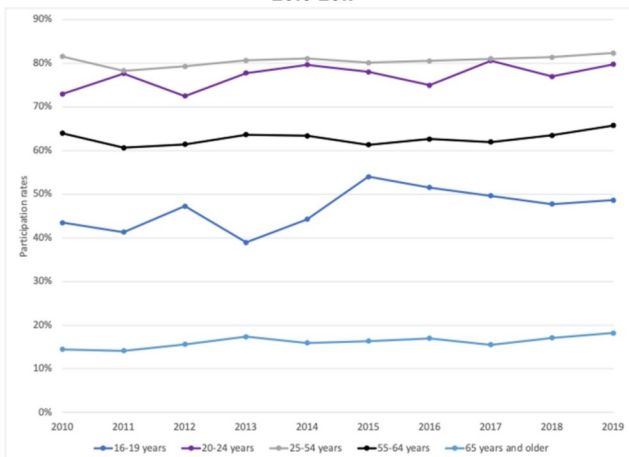


Source: United States Census Bureau (2011-2020), Table B23001.

source: the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). The U.S. rates are not comparable to those from the BLS rates analyzed above, both because they come from a different survey and because they are based on total population 16 years and older rather than noninstitutional population. Franklin County's female participation rate is consistently higher than the national average; the difference is between five and eight percentage points.

Figure 4.7 breaks down Franklin County female participation rates by age group. These exhibit the same general pattern as the national averages in Figure 4.3, except as with the total rates, the rates in

Figure 4.7: Franklin County Female Participation Rates by Age 2010-2019



Source: United States Census Bureau (2011-2020), Table B23001.

each age group are higher than the corresponding national averages derived from the ACS data. The 10-year average percentage point difference between the Franklin County rate and the U.S. rate for each age group is shown in Table 4.1. Percentage point differences are smaller for older age groups because the participation rate is smaller. However, the largest difference is for the 16-19 year age group. The 10-year average for Franklin County women in this age group is 47%, compared to a 39% national average.

Table 4.1: Average Percentage Point Difference between Female Franklin County and U.S. Participation Rates by Age, 2010-2019

16-19 years	20-24 years	25-54 years	55-64 years	65 years+	Average
7.9 points	4.6 points	4.0 points	2.9 points	2.4 points	7.0 points

Source: United States Census Bureau (2011-2020), Table B23001.



PARTICIPANT PROFILE—Group No. 2
Self-Selected Out of Workforce

"I simply couldn't do it all. So I quit."

Many have speculated that women are living on stimulus checks and unemployment, preferring not to work. We define "self-selected out of the workforce" to mean women who are at least temporarily not working, not self-employed, nor actively seeking employment. Among the focus group participants, only one is happy not working. The most common reasons for self-selecting out of the workforce, in descending order of frequency:

1. Childcare (16 women)
2. Self-Employed or seeking self employment (15 women)
3. Family responsibilities (10 women)
4. Transportation (7 women)
5. Discouraged over job prospects (6 women)
6. They are in school or training (4 women)

for buying a home. By the time the first car payment was due, the pandemic was in full force and she no longer had travel reimbursements. She struggled with adapting everything to virtual. It was a lot to juggle, all while being less personal. She was used to getting hugs on the job. She struggled with being alone in her small apartment that she had thought would be only temporary. George Floyd was murdered and she struggled thinking about her sons. Her organization asked her to speak to the public about defunding the police. She said her time was already stretched and she didn't know anything about this topic. She felt they should hire someone else to do this. Her boss began bullying a coworker, and she stood up for the coworker. She worked 16 hour days. The victims who would be able to get services were challenged because their abusers were in the home with them during the shutdown. It was emotionally difficult to witness. She was "losing her mind". Ultimately, she let them fire her so she could qualify for unemployment. She felt if she quit she would not qualify. **She needed several months just to heal from the stress of the job situation.**

Employment Situation: Not working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Very unhappy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Not Sure
Age: 50s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Bachelor's degree
Home Situation: Divorced and has no children at home

Employment Situation: Not working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Somewhat happy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Not Sure
Age: 40s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Graduate degree
Home Situation: Single and has two young children at home

She had a "dream job" working for a local government agency prior to the pandemic. She built the program from the ground up, worked with people in person, and traveled around the state. With expected money she got for traveling reimbursement, she purchased a car. She also moved out of her home into a small apartment, intending to stay there a short while to save

This mother of two children moved in with her aging mother in 2019 to take care of her. She was working in a warehouse when the pandemic hit. Once schools closed – "and spring break turned into three months" – she let her boss know she wouldn't be coming back. She's still searching today. Her doctor advises her not to be on her feet all day, which eliminates restaurant or warehouse work. So she's pursuing jobs where she can work from home. She's done

some interviews but was suspicious. **“The jobs seemed like scams.”** Childcare is also an issue. Her older child is not covered by the public assistance she receives for the younger one. What is she supposed to do, she asks sarcastically, “Leave my 9-year-old at home?” She feels employers need to understand the challenges of children/childcare and that a parent might be a sole provider without a support system offered by a traditional 2-person relationship. Once her mother moves into assisted living, which is imminent, she and her children will have nowhere to go. She will likely resort to living in a shelter with her two children. She would like a place to live, a job that allows her to work around her kids’ schedules, and her own transportation (not using the bus or walking).

Employment Situation: Not working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Neither happy nor unhappy
Next Month’s Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 50s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Associates degree
Home Situation: Married and has two teenagers at home

Married with three children (college, middle school, and elementary school), she is a therapist in the mental health and addiction field. Her elderly mother – whose dementia requires significant care – moved in with her. One of her sons has a bone disease and her husband has diabetes. She was very concerned about the spread of COVID and was frustrated and stressed when her employer insisted she come back to the office – even though she was seeing clients virtually. It all became too much for her to handle. **She thought for sure she was going to have a stroke or a heart attack. “So I took myself out of the workforce,”** she says. She’s in school now pursuing an associates degree in social work and is on track to graduate this summer. Finishing school is her top priority. She and another individual have plans to start their own agency. Her mother is declining and will soon move into long-term care so the stress and demands of this will be eliminated. She is bitter towards her former employer. She felt like her

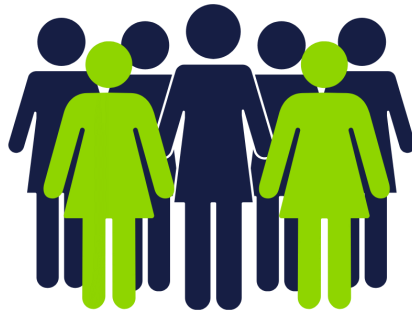
job was in jeopardy if she took time off because her kids were sick. “Their attitude was like, ‘Here we go again.’” They were unsympathetic to her personal needs. They didn’t seem to care that she was experiencing stress because of the extra demands on her time. Instead, they gave her a hard time. “Can you work with me?” she remembers asking. She has a good work ethic, but companies are too focused on productivity and billing. She seeks work-life balance. She also expects employers to respect her by paying her what she is worth. She reasons, **“If they make you feel like you matter at work, employees would give their best.”** **She’s eager to work, just not at the expense of her family.** She could benefit from access to loans to start her business and scholarships to continue her education. She wants to keep advancing and “knows no other way than to keep moving forward.” She wants to be an example for her sons. Besides, she says, she is too old to stagnate.

Employment Situation: Not working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Very unhappy
Next Month’s Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 40s
Race/Ethnicity: White
Education: Graduate degree
Home Situation: Married and has two teenagers at home

This married mother of two is unemployed because she needs to homeschool one of her two sons. The other has special needs and she is frustrated because she feels the teacher has “punted” responsibility for managing her son back on her. “Disruptions at school become disruptions for parents.” **Once both her kids are back in school, she’ll be able to start looking for work. She’s eager for that day!** She last worked as a 1099 employee in administration at a non-profit, which ceased operations altogether once the pandemic hit. She used to work for causes and people she cared about. “I’m not doing that anymore.” She is discouraged about wage inequality and the unfair treatment that

caregivers with children experience at work. They are “penalized for needing more flexibility.” She feels she was not considered for advancement opportunities because her employers “didn’t care that she couldn’t work outside the agreed-upon work hours.” She sees her male counterparts, who don’t have childcare responsibilities, are promoted, paid better, and receive preferential treatment. She wishes she was valued as a human being who has a family. She wishes she didn’t have to spend her vacation time caring for her sick children. She’d like a flexible work arrangement, including an option for working from home, that aligns with the 6-hour school day. It’s important to her to take her kids to school.





SECTION 5

Challenges They Faced



Section 5

CHALLENGES THEY FACED

As would be expected, considering this unique moment in history that we're in, many of the challenges the women who participated said they faced were COVID-specific. **Grouped together, COVID-specific challenges were mentioned by 22 participants.** Participants talked about feeling unsettled about what the outcome of the pandemic would be as well as how so much has changed. Staying safe and protected from the virus was a big deal for many people. They also talked about their perceptions about the extent to which their employer abided by COVID safety protocols. Some thought it was too much, while others thought it was too little. The number of hours people were expected to work – either to cover for smaller staff or because they felt like they were always at work/working – was mentioned as a challenge. Closely related was a resentment about not getting paid for all the extra work. Finally, vaccine requirements make finding work a challenge for several of the participants.

