

Dialogue 3 Women in the US workforce

A Roger, I'm sure you know, the US had a crushing economic recession. COVID-19 infection is still high. Thousands of schools and childcare facilities were closed. Guess who is bearing the brunt of this torrent of bad news?

B I can guess the answer, Barbara: women.

A Yes. Between August and September in 2020, just two months, 865,000 women dropped out of the labor force. In the same time period, just 216,000 men left the workforce. Meanwhile, one in four women were considering reducing work hours, moving to part-time roles, switching to less demanding jobs, or taking leaves of absence from work. Some are thinking of leaving the workforce altogether.

B We've never seen numbers like these! We have nothing to compare it to: not to the 2008 recession or even the Great Depression.

A It's still too early to tell what the impact of this unequal exodus will be, since we're still in the midst of it. But economic and business sector analysts agree it's not going to be good. The progress towards gender pay equality, still incomplete, will almost certainly slow down or stop.

B Do we have an explanation for these figures?

A Some of those high numbers can be attributed to the type of jobs that women often hold. Female-dominated industries, including healthcare, education, care of the elderly, service, and hospitality, have been among the hardest hit by the recession.

B Didn't even hospitals begin to furlough nurses and medical assistants not involved in Covid care?

A Yes. And Daycare centers for young children, struggling with reduced numbers and skyrocketing overhead costs, laid off 250,000-plus workers. By April, 72% of home cleaning workers had reported being abandoned by all their clients. Restaurants, which lost all their dine-in business overnight, laid off their servers - 70% of which are women.

B: But layoffs and furloughs only explain part of the picture.

A That's right. Many women are leaving the workforce not because their jobs have vanished, but because their support systems have. A lot of children and students are still in online-only classes, and someone needs to be at home with them.

B I suppose that without the help of those institutions, the full-time job of caring for and educating kids has fallen disproportionately on women.

A Yes, a high percentage of working mothers said they worried about their job performance, because they were also juggling care-taking responsibilities. Only 44% of mothers polled said that they were splitting household responsibilities equally with their partner since the pandemic started.

B I don't expect the men agreed.

A No. 70% of fathers polled said they were doing their fair share. But the reality is still that domestic duties are mostly performed by women.