

## Op-ed: Support all working women during the pandemic



Trish Foster is executive director of the Center for Women and Business at Bentley University in Waltham.

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Remote work has become [the new norm](#) for many workers during the pandemic, bringing with it new opportunities to succeed. But for significant numbers of women, the pandemic is crippling opportunity and advancement. It's critical to understand the unique challenges and inequities that some women — especially women of color and those with disabilities — currently face.

Across the board, women are burdened with greater household duties, but the impacts on Black women are more pronounced. A [McKinsey/Lean-in survey reveals](#) that 75 percent of Black women spend more than three hours a day on housework compared with just over half of white women. The same study finds that Black women also have to spend more money per week on childcare than white women and nearly three times more hours per week caring for elderly or sick relatives. And what about women with disabilities? Research shows these workers are far less likely to report getting the work flexibility they need during the pandemic. They are more

likely than other women to experience stress and exhaustion and, disturbingly, they are almost twice as likely as other women to feel uncomfortable sharing such challenges.

Given these inequities, it's unsurprising that we are also seeing promotion and wage stagnation for women. According to a new [Boardlist/Qualtrics study](#), a mere 9 percent of mothers with children at home report being promoted while working remotely and only 13 percent have received pay increases. In contrast, more than a third of fathers similarly situated say they have received promotions and 26 percent report pay increases. A new [Bentley University Center for Women and Business report](#) suggests that organizations can address these challenges with renewed emphasis on inclusive cultures, tapping into three specific strategies:

1. **Utilize virtual opportunities to mentor and sponsor women.** While women consistently cite the importance of workplace mentorship, women of color see it as essential. Those who have made it to senior levels report that supportive, influential mentors, sponsors, and role models were vital to the knowledge they acquired and the success they achieved. And yet, Black women specifically continue to lag in sponsorship opportunities, being eclipsed both by white women and Black men. For those concerned that virtual advising will have a diminished impact, there is evidence to suggest otherwise. Virtual mentoring in real time results in outcomes equivalent to in-person mentoring. During this uncertain time, mentors and sponsors might want to expand their engagement beyond career outcomes to emotional and social support. Advisees will [benefit from psychosocial support](#) that includes reassurance, friendship, affirmation, and the opportunity to show their own vulnerability during the crisis.
2. **Bolster allyship efforts for Black women and all people of color.** Publicly advocate for racial equality and confront instances of bias. Those new to allyship might start by lending an ear. Urban Zen CEO Helen Aboah asserts that Black voices not only need to be heard, but Black workers need to “feel confident showing up as their true self, without worrying their every move is being perceived through the lens of their color.” Remember, though, not to expect a woman of color to speak for all women of color. And be sure to honor the enormous emotional burden Black women are carrying right now as they confront the dual challenges of the pandemic and racial strife — there might be days when allies need to give them a chance to disengage for self-care.
3. **Ask women what they are experiencing and seek their advice on strategies for change.** Consider a variety of techniques to obtain authentic feedback, including surveys, stay interviews (versus exit interviews), focus groups, and listening sessions. Get specific, asking them whether they believe they are valued and making an impact, whether they see a clear career path ahead, whether they get the feedback they need, and whether they are receiving the necessary flexibility and support to thrive. Next, ask them what they need and let them be part of the solution. You might find out that women and others with disabilities, for instance, require changes in your approach to remote meetings to make them more accessible. Hearing and vision impairment might be a greater or lesser obstacle to success for those working from home, and employees themselves might be able to help craft solutions.

Organizations that nurture cultures of care and employ specific, outcomes-driven approaches like these may reveal a silver lining to the pandemic as they adopt creative and lasting inclusion strategies for women and all employees.

*[Trish Foster](#) is executive director of the Center for Women and Business at Bentley University in Waltham, which partners with organizations to help them become more inclusive*