Emotional Well-Being/Mental Health. Many of the focus group participants used the words “mental health” to describe challenges they faced. While mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being, only a few people mentioned specific illnesses or disorders, like anxiety or depression. Mostly, the women we talked to articulated a desire for general emotional well-being and help eliminating things that cause stress (such as navigating work and childcare). They talked about wanting to feel supported at home and at work. They talked about being treated with respect and dignity and how hard it is to endure even the simplest situation when those things are absent. Some of the focus group participants expressed resilience and determination. They were able to see a positive future.

CHALLENGES THEY FACED

- 22 - COVID-specific
- 20 - Emotional well-being and mental health
- 17 - Empathetic management and safe workplace conditions
- 15 - Childcare
- 12 - Personal illness/injury
- 12 - General financial stress or ruin
- 10 - Discrimination (race, gender, age, parenting status)
- 9 - Single parenting
- 8 - Housing
- 7 - School and daycares closed
- 7 - Pregnancy/Had a baby

Summary Box 5.1: Challenges They Faced

DIFFERENT WAYS PEOPLE DESCRIBE THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

Among the positive expressions of emotional well-being:

- Harmony, peace, balance
- “I leave it to God”
- Resilience
- Being in community
- Love

Among the negative expressions of emotional well-being:

- Fear
- Stress
- Overwhelmed
- Angry
- Loss
- Stagnation
- Falling behind

Third on the list of most often cited challenges is **Fair & Empathetic Management and Workplace Conditions**. We grouped in this category any mention of bosses, policies and rules, training, tools. For the most part, anything that happened at work was included in this category, except COVID-specific challenges and discrimination, which were independently and specifically mentioned enough times to warrant their own categories.

TYPES OF CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED WITH EMPLOYERS (THE SYSTEM)

- Understanding the needs employees have as human beings; acknowledging their humanity; Value and respect the person doing the work and the work itself
- Wage equity and transparency; paying fair wages for the work
- Treating employees fairly and not taking advantage of them
- Providing training, resources, and support required to actually do the work
- Policies that support and accommodate parents with children ... that you can't

plan for when your child gets sick; when there is an emergency with your child, you have to go; if all else fails, you're not going to leave your child alone

- Policies that support and accommodate single parents with children ... *oftentimes there is no one else*
- Policies that support and accommodate new mothers
- Policies that prevent punishing parents with children ("volunteering" them for work outside agreed-upon work hours, denying PTO requests, forcing them to take vacation, etc.)

TYPES OF CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED WITH BOSSES

- Eliminate toxic work environments, micro-aggressions, overt discrimination, racism, sexual harassment, ageism
- Empathy for parents; understanding the particular stresses faced by single parents and acknowledging that not every family has two parents
- Ensure frontline supervisors are knowledgeable about the equitable implementation of policies so as not to punish parents with children or overlook them for promotions, etc.
- Eliminate micromanaging; improve trust and communication
- Improve understanding of employees' lives outside of

work

Childcare. Taken together, all the issues around being a parent (Childcare, Single Parenting, Schools/Daycares Closed, and Pregnancy/Had a Child) are the most often cited challenges, at 38. However, we separated these into four separate categories. Childcare is wholly different from Single Parenting, though it is true that being a single parent can make childcare exponentially more challenging. Childcare, which was mentioned by 15 participants as a challenge, refers to the ability of an employee to obtain consistent care for their children while they are at work. Childcare, in this case, means both daycare for younger children and school for older children. Important factors related to childcare are cost, availability, consistent operations, and quality. It can also include hours of operation so parents are able to drop off and pick up their children and still accommodate work responsibilities. **Single Parenting** refers to the lack of a support system or being able to share the responsibility/burden of childcare with a partner. Often for single parents, *there is no one else*. Schools are the de facto childcare system for school-aged children. **It was a hardship for parents when schools and daycares closed at the start of the pandemic.** The effects of this are lingering. Some students/schools are not back in session in-person fulltime. Daycares also randomly close.

randomly close and have inconsistent operations. Because they are not fully staffed, it is common for entire rooms to close for a day or more, leaving parents to scramble for alternatives.

Personal illness/injury.

Several people experienced injuries that interrupted their employment. They did not feel their employers were supportive of their recovery and they were challenged to continue working in the same role. There were 12 additional people who shared that non-COVID related health issues were a challenge. They had short or long term illnesses that made it difficult to keep working. Two disclosed they have a disability. None said that an illness or injury prevents them from wanting to return to work.

General financial stress/

financial ruin. Twenty-six of the women expressed financial challenges. Twelve of those were described as general financial hardship or “ruin.” It was expressed as if they were unable to keep their heads above water.

TYPES OF FINANCIAL HARDSHIPS EXPERIENCED

- General financial ruin.
- Eviction or threat of.
- Can't find affordable housing.
- The “Benefits Cliff” (i.e., earning too much risks losing supportive benefits).
- Can't afford childcare.
- Can't afford to continue education or training program.
- Can't afford to quit school because student loan repayment begins.
- Unable to do all that is

required at home and still work.

- Unable to do all that is expected at work and be successful.

Single parenting.

See the explanation in Childcare above.

A number of participants mentioned **Housing** as a challenge, specifically their ability to pay their rent and the fear of being evicted. This could also be included in the General Financial Stress/Financial Ruin category above. But because of the number of people who specifically mentioned housing as a challenge and the fact that affordable housing is already known to be a structural challenge in our community, we call it out separately here.

Schools/Daycares Closed

and **Pregnancy/Had a Baby.** See Childcare above.



DATA OBTAINED FROM FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

The tables on the next page provide additional data from the 66 focus group participants about their experience and their current situation. Table 5.1, shows that 29 women say they are not working but actively looking while another 25 are working but are not getting enough wages or hours. When considering the change in hours from their pre-pandemic jobs to current, 22 have gone from working fulltime to not working, while 13 have experienced no change (fulltime to fulltime). Nine have gone from fulltime to part-time and 8 have gone from fulltime to inconsistent hours. Eleven are “very happy” with their current job situation, while 17 are “very unhappy.”

Table 5.2 shows the change in the financial situation of focus group participants. While 43 know how they'll pay next month's rent or mortgage, 23 are at least unsure how they'll do it.

Table 5.3 details the perspectives of focus group participants of their current job situation, and they could select “all that apply” when answering. While 38 are either working or actively looking, 32 are discouraged over job prospects, 26 have childcare responsibilities and 25 have family responsibilities that prevent them from searching.

Table 5.1: Change in Job Situation of Focus Group Participants (N = 66)

Current job situation?	Change in hours	Happy with current job situation?
Unemployed - Not working but actively looking (29)	Fulltime to Fulltime (13)	Very happy (11)
Underemployed - Working, but not enough hours or wages (25)	Fulltime to Part-time (9)	Somewhat happy (12)
Out of the workforce - Not working for foreseeable future (3)	Fulltime to Inconsistent hours (8)	Neither happy nor unhappy (16)
Self-employed/Started a business (9)	Fulltime to Not working (22)	Somewhat unhappy (10)
	Part-time to Fulltime (3)	Very unhappy (17)
	Part-time to Part-time (4)	
	Part-time to Not working (4)	
	Inconsistent hours to Part-time (1)	
	Inconsistent hours to Not working (2)	

Table 5.2: Change in Financial Situation of Focus Group Participants (N = 66)

Do others contribute to household income?	Know how you'll pay next month's rent?
Yes (28)	Yes (43)
No (38)	No (11)
	Not sure (12)

Table 5.3: Experience with Current Job Situation Among Focus Group Participants (N = 66)

If not working and not job searching, why?	If occupation/industry changed, why? Or N/A.
Discouraged over job prospects (32)	Pandemic (9)
Family responsibilities (other than childcare) (25)	Career growth (8)
Childcare (26)	Family needs (5)
In school or training (21)	Salary increase (4)
Personal health issues (18)	Injury (3)
Transportation (11)	Company economic problems (3)
Disability (10)	Company environment change (3)
Happy not working (8)	Start a business (2)
N/A - looking/working (38)	Distance to work (1)
	Increased flexibility (1)
	Working from home (1)
	Disinterest in former occupation (1)
	Discrimination and disrespect (1)
	Inability to meet physical demands (1)

COMPARATIVE DATA OBTAINED THROUGH A GENERAL SURVEY

In addition to conducting focus groups, we issued a survey to ask many of the same questions. This way, we could supplement the anecdotal stories we collected during the focus groups by capturing quantitative data from individuals who may not be able or inclined to participate in a focus group. Tables 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6 show the responses to the survey which can be compared to the responses provided by focus group participants. The number of survey responses is 131.

Table 5.4 shows, if they are not working, why survey responders are not working. Twenty-four said they are working, while 16 said childcare and 10 say family responsibilities prevent them from working. Most survey responders say they changed jobs or industries because of the pandemic.

Table 5.5 details the current job situation of

survey respondents. Sixty-six are working, but not enough hours or wages while 32 are not working, but actively looking. When considering the change in their hours from pre-pandemic to today, 50 say they've stayed the same (fulltime to fulltime) while 21 have gone from fulltime to part-time, 13 have gone from fulltime to inconsistent hours, and another 13 have gone from fulltime to not working.

Table 5.6 indicates the type of support survey responders wish they had (at work or at home) and what has been most stressful. As would be expected, at the beginning of the pandemic, the economy was a major stressor for 24 survey responders while 20 said inadequate salary and financial pressure. By contract, childcare and other responsibilities and inadequate salary, financial pressure are the most frequently cited stressor today (22 and 19, respectively).

Table 5.4: Survey Responders Explain What Has Changed For Them Regarding Work (N = 131)

If not working and not job searching, why?	If occupation/industry changed, why? Or N/A.
Childcare (16)	Pandemic (18)
Family responsibilities (10)	Salary increase (8)
Transportation (7)	Company economic problems (7)
Discouraged over job prospects (6)	Distance to work (3)
Self-employed (6)	Company environment change (2)
Disability (4)	Disinterest in former occupation (2)
In school or training (4)	Increased flexibility (2)
Happy not working (1)	Career growth (1)
Ill health (0)	Discrimination and disrespect (1)
Not applicable - I'm working (24)	Family needs (1)
	Inability to meet physical demands (1)
	Working from home (1)

Table 5.5: Survey Responders Explain Current Job Situation and How Happy They Are With It (N = 131)

Current job situation?	Change in hours from --> to	Happy with current job situation?
Unemployed - Not working but actively looking (32)	Fulltime to Fulltime (50)	Very happy (27)
Underemployed - Working, but not enough hours or wages (66)	Fulltime to Part-time (21)	Somewhat happy (39)
Out of the workforce - Not working for foreseeable future (14)	Fulltime to Inconsistent hours (13)	Neither happy nor unhappy (27)
Self-employed/Started a business (19)	Fulltime to Not working (13)	Somewhat unhappy (30)
	Part-time to Fulltime (9)	Very unhappy (5)
	Part-time to Part-time (10)	
	Part-time to Inconsistent hours (7)	
	Part-time to Not working (1)	
	Inconsistent hours to Part-time (2)	
	Inconsistent hours to Not working (2)	

Table 5.6: Survey Responders Describe Causes of Stress and Lack of Well-Being (N = 131)

What type of support (work or home) do you wish you had?	What has been most stressful for you?	At beginning of pandemic	Lately
Family support (23)	Economy	24	5
Work support/fair opportunity (20)	Inadequate salary, financial pressure	20	19
Work and family support (7)	Bad working environment	17	10
Financial support/benefits/government subsidies (19)	The pandemic	12	15
Housing support (1)	Childcare and other family reasons	10	22
Childcare (4)	Job loss (actual or potential)	8	10
Medical support (1)	Promotion, additional work responsibilities	3	0
Respite care/time off (2)	Physical health	3	5
Support/understanding from society (6)	Mental health	3	3
Hope/encouragement (4)	Start-up capital, business challenges	1	2
Moral/spiritual support (4)	Access to medical care	1	0
Mental health support (1)	Housing	1	14

ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS FROM FOCUS GROUPS & SURVEYS

One of the questions we sought to answer in the Women and Work project is, How are women faring whose employment situation has changed during/due to the pandemic? We can get an idea about how they are faring when we consider the change in income from before the pandemic compared to their current situation — for themselves and their households.

The first two tables on the following page show responses from the 66 focus group participants regarding their change in income pre-pandemic compared to now. The third table shows data collected from the 131 individuals who responded to the survey.

Table 5.7 shows the estimated annual income of individual focus group participants while Table 5.8 shows the estimated annual income for their households. Table 5.9 presents the responses to the survey when asked about their household incomes prior to the pandemic versus currently. Income before the pandemic is shown across the top. Current income bands are listed down the left side.

Other information that useful when reading these tables:

- ◆ Income bands are grouped in various increments (\$15,000, \$25,000, and \$50,000).
- ◆ The bottom row shows the number of focus group participants who chose that category for their pre-pandemic income. For example, in Table 5.7, 17 of 66 focus group participants indicated their individual income prior to the pandemic was less than \$20,000 (12 + 5).
- ◆ Totals in the far right column refer to the number of focus group participants who chose that income band for their current income. Looking at Table 5.7 again, 33 people indicate their current income is less than \$20,000 (12 + 12 + 4 + 3 + 2). We can therefore conclude that the number of women in our focus groups who report their income as less than \$20,000 nearly doubled from prior to the pandemic. The number of focus group households (Table 5.8) reporting current income as less than \$20,000 tripled (8 versus 24). In Table 5.9, the number of survey respondent households indicating income as less than \$20,000 also doubled, but the actual number was 14 (versus 33 and 24 among focus group participants for individual and household income, respectively).
- ◆ Boxes appear around the numbers where this is no change between pre-pandemic income and current income. In Table 5.7, for instance, 12 focus group participants indicated their annual income prior to the pandemic was less than \$20,000, and 12 responded their current annual income is \$20,000. So there is a box around \$20,000. Likewise, four focus group participants stated that their annual income before was in the \$20,000 to \$34,999 band and four said their current income is \$20,000 to \$34,999. This does not necessarily mean these are the same specific people saying their income has stayed the same.
- ◆ Numbers above the boxes indicate annual income (whether individual or household) has decreased since before the pandemic. Number appearing below the boxes indicates an improvement. Among focus group participants (Table 5.7), the individual incomes of 29 deteriorated (12 + 4 + 4 + 3 + 2) while 15 improved (5 + 3 + 1 + 5 + 1). Twenty-five focus group participants reported their household income deteriorated while 18 improved (Table 5.8). Among survey responders, 65 indicated their household income deteriorated while 27 improved.

Table 5.7: Change in Focus Group Participant's Personal Income Pre-Pandemic Versus Current (N = 66)

Before pandemic → Current ↓	Less than \$20,000	\$20,000 to \$34,999	\$35,000 to \$49,999	\$50,000 to \$74,999	\$75,000 to \$99,999	\$100,000 to \$149,999	\$150,000 or more	Total Current
Less than \$20,000	12	12	4	3	2			33
\$20,000 to \$34,999	5	4	4					13
\$35,000 to \$49,999		3	2	2				7
\$50,000 to \$74,999		1	5	3	1			10
\$75,000 to \$99,999				1		1		2
\$100,000 to \$149,999								0
\$150,000 or more				1				1
Total Before	17	20	15	10	3	1	0	66

Table 5.8: Change in Focus Group Participant's Household Income Pre-Pandemic Versus Current (N = 66)

Before pandemic → Current ↓	Less than \$20,000	\$20,000 to \$34,999	\$35,000 to \$49,999	\$50,000 to \$74,999	\$75,000 to \$99,999	\$100,000 to \$149,999	\$150,000 or more	Total Current
Less than \$20,000	5	14	2	2	1			24
\$20,000 to \$34,999	3	5	3	1				12
\$35,000 to \$49,999		5	4	2				11
\$50,000 to \$74,999		1	5	3		1		10
\$75,000 to \$99,999			1	1	3	1		6
\$100,000 to \$149,999				1		1		2
\$150,000 or more				1				1
Total Before	8	25	15	11	4	3	0	66

Table 5.9: Change in Survey Respondent's Household Income Pre-Pandemic Versus Current (N = 131)

Before pandemic → Current ↓	Less than \$20,000	\$20,000 to \$34,999	\$35,000 to \$49,999	\$50,000 to \$74,999	\$75,000 to \$99,999	\$100,000 to \$149,999	\$150,000 or more	Total Current
Less than \$20,000	4	6	4					14
\$20,000 to \$34,999	3	5	3	1	5	2		19
\$35,000 to \$49,999		2	6	7	6	1		22
\$50,000 to \$74,999			2	6	10	1	1	20
\$75,000 to \$99,999		1		7	3	10	1	22
\$100,000 to \$149,999		1		1	2	7	7	18
\$150,000 or more			1	1	4	2	8	16
Total Before	7	15	16	23	30	23	17	131

PARTICIPANT PROFILE—Group No. 3
Already Made a Change

"A lot of people are starting to just care more about themselves and have stopped catering to these jobs that don't treat them like they are human."

Some of the women were quick to leave jobs that weren't working for them, return to school, or self-select out of employment. Four of the women are currently in training for new jobs. Several have already completed new training, and some have started in a new field.



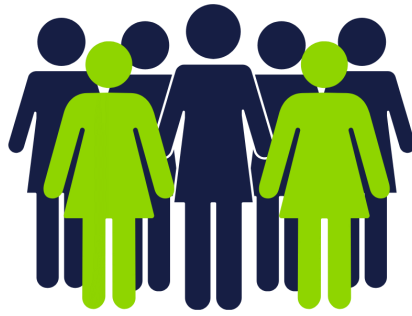
Employment Situation: Working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Very unhappy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 60s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Some college
Home Situation: Married and has no children at home

She was feeling positive today. She reports feeling blessed she **recently completed training as a Medical Admin Assistant and received a job offer last week.** She was headed to complete paperwork directly following the session. She feels well supported. Her husband helps her emotionally and financially. "Without that man, I don't know where I'd be." She was referred to Medical Admin Assistant training by OMJ. And she has supportive allies at local workforce agencies. She quit her job working for a local school district because they "were running me in circles." She had been a cafeteria worker, and she was asked to go to students' homes to check on families. She said it was very difficult for her employer to figure out what they needed to be doing.

Employment Situation: Working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Somewhat happy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 40s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Associates degree
Home Situation: Divorced and has pre-teen at home and has no children at home

She is trained in IT and her pre-pandemic job had her traveling to client sites to work on projects, which she generally enjoyed. The benefits were good and she took advantage of her employer's tuition reimbursement to get an associate's degree. However, once the pandemic hit, she was required to continue working the same as always while others were able to work from the safety of their homes, which she felt was unfair. In addition, she didn't like being the only woman and the only African-American. **Ultimately, her experience with sexual harassment caused her to leave that job. Since then, she's had "lots of side hustles" and she takes advantage of every opportunity put in front of her. She is now working on a Bachelor's degree.** She believes in sharing resources and communicating and connecting people and services. Her aspiration is to get in the financial services industry working directly with individuals.





SECTION 6

What They Need



Section 6

WHAT THEY NEED

The Research Question asks what types of support women need to obtain and maintain employment and what type of information and assistance they want. To facilitate the conversation in this direction, we asked several specific questions:

1. What do you need to accomplish what you want?
2. What keeps you from getting where you want to go?
3. What information would be helpful to you? What access do you need to make that happen?
4. What could your employer do that would help make it easier for you to stay with them?

Need #1. Personal & Family Needs Accommodated

Sixty-two percent of focus group participants said they want to be able to work from home or to “work remote.” While there are some frivolous advantages to this arrangement — (like wearing pajamas on a Zoom call), what we heard was far more serious and pragmatic. These women need work that allows them to do all of the things expected of them at work and required of them at home.

I JUST NEEDED A TEMPORARY SOLUTION FOR WHAT WAS GOING ON AND THEY WERE NOT WILLING TO WORK WITH ME ON THAT. THAT’S NOT A COMPANY THAT I WANT TO WORK FOR. IF THERE WAS A PANDEMIC OR NOT, I PROBABLY WOULD NOT WORK FOR THEM.

TYPES OF CHALLENGES WITH WORK SCHEDULES OFFERED:

- Mismatch with school/daycare schedules.
- Too many hours – part-time is preferred.
- Lack of flexibility for caring for sick children and other family members.
- Lack of ability to work remotely during COVID to care for children who were out of school or daycare even though the nature of the work allows it to be done remotely.

- Expected to work outside of agreed-upon work hours (early mornings, evenings, weekends).
- Difficulty getting time off for doctor’s appointments for self or others in their care.
- Supervisor opposition to taking time off for funerals of close family members.
- Mandatory overtime.

While some participants reported having PTO, many shared they are made to feel guilty for taking time off. One woman’s supervisor questioned her request for time off for a doctor’s appointment because she had one the previous month.

Parents, especially, had strong need for accommodations. Some of these reasons existed prior

to the pandemic, but this time of short staffing highlighted them. One mother reported that when her son broke his arm on the playground, she was told find someone else to take him to the hospital. This person quit her job.

TYPES OF CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY PARENTS

- Being a single parent.
- Being primarily responsible for children’s care (doctor’s appointments, emergencies from school, home when sick, drop-off and pick-up especially for children involved in activities, etc.).
- Sole childcare provider; no family or other supports.
- New parent (breastfeeding, bonding, etc.).

Remote work was only one of the solutions offered (25 participants). Nevertheless, focus group participants say they are not asking for remote and flexible work out of a sense of abundance or luxury, but to maintain their equilibrium and meet their obligations.

Coding The Transcripts

Below are the results of coding the focus group transcripts. When a participant mentioned something — for instance, that COVID is a challenge, we added a tick mark next to “COVID.” But if COVID was mentioned as a challenge by that person two or three times, COVID was not ticked two or three times. One person got one tick mark for each topic. Participants get tick marks for as many topics as they mention.

WHAT THEY NEED & THEIR PREFERRED JOB CHARACTERISTICS

- 41 - Personal and family needs are accommodated
- 30 - Fair and empathetic management and safe workplace conditions
- 27 - Fair compensation and benefits/Higher wages
- 20 - Career advancement (professional development; encouragement; training; a job that helps me grow)
- 19 - Compassion; leaders who empathize with beyond work (subset of fair and empathetic management and workplace conditions)
- 13 - Better childcare
- 13 - Mental health and well-being
- 11 - Belief I am treated fairly and valued (subset of fair and empathetic management and workplace conditions)
- 8 - Follow COVID protocols
- 7 - Transportation
- 7 - Ability to be part of problem solving
- 7 - Information about jobs (accurate job descriptions; transparent and fair pay; remote work; employers that respond to applications)
- 4 - Small business support
- 3 - Overcoming challenges of criminal history
- 3 - Consistent, high-quality ESL

Summary Box 6.1: What They Need & Their Preferred Job Characteristics

SOLUTIONS THEY PREFER:

- Work from Home/virtual/remote. (25)
- Flexible hours (asynchronous, non-traditional, or adjustable). (20)
- No mandatory overtime.
- Flexible work arrangements (number of days, number of hours, hours in the day, location).
- Hybrid ... ability to come to the office and work remotely.
- Accommodations for time off for childcare and/or PTO; willing to work with me to find a win-win.

Need #2. Fair and Empathetic Management + Safe Workplace Conditions

Focus group participants said over and over again they didn't feel they were asking for special treatment. They were asking to be treated "as a human" and to be treated fairly. These words came up independently in the 18 focus groups:

- ◆ Compassion
- ◆ Empathy
- ◆ Human Being
- ◆ Flexibility
- ◆ Consideration
- ◆ Had to Quit

THIS EXPERIENCE HAS RUINED ME FROM GIVING MORE OF MYSELF TO MY WORK.

TYPES OF CHALLENGES EMPLOYEES REPORTED WITH FAIR AND EMPATHETIC MANAGEMENT AND WORKPLACE CONDITIONS:

- ◆ Lack of understanding of life/responsibilities outside of work.
- ◆ Bad boss.
- ◆ Lack of appreciation/reciprocity/empathy/compassion.
- ◆ Treated less because of part-time status.
- ◆ Inconsistent operations and being short-staffed.

BY FAR, THE TOP NEEDS HIGHLIGHTED:

- ◆ Fair compensation package, including fair wages (commonly \$20/hour) that keeps up with rising inflation; regular wage increases; pay that is equal to white and male peers. (22)
- ◆ More compassion/humanity/leaders who empathize with my situation beyond work. (19)

- ◆ Belief that I am treated fairly and valued. (11)

LESS FREQUENTLY, BUT OF NOTE:

- ◆ Better communication/listen to me.
- ◆ Notice me/provide feedback.
- ◆ Better bosses.
- ◆ Better On the Job Training.
- ◆ Trust/not micromanaging.
- ◆ Having a "seat at the table."
- ◆ Providing resources needed to do the job.

LITERALLY FELT LIKE I WAS GOING TO HAVE A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN, STROKE, OR A HEART ATTACK AND MY BLOOD PRESSURE WAS THROUGH THE ROOF.

Need #3. Emotional Well Being and Mental Health

Managing their lives, making a living while taking care of themselves and their families, posed a challenge to women's mental health and well-being. Participants shared it as both a reason for leaving their job during the pandemic and a reason for not yet being ready to return to work. For many, it is the new lens through which they look at the world, their priorities, and their future. They talk about how they can't juggle everything. They felt unstable, and they will do whatever it takes to gain stability.

WAYS THEY REFERENCED EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH:

- ◆ Mental Health
- ◆ Isolation
- ◆ Stress
- ◆ Challenges juggling/balance
- ◆ Deaths in the family
- ◆ Support (or lack of it)
- ◆ Breakdown

Mental health and emotional well being is a key factor for almost 40% of women we spoke to who specifically named this challenge. This percentage is likely higher since many appeared to focus more on their solutions to resolving it (remote work, flexible work, and better supervisors) rather than the problem itself, so did not name it in a way that could be captured in the coding.

IT'S NOT AS STABLE DOING GIG WORK AND WORKING PART TIME BUT THE PIECE OF MIND MAKES UP FOR IT. WE CAN MAKE DO WITH LESS BECAUSE IF I FEEL MORE SECURE DOING IT WITH 90% OF THE RESPONSIBILITY ON MYSELF, I WILL TAKE THAT CHANGE.

Need #4. Higher Pay & Benefits/Fair Pay

While higher pay was seen as an issue of equity and fairness, it was also mentioned as a matter of necessity, especially as rent and food costs rise. Employers often believe that pay is what leads to retention; this is not the case. Trust in one's supervisor is a leading reason for job retention. That said, fair wages are critical for employee attraction. This focus study confirms this in that higher pay and benefits comes after fair and empathetic treatment.

DEFINITION OF A FAIR WAGE

- ◆ Typically \$20/hr.
- ◆ Pay commensurate to that of men.
- ◆ For people of color, pay commensurate with white colleagues.
- ◆ Compensation for additional hours worked during.
- ◆ Pay that increases with tenure and responsibilities.

PAY ME WHAT I'M WORTH. I'VE ALWAYS BEEN UNDERPAID BUT I WAS WORKING ON A CAUSE THAT I ENJOYED, BUT THAT IS NOT ENOUGH ANYMORE. I WANT TO BE COMPENSATED FAIRLY. I'M SICK OF READING ARTICLES THAT WE MAKE BETWEEN 40-80% LESS THAN WHAT A WHITE MAN MAKES.

Additionally, workers reported the desire for benefits and PTO. Many did not have these things. And those that did have PTO often were not permitted to use it. Parents, especially, were made to feel guilty, often resulting in the decision to quit.

Need #5. Career Advancement

Many women lamented that they have worked hard and have nothing to show for it. It was not that servers wanted to be chefs or warehouse workers wanted to be operations managers. They wanted to contribute to the organization, to be seen, to improve. Many were discouraged from professional development. Several Black women felt it was related to their race. Others felt it was related to their gender. Others felt it was simply because their employers are only interested in production over humans. These are not the sort of employers they want to work for.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT DESIRES EXPRESSED BY PARTICIPANTS

- ◆ Professional Development
- ◆ Encouragement
- ◆ Information about training
- ◆ Access to Training
- ◆ Money for training
- ◆ Equity in training availability
- ◆ Job helps me to grow

In the meantime, many were pursuing education on their own or had accessed funds through OhioMeansJobs. Some felt the need to hide their educational pursuits from employers. A number of people had completed training, and most of these reported feeling optimistic about their futures.

SOME JOBS OF INTEREST WERE AS FOLLOWS:

- ◆ Nurse (LPN, RN)
- ◆ Medical Office
- ◆ Data Entry Operator
- ◆ Anything remote

Need #6. Compassion/Leaders who Empathize Beyond Work

While this was mentioned in #2, it is being mentioned here again, because it alone was mentioned by 19 participants.

Need #7. Better Childcare

Many parents reported challenges with childcare. Title XX, a public benefit is intended to reduce childcare costs. However, women in our focus groups reported that, while it's helpful, it doesn't resolve the issue. They spoke of juggling kids and work, rushing to pick up children to avoid fees and penalties, let alone long waiting lists, and .

WHAT'S THE POINT OF GETTING UP AT 6AM, WORKING HARD, AND I DON'T MAKE ANY MONEY. IT ALL GOES TO CHILDCARE.

TYPES OF CHALLENGES PARENTS EXPERIENCE WITH DAYCARE

- ◆ Insufficient availability (staffing shortages, long wait-lists).

- ◆ Inconsistent operations (e.g., staffing shortages, quarantines) causes random daily closures.
- ◆ Lack of confidence in/dissatisfied with care provided.
- ◆ Employer Start and Stop times inconsistent with hours of operation (early mornings, evenings, weekends).
- ◆ Too expensive.

Other childcare issues involve older children, access to summer activities, and tending to special needs children or their children who have issues at school. A couple of women suggested having school, work, and daycare physically connected. Many were interested in working for childcare facilities so their child could attend the place where they worked.

THIS EXPERIENCE HAS RUINED ME FROM GIVING MORE OF MYSELF TO MY WORK.

Need #8. Belief I am Being Treated Fairly and Valued

While this belief was included in "Fair and Empathetic Management and Workplace Conditions," it deserves special attention because it was called out by 17% of women. Notably, it included women who felt they were being actively discriminated against for the following reasons:

TYPES OF DISCRIMINATION EXPERIENCED

- ◆ Racial/ethnic
- ◆ Whistleblower
- ◆ Being a parent
- ◆ Illness
- ◆ Age
- ◆ Part time work status

YOU WANT TO FEEL LIKE WHEN YOU WALK THROUGH THE DOOR, THAT YOU MATTER. IF A LOT OF COMPANIES WOULD DO THAT, PEOPLE WOULD STAY AND THEY WOULD GIVE THEIR BEST.

Need #9. COVID Protocols

As might be expected, workers are divided about their preferences for following or not following COVID Protocols. This was evidenced as follows:

COVID PREFERENCES THAT IMPACT EMPLOYMENT DECISIONS

- ◆ Fourteen women left their jobs because they were not comfortable with their workplace's ability to protect them or they disagreed with masking or vaccination requirements.
- ◆ Eight women require COVID protocols to be followed in order to return to work.
- ◆ Two will not return because of vaccination requirements.

Need #10. Transportation

Seven women cited transportation as a specific barrier to employment.

CHALLENGES WITH TRANSPORTATION

- ◆ Inability to afford a car and/or car repairs.
- ◆ Navigating bus riding with children to and from school or childcare then work.
- ◆ Fear of commuting at night (especially using public transportation) for 2nd and 3rd shift jobs.

Need #11. Ability to be Part of Problem Solving

Focus group participants say they want a say over what happens to them.

TYPES OF PROBLEM SOLVING THEY WOULD LIKE TO BE INCLUDED IN

- ◆ Access to upper management to share concerns and complaints.
- ◆ Input on decision making and problem solving (i.e. how to handle work schedule when schools closed).
- ◆ Autonomy (not being micromanaged).

This last item is likely higher than represented, since in addition to the women working in or seeking a W-2 position, many of the 22 women who chose self-employment mentioned the authority over their time, work schedule, and time off as a key reason.

Need #12. Information They Want

Most of the women we talked to said they have access to information. They are just not sure the information is reliable or the resources are high quality. In addition, they said they know how to search for information — they are frustrated by lack of transparency in the hiring process.

TYPES OF INFORMATION THEY WANT

- ◆ Transparent information about jobs, such as accurate job descriptions, salary included on job descriptions, and more remote opportunities.
- ◆ How to get a response from employers.

- ◆ How to revise their resume.
- ◆ Best career paths.
- ◆ How to get training funds.
- ◆ How to get funds to support their small business.
- ◆ How to create a small business.
- ◆ Overcoming challenges locating employment with a criminal record.
- ◆ Where to find professionally-delivered ESL.

Though information for small business owners and new Americans landed at the bottom of the list, it is important to consider as both of these populations are growing. Also, both lead directly to economic vitality of the local economy.



PARTICIPANT PROFILE—Group No. 4
Looking for Remote Work

"I told my boss I can't work Saturdays because I have no one to watch my kids."

Twelve of the women are looking for work. The most common characteristic they are looking for is work that is remote. We found that when women said "remote" what they really meant is that they need to be able to accommodate their personal and family needs. For some, it's due to their health. Others want shifts that align with school schedules or allows for flexible scheduling. Some want PTO to take care of doctor's appointments for themselves or their kids. When they have this PTO, they don't want their boss making them feel guilty for using it.



Employment Situation: Working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Neither happy nor unhappy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 20s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Some college
Home Situation: Single and has two young children at home

She is due to deliver her third child in a week. When the pandemic hit, and schools and daycares closed, she couldn't get paid time off from her employer, a large distribution center, to take care of her children. She quit her job. But, "if I'm not working, I'm not earning." She didn't receive unemployment until six months later, which was stressful and the application process was challenging to navigate. "Depending on who you got, determines what documents you need." Ideally, she'd like to leverage the tech support certificate she recently earned but, so far, has found it useless because employers expect candi

dates to have previous experience. She has the certificate, but not the experience. The entry point is the help desk, but there's "not a lot out there." **Because she couldn't find anything, she went back to her former employer and is now working 10-hour-days. It's hard for her as a parent.** "I don't want to work all day every day just to support us," she says. **She'd like a job with flexibility, something like split-shifts or the ability to set her own hours.** This would allow her to drop her kids at school and take them to extra-curriculars. Ideally, she'd like a job where she can work from home, though she prefers something other than customer service. She doesn't want to get in trouble for a crying baby in the background. Her immediate situation – with her baby due in a week but needing a better paying job with some kind of flexibility to support her children – she feels stuck, "What can I do?" She doesn't know where or how to find employment. Nevertheless, she appreciated the opportunity to participate in the focus group. "It's beautiful to know you're not alone in this cruel world sometimes."

Employment Situation: Working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Very unhappy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Not Sure
Age: 50s
Race/Ethnicity: White
Education: Some college
Home Situation: Single and has no children at home

When the pandemic hit, she felt challenged by the isolation because she lived alone, couldn't go anywhere, and had no internet or TV. Her home healthcare job went from 40 hours a week to 14. "It was hysteria," she recalls. While many of her coworkers were quitting. She earned a bonus from her employer for staying. Unfortunately, she was given assignments (like hospice) that she doesn't feel she is qualified for. She's using every resource she knows of to find a new job. **She's looking for remote work**

because she has COPD. She has a doctor's excuse to not wear a mask and vaccination is not for her but so many employers require it.

Employment Situation: Not working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Somewhat unhappy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Not Sure
Age: 20s
Race/Ethnicity: Latinx
Education: Some college
Home Situation: Domestic partnership and has a toddler at home

In 2019, she and her boyfriend decided it was time to settle down. They would save money to buy a house and then start a family. In January 2020, they purchased their first home but decided to hold off on the second part of their plan due to the pandemic. In April, surprise! She discovered she was pregnant. What should've been a joyful experience for expectant parents was marred by the pandemic. Having to go to all of her doctor appointments alone, for example, was very stressful. Once her baby was born, she was offered two weeks of leave. Family members watched her newborn so she could go back to work – until they came down with COVID and, once they recovered, she no longer felt it was safe to leave her baby with them. By this time, her boyfriend had lost his job and they began to fall behind on the mortgage. She acknowledges that she has so much to be grateful for: her boyfriend, who has since found a good job, is an involved parent to their healthy baby. Nevertheless, she has not found a job. She is bothered that she is not working and not contributing to the family. **Working from home would be ideal for her. Not only could save on childcare costs, commuting, parking, and lunches, but she could also do chores during her lunch breaks. "Any pay rate is fine," though she would like to be able to set her own hours and have what she describes as "comp time" – more than just paid time off – "because you can't plan for when your kid gets sick." It's hard to work when employers don't accommodate parents' responsibilities to care for their sick kids.**

Employment Situation: Working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Somewhat happy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 40s
Race/Ethnicity: White
Education: Some college
Home Situation: Single and has no children at home

She went remote the fall before the pandemic. **Going fully remote was a game changer.** It allowed her to not have to use all of her vacation time to drop off and pick up her daughter from before and after school care. **She is transitioning into a role. She has less hours and less flexibility.** It is a challenge because she is a parent first. She would like daycare and day camps to be cheaper. **She would like for people to understand what single parents have to do. She is thankful to be in a job that offers flexibility for drop offs, pickups and illness.** If everything falls into place, she feels she will be a better parent and role model for her daughter...one who puts work away for her family. She wants her slice of the American Dream.

Employment Situation: Not working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Very unhappy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Not Sure
Age: 50s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Bachelor's degree
Home Situation: Divorced and has no children at home

Working in the health insurance industry, she describes her current employment situation as satisfactory. The job she had at the beginning of the pandemic quickly became overwhelming when her department went from 22 people to nine. **She worked from home, but was not given the tools or supports to do it effectively. She found herself regularly working late into the night. Since she hadn't gotten a pay raise in five**

years, and things didn't look like they were going to improve with her employer, she quit. She took a "gigantic pay cut," but felt the situation was better. She says she is now almost back to where she was before the pandemic in terms of wages. She is looking for a new job but, because she is not vaccinated (in consultation with her physician and because of other medical issues), is having difficulty even getting an interview because of employers' vaccination requirements. She had COVID and "almost died." Other family members did not survive. As a result, she has reprioritized what is important in her life and being able to spend time with her grandchild is *the thing*. She sees that working from home – or working from anywhere – is ideal for her.

Employment Situation: Not working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Very unhappy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 30s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Some college
Home Situation: Single and has one young child at home

She had a job working in a warehouse for less than a month when schools and daycares abruptly closed due to the pandemic. With no alternatives, she had to miss work because she had "no one to watch him." She was eventually fired. Since then, she has worked sporadically – her ability to work consistently is interrupted by car troubles and insufficient daycare. **She lost her most recent job because she had to go get her child from school. "I'm not leaving him," she said. She has trouble finding work, especially that aligns with her child's school schedule, because of a 6-year-old felony conviction.** She needs to work to pay rent and bills, but the only jobs she can find are outside daycare hours. "I don't want to accept a job that I know I'm going to be late for." The only jobs she says she's eligible for are 2nd and 3rd shift. She's looked into 24-hour daycare, but there's a 3- to 6-month waiting list. Though she's paid her rent through May with her tax return, she says it is a "frightening possibility" that she and her child will be evicted and they will be living in

her car come June. For her, the ideal work situation would be a customer service job where she could work from home and have the flexibility to get her child as needed. She's in school now pursuing a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. She says she feels frustrated and overwhelmed. She can't afford to quit school because her student loans will come due, which she can't pay because she can't find a job.

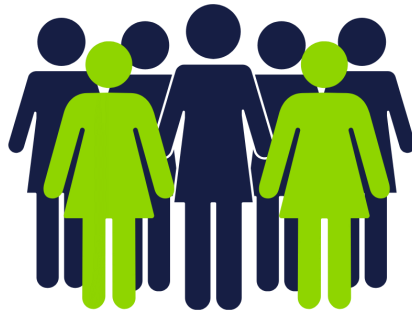
Employment Situation: Not working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Very unhappy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: No
Age: 30s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Bachelor's degree
Home Situation: Single and has an infant at home

A recent college graduate, she has two degrees. She got through the pandemic working for Door Dash and Instacart. She is not working now and is having trouble finding work. "Plenty of interviews," she says. But when she follows up, employers are not following through. **She seeks a work-from-home arrangement so her baby can stay with her and she can breastfeed. She is not comfortable leaving her child at daycare.** Working for a company with onsite daycare would also be an option. Work-life balance is important to her and she believes employers need to provide PTO because people "need days for when life happens." This isn't what she intended for herself. She wants to work and make her own money. Till then, she will "continue to be a stay-at-home mom and mourn it."

Employment Situation: Not working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Very unhappy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 30s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Some college
Home Situation: Single and has young child at home

She was hired for a job, but was terminated after they did a background check. She has difficulty locating a position that will accommodate her needs, which are hours that align with her mother's availability for childcare, located where she can get to without a car, and pays a "living wage," which to her, means \$16-17 per hour. She would prefer remote work to eliminate some of these issues, but has been unsuccessful in locating positions that meet these criteria.





SECTION 7

Making Different Choices



Section 7

CHOICES THEY ARE MAKING

Rather than going back to work just like before, the women we spoke to are responding to the pandemic related changes in a number of different ways, as outlined below.



New attitude about W-2 employment.

Many of the women described having some sort of epiphany, awareness, or new outlook. They were asked about challenges they faced and supports or information they needed. Instead, what many of them described was an entirely new outlook toward work. They spoke about their need to have a voice in what happens to them. They spoke about wanting to be “at the table” when decisions about their work are made. They spoke about not investing as much in their places of employment. For many, they spoke about doing “gig work” and starting their own businesses. Often the gig work was a stepping stone. Regardless of their choices, many are no longer expecting their employer to provide stability.

Self-selected out of the workforce (for now). Many have speculated that women are living on stimulus checks and unemployment, preferring not to work. In this group of women, only

one expressed during focus group conversations that she is happy to not be working. We defined “self-selected out of the workforce” to mean women who are not working, self-employed, or actively seeking employment. The most common reasons for self-

- 4. Transportation - 7
- 5. Discouraged over job prospects - 6
- 6. In school or training - 4

Already made a change.

Some of the women were quick to leave jobs that weren't working for them, return to school, or adopt employment. Four of the women are currently in training for new jobs. Several have already completed new training, and some have started in a new field.

Looking for remote work.

Twelve of the women are looking for work. And the most common characteristic they say they are looking for is to be able to work remote. We interpret that to mean they need work to accommodate their personal and family needs. For instance, they want shifts that align with school schedules and/or flexible scheduling. They also PTO to take care of appointments for themselves or their kids. And they don't want their boss making them feel guilty for using PTO.

Self-employed. Six out of the 66 women started a business during the pandemic. Another nine women are pursuing self-employment. Traditionally we associate self-employment as something taken on by people

JOB CHOICES THEY MAKE

- ◆ New attitude about W-2 employment
- ◆ Self-selected out of the workforce (for now)
- ◆ Already made a change
- ◆ Looking for remote work
- ◆ Self-employed
- ◆ Working, but will quit
- ◆ Retired early

Summary Box 7.1: Job Choices They Make

selecting out of the workforce cited by focus group participants (in order of frequency):

- 1. Childcare - 16
- 2. Self-employed or seeking self employment - 15
- 3. Family responsibilities - 10

with a taste for risk and desire for riches. This is not the case with these women. In fact, rather than risky, they see it as a path to stability. They want to be in charge of their own fate. They no longer trust that employers have their welfare in mind. Some who are self-employed said they would consider returning to W-2 employment if they thought an employer would be concerned about them as a human being.

Working, but will quit.

Twenty-four of the 66 women are working. That may be cause for encouragement. Except that...many of them said they are likely to quit if their needs can't be met. They are less committed to their employment and employer than they were in the past.

Retired early. Two of the women assessed their options and decided to retire early. They say they will continue to learn and aren't giving up on earning.

National news stories have speculated that women are content to stay home — happy to collect unemployment. Stimulus checks mean they don't need to work.

No one in the focus groups reported that stimulus checks replaced employment.

Likewise, none of the focus group participants said unemployment checks made their lives easier. And in fact, when they brought it up, it was to

remark about how frustrating and time-consuming the application process was, and how it didn't prevent them from draining their savings or getting evicted.

Only one woman in our focus groups said she was happier not working.

Gallup's Net Thriving Score

This "net thriving" score is collected by asking about survey participant's "best possible life". They ask a two part question:

Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you.

Q1: On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time? (0-10)

Q2: On which step do you think you will stand about five years from now? (0-10)

(Clifton & Harter, 2021, p.5)

When women say they need employers to accommodate their personal and family needs, it is so they can have order in their lives, and a sense of well-being.

When women said they need fair wages— at least \$20/hour, and that their wages are comparable to men— they

mean so they can pay for housing and food.

When women say they want growth, they mean so they can feel what they were doing is worth something.

And certainly, when they speak of safety, they are talking about a sense of well-being.

Gallup conducts surveys of well-being with thousands of people annually. They have identified mental health as the number one priority. In Well Being at Work: How To Build Resilient Teams, Jim Clifton points out "there are still no organizational benchmarks for the most critical issue of all— the state of mental health and well-being." Further, "There are no official statistics for 'How are your employees making it through COVID-19 and a crashing economy?'"⁷

They aim to remedy this by promoting the use of a "Gallup Net Thriving " score, which they have collected from thousands annually in their worldwide surveys since 2005.

"In fact, Gallup recently asked employees what they look for most in an employer. The data showed that employees of all generations rank "the organization cares about employees' wellbeing" in their top three criteria. For millennials and Generation Z, it's their No. 1 workplace want." (Morgan, 2021)⁸

Net thriving scores tell us how people's lives are going. This is the basis for their decisions.

In our focus groups, we asked, "If nothing else changes in the next year, how will that be for you?"

Answers ranged widely from "I don't know what I will do" to "I'm better off than I was," to "I'll throw myself off of a tall building."

Gallup rates the scores along a continuum from suffering to struggling, and thriving. The "Thrive Score" has varied widely throughout the pandemic, mysteriously climbing during it, dipping in 2021, and recently climbing again. It might be noted, when net thriving "soars" that means 59.5% of people rate themselves at least a 7 on a scale of 1-10 in terms of living their "best possible life". This number typically hovers between 40-60%. The newest challenge is that this number is becoming more strongly correlated with whether or not

workers stay or go. Career Well Being is the fact of well being that carries the strongest weight, according to Gallup.

This is what we believe the women we spoke to are basing their decisions on. Their decisions to require remote work (so they will have more stability in their lives), their decisions to get training and switch careers (to one that is more stable), to ones that pay a fair wage, even to self-employment. These women are doing it to achieve their "best possible life" ... mostly the stability and mental health required for overall well-being.

DIFFERENT WAYS PEOPLE DESCRIBE THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

Among the positive expressions of emotional well-being:

- Harmony, peace, balance
- "I leave it to God"
- Resilience
- Being in community
- Love

Among the negative expressions of emotional well-being:

- Fear
- Stress
- Overwhelmed
- Angry
- Loss
- Stagnation
- Falling behind



PARTICIPANT PROFILE—Group No. 5

Self-Employed

"I get everything I want. And I get to spend time with my kids."

Six out of the 66 women started a business during the pandemic. Another nine women are pursuing self-employment. Traditionally we think of self-employment as an option for people with a taste for risk and desire for riches. This was not the case with any of these women. In fact, they see it as a path to stability. They have a desire to be in charge of their own fate since they no longer trust employers to have their welfare in mind. Some who are self-employed said they would consider returning to W-2 employment if they thought an employer would be concerned about them as a human being.

raw deal." She wants to be in control of her destiny and feels unsettled how easy it was that "someone took the money away." She started a small food service business with one of her adult child. Even though she "has a lot going on, it will always be family first" for her.

Employment Situation: Working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Very happy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: No
Age: 20s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Bachelor's degree
Home Situation: Married and has young child at home

She was working in a daycare, but was only getting one day off a month. **Ultimately, she lost her job and decided to start her own restaurant business in a hotel.** She would like to build a national level brand, but she does not have enough capital. She would like more information about accessing business loans. She looked on the internet, but she wasn't able to locate the resources she needed.

Employment Situation: Working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Very happy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Not Sure
Age: 50s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Bachelor's degree
Home Situation: Separated and has three teenagers at home

She was a school teacher prior to the pandemic and was laid off. She worked part-time for a nonprofit organization and full-time in retail to make ends meet. She says her manager treated her unfairly and she was fired. "Unjust-to-unemployed," she quipped. She has a new job, which she loves, because it puts her in the center of helping people. That gives her satisfaction. She, too, expressed animosity towards the fragility of the economy and her relationship to it. She believes that doing extra and then getting fired "is a

Employment Situation: Working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Very unhappy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 50s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Associates degree
Home Situation: Divorced and has teenager at home

With a degree in human services, she worked in a public facing job. Her job was pretty good, but became very stressful when she was required to do a lot of duties that were beyond the usual scope of the position. Additionally, she lost nine of her family and friends in two years, including both parents, a sister, and an uncle. Her workplace did not offer compassion for her grief, nor was there FMLA to cover the

time she had to care for sick family members (as the woman in the family). She left to work for herself. She now has a travel agency, among other things. She is always looking for ways to be paid. **She does not see herself returning to work for an employer, where she will have to get permission to handle her life. She enjoys the autonomy to make her own decisions.** She has also learned that you can dedicate yourself to an employer and prepare a lot, then lose it all.

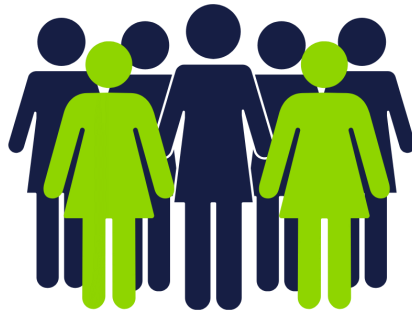
Employment Situation: Working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Somewhat happy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: No
Age: 30s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Bachelor's degree
Home Situation: Married and has two young children at home

As a teacher, once schools closed and moved online, her salary was cut. She decided to quit her job as a teacher in order to look for something that would enable her to pay her bills. Currently, she is tutoring and homeschooling children and she wants to turn that into a business. She likes what she is doing now because it gives her flexibility. She can work on her own time. She is stressed, though, about her current situation and wonders "if I can make it." **She is sad that employers neglect the emotional needs of her profession. She expects to be treated both as "a professional and a human being."** "That would bring me back," she says.

Employment Situation: Not working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Very unhappy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Not Sure
Age: 30s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Some college
Home Situation: Single and has two young children at home

She left Columbus and has been living in Cleveland since September 2021. She has two children, an infant and a child with special needs. Quite frankly, she can use the \$50. Before the pandemic she says, "I was living my best life." She is an LPN and, in addition to working full-time as a nurse, had started a home healthcare business. Once schools and daycares closed, she lost her job. Without consistent childcare – and her family is only occasionally available to watch her children – she could no longer work. She has consistent childcare now. **Today she is back in school pursuing an RN. She recently submitted an application for her business to be approved as a Medicare provider. She is optimistic that this home healthcare business, which is her side hustle, will soon become her "main hustle."** "Things are looking good now," she says.





SECTION 8

What We Can Do



Section 8

WHAT WE CAN DO

The WDBCO decided to conduct focus groups in order to listen to what women say they need. The information that follows provides guidance for targeted service offerings to meet the needs of women. It is likely some of this would be offered in cohorts and at a one day information session. These are our recommendations:

For Employers:

Table 8.1 lists survey responders' ideas about what employers can do to make it easier and more enjoyable to work for them. Also, from the focus groups, employers can consider any of the following

- ◆ **Leaders & managers.** Or compassionate bosses who empathize beyond work.

- ◆ Implement **fair and empathetic management + safe workplace conditions.**
- ◆ **Pay & benefits.** Or confidence that one is paid fairly and equitably.
- ◆ **Career advancement.** Or the belief that one is doing work that means something and that one is moving forward.
- ◆ **Workplace conditions.** Or confidence that I am safe at work. [COVID Protocols]

For Individuals:

- ◆ **Time.** Necessity that the employee's personal and family needs be accommodated in addition to work responsibilities.
- ◆ **Mental health.** Need for bosses to care about the emotion-

al well-being of their workers.

- ◆ **Being valued.** The belief one is being treated fairly – and humanely – at work.
- ◆ **Agency.** One's ability to be a part of problem-solving.

For Governments & Workforce Development Systems

- ◆ Childcare.
- ◆ Transportation.
- ◆ Affordable housing.
- ◆ Federal Child Tax Credit.
- ◆ Subsidies and benefits.

ACTIONS TO CONSIDER:

Women's Workforce Cohorts:

- ◆ Use the "Best Possible Life" score as a pre- and post-measure for success.
- ◆ Support for women to heal from workplace trauma.

- ◆ Training women in how to self-advocate without jeopardizing employment.

- ◆ Training and/or support for navigating difficult situations.

Day Long Information and Resources Events:

- ◆ Mini-focus group specific to immigrants to learn more about their interests and needs.

Table 8.1: Three Things Survey Responders Say Employers Need to Change (N = 131)

3 things ERs should change to make it easier for you to work?	Thing 1	Thing 2	Thing 3
Work-life balance	20	8	8
Salary	20	6	4
Support/tolerance from leadership and colleagues	18	16	14
Professional skills development/on-the job training	8	5	8
Childcare	4	2	
Benefits	3	7	13
Remote work	3	2	1
Increase staffing, improve operations	3	8	8
Transportation		2	
Self-employment support		2	1
Easier work			1

- ◆ Training specific to working in a hybrid or remote environment. Topics can include “How to Thrive in Hybrid” and “How to Advocate for Working Where and When It Works Best For You.”
- ◆ Career Pathway sessions for “Helping Positions” such as childcare, tutoring, education, and social services. Invite school districts to speak about their job opportunities and their transparent hiring processes to assist women with navigating this pathway.
- ◆ Information on accessing funding and Realistic Job Preview for self-employment. A panel sharing their stories and the requirements (such as the many hours) of self employment could be provided.
- ◆ Information sessions and one-one-one assistance or referrals to the SBA, ECDI, and SBDC, and NAWBO could be provided.
- ◆ Include the organizations who hosted Women and Work events: Dress for Success, Goodwill Columbus, Advanced Technology Education, New Directions, and CRIS in planning and service delivery if they are interested.
- ◆ Share information about transportation assistance for before and after school activities.
- ◆ Share information about accessing money for training and setting yourself up for

success

- ◆ Provide information about high quality interpreting services.

In addition to the recommendations for conducting cohorts for women and a one day information sessions, WDBCO may consider the following options for longer lasting impact:

Information for Businesses:

- ◆ Assist businesses with writing accurate and transparent job descriptions.
- ◆ Increase effectiveness of obtaining information about hiring processes and pay. Remove the mystery.
- ◆ Beef up the database of positions that are consistent with school schedules and academic school year.
- ◆ Share information with employers about what women have said they need.
- ◆ Encourage employers to offer flexible scheduling options that accommodate the needs of parents and other caregivers.
- ◆ Showcase best practices of businesses that accommodate personal and family needs and train their bosses to be better bosses.
- ◆ Connections to remote jobs for second chance citizens
- ◆ Partner with businesses to provide professional development— and increase employee retention.

Training for Business:

- ◆ Information session for businesses on what we heard women want: Accommodate Personal and Family Responsibilities, Empathy/Compassion, Fair Wages, Career Growth, Workplace Safety, and Autonomy/Having a Voice.
- ◆ Improving Career Well Being
- ◆ Giving and receiving feedback.
- ◆ Creating a culture of collaboration and communication in a virtual workplace.
- ◆ How to bring workers “to the table” to include them as problem solvers when making decisions are being made that impact the business or employees.

Career Assistance:

- ◆ Conduct further investigation about what information and careers New Americans are looking for.
- ◆ Support access to career pathways for New Americans.
- ◆ Offer access to information for funding small businesses and referrals to organizations that support them.
- ◆ Advise workforce development providers to strengthen career planning and business development services leading to jobs in schools or that meet the scheduling needs of working parents.

Table 8.2: Resource and Support Survey Responders Need Find and Keep a Job (N = 131)

What resources or support do you need to help you find a job?	What resources or support do you need to help you keep a job?
Friends/family (19)	Professional skills development/on-the job training (19)
Human resources/employment channels (16)	Childcare (9)
Career counseling/resume writing (10)	Support/tolerance from leadership and colleagues (9)
Online resources (10)	Vacation time and other benefits/work-life balance (8)
Stipends/monetary support (5)	Public policy (5)
Resources for single mothers/older women (2)	Adequate salary (4)
Time (2)	An end to the pandemic (4)
Mental health counseling (1)	Family support (4)
Skill development (1)	Internet connection (2)
Wifi access (1)	Support for self-employed business (3)
	Psychological counseling (1)
	Reliable employment (1)
	Transportation (1)

PREFERRED CHARACTERISTICS OF “BEST” JOB

- ◆ I learn/contribute/help people/ do something that matters.
- ◆ Intentional onboarding, training, and professional development; on-the-job training.
- ◆ Follows COVID protocols.
- ◆ Emotional/mental health support and accommodation.
- ◆ Childcare benefits, subsidies, or onsite accommodations.

REASONS FOR PURSUING SELF-EMPLOYMENT

- ◆ Self-reliance; be in charge of myself; can’t trust or rely on W-2 employment.
- ◆ Autonomy; set my own schedule; be there for kids/family.
- ◆ Self-fulfillment; achieve my dreams.

A surprising number of focus group participants expressed a determination to be fully in control of their financial well-being and destiny. They no longer trust the “system” and they say they will no longer put themselves in a position where they are at the whim of an employer that

“doesn't care about me” or “thinks I’m disposable.” For some, it is emotional. They resent their former employers and are angry about having been laid off. For others, as a result of their pandemic experience, it is pragmatism. They simply feel it is unwise to trust an employer with their future.

Self-reliance, for these individuals, means becoming self-employed or starting a business. Many relied on gig work to earn income during the pandemic. They shopped for Instacart, they delivered for Grubhub and DoorDash, they drove for Uber and Lyft. While a few started businesses out of whole cloth during the pandemic, like the icee dessert stand, many evolved their pre-pandemic work into something they owned and operated, like the school teacher turned online tutor and the patient care assistant turned private home care aid.

There were also the women who see self-employment as a means to get the work schedule that works for them. These women spoke about how, if they control

when and where they work, they can still do their work and drop their kids at school, deliver them to after-school activities, and be available for family emergencies that inevitably come up during the workday.

TYPES OF SUPPORTS NEEDED

- ◆ Access to training, certification, or credentialing required for specific occupations.
- ◆ Better access to daycare (availability, subsidies, schedules).
- ◆ Connections to employers
- ◆ Better and more respectful hiring process; employers who actually hire.
- ◆ Small business grants and loans.
- ◆ Introduction to small business creation.
- ◆ Legal aid for job seekers with criminal background
- ◆ Transportation.
- ◆ Support for parents with children with special needs.
- ◆ High quality ESL.



PARTICIPANT PROFILE—Group No. 6
Working, But Will Quit

"I will quit a job if I don't feel appreciated."

Twenty-four of the 66 women are working. That may be cause for encouragement. Except that...many of them said they are likely to quit if their needs can't be met. They are less committed to their employment and employer than they were in the past.



Employment Situation: Working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Somewhat happy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 40s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: Bachelor's degree
Home Situation: Single and has no children at home

She had a great job prior to the pandemic though, as compared to how much she earns in her current position, she thinks she may have been underpaid. With the pandemic, she was required to work from home which, it turns out, she loves. "Working from home is a gift," especially because it allows her extra time to be with her teenage child. **She dreads having to go back to the office, which her employer is beginning to implement. She's reluctant to go and is considering quitting. "It might not be a good fit after all."** At one point in the conversation, she insists she is still doing the work but admitted another time that maybe she doesn't get as much done at home. She also said she is not sure if she is well-positioned for a career.

Employment Situation: Working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Very happy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 20s
Race/Ethnicity: Black
Education: H.S. diploma
Home Situation: Single and has a toddler at home

Works as a caregiver to individuals with dementia and Alzheimer's. She became pregnant prior to the pandemic but stopped working to protect her health because her asthma made her vulnerable and her job in healthcare facilities meant she was more at risk. During this period, she also experienced domestic violence, which meant she had to exit a relationship and a living situation. At one point, she also faced eviction. She is working now as a home health aid, an occupation she believes is already underpaid. She does not earn enough to afford childcare. She likes her job, and sees she can bridge the wage gap by earning a CNA certificate or becoming an LPN or RN. Even though she wants to become a nurse, she finds the job mentally draining. Not only is the pay low, she says, but staff shortages put pressure on her to do more than is fair. Nonetheless she says, "I have to keep it together" and not show frustration to her patients. She, too, is overwhelmed by the lack of support, especially from family. "I almost crashed my car for my family to step in," she recalls. "I literally had a breakdown for someone to offer help." Employers could be more understanding of people's situations, she says. "They may not have childcare issues, but others do." That's why, she says, people are looking out for themselves. **"I'll quit if I feel unappreciated," she says, "and when a small thing becomes a big thing."**



PARTICIPANT PROFILE—Group No. 7
Retired Early

"Blah blah blah blah."

Two of the women assessed their options and decided to retire early. Even so, they are continuing life-long learners and aren't giving up on earning.

She feels it is wrong that the richest country in the world doesn't have these things. She feels we can learn from other countries.

Employment Situation: Not working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Neither happy nor unhappy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 60s
Race/Ethnicity: White
Education: Bachelor's degree
Home Situation: Divorced and has no children at home

Employment Situation: Working
Feelings About Employment Situation: Very happy
Next Month's Rent/Mortgage: Yes
Age: 60s
Race/Ethnicity: Asian
Education: Bachelor's degree
Home Situation: Domestic partnership and has no children at home

Two weeks after being told by her employer to work from home she was laid off. Even though she got unemployment right away, she found the application process to be incredibly difficult adding to the stress she already felt from losing her job. Now she is dealing with a mobility-limiting health issue that requires surgery. "For the first time in my life, I'm struggling." She wants to work and would like to find a suitable job, preferably working from home, leveraging the certificates she recently earned (medical coding & billing and medical front office). She would benefit from job connections, to know who's hiring, for what, and how much. She also wants wage transparency. Remote work is best for her because, right now, it eliminates driving, parking, and walking – all normal activities that are difficult for her in her condition. "I'm able to work. I just can't walk." The question is timing. Her surgery is imminent so she doesn't want to start a job and then immediately take time off. She is preparing herself for various scenarios.

Prior to the pandemic, she worked for the government going door-to-door. She was not comfortable getting vaccinated due to a medical condition, nor was she comfortable going into people's homes. **She decided to retire early, and she is excited about the possibilities this brings.** She did not get unemployment since she was terminated due to not being vaccinated. She has no mortgage, so she has been able to survive with odd jobs and her Social Security check. She is feeling happier about doing something she wants to do and has come to terms with the fact that it may have been her time to leave after twenty years. She has taken advantage of educational benefits through a program at Columbus State Community College and recommends that others do so, as well. She has taken courses in Quickbooks and Social Media. She feels it is good for her to be in college. During the pandemic, she saw some businesses innovate. She says she would love to be at one of those meetings. What are these businesses doing differently? She grew up in England where no one had to worry about health insurance.

She's investigating how to retire early so she can collect social security. Her plan B is to sell her childhood home she's been living in for the last two decades or get a roommate to share expenses. Of these options she says, "I don't want to but I'm prepared to." As for participating in the focus group, she feels "empowered now after talking to people who've had similar experiences. Knowing that I'm not going through this alone."



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