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NEARLY 1.5 MILLION MOTHERS ARE STILL MISSING FROM THE WORKFORCE

Mothers, especially those with school-aged children, have been slow to return to work during the Covid-19 pandemic.

By Katherine Riley and Stephanie Stamm
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Liz Anthony is one of millions of American moms whose ties to the workforce have been weakened by the pandemic. When her older daughters' schools closed last spring because of Covid-19, Ms. Anthony, a self-employed public-relations consultant, closed her business indefinitely.

In March 2021, almost 1.5 million fewer moms of school-aged children were actively working than in February 2020, according to Misty Heggeness, principal economist and senior adviser at the Census Bureau. During the depths of last year's economic crisis, Bureau of Labor Statistics data show, women's participation in the workforce fell to levels not seen since the mid-1980s.

While Ms. Anthony's husband has kept working to support the family, she has cared for their daughters – ages 7, 4 and 1 – a decision she said the Brooklyn, NY, couple made in haste during a stressful time. She hasn't worked much since.

"I cannot do both," said Ms. Anthony, 38. "I cannot be a good mom and successfully work to further my career simultaneously."

Many mothers and fathers alike have said that the pandemic's effect on their lives has helped them feel closer to their children. But it has also affected their careers: Although men's labor-force participation also fell to record lows last spring, women as a group have had more difficulty rebounding. A Wall Street Journal analysis of Census Bureau data shows that mothers are re-entering the labor force – defined as people 16 and older who are working or actively looking for work – more slowly than fathers.

Factors including access to child care, a lack of attractive jobs, the demands of home and virtual schooling, and health concerns are likely affecting mothers' employment. The participation rates of women with children under the age of five have fluctuated the most, Census Bureau data show.

And mothers with children in school have had trouble staying in the workforce since classes resumed this fall. In September 2020, there were 1.4 million fewer women with school-aged children in the labor force than there were a year before, according to Dr. Heggeness.

"When school started, my husband and I went from zero to 60," said Rasheba Stevenson, a senior director of strategy and growth at an education nonprofit who has 5- and 6-year-old sons. Six months later, as she came to realize she couldn't balance a full-time job and virtual schooling for the boys from home, she switched to part-time work.

"A year in, I finally had to ask myself, 'How can I sustain this?'" said Ms. Stevenson, 38, of West Orange, NJ.

Millions of women who have kept their jobs have struggled to stay working. The number of mothers on leave from work spiked this summer, even as unemployment declined and as the number of mothers actively working started to recover.

Motherhood can also complicate the job search. LaQuesha Nelson, a single mother of an 8-year-old daughter, is working three part-time jobs after losing bartending and cleaning jobs during the pandemic. She would prefer full-time work, but her daytime child-care responsibilities mean she needs hours in the evening, when she can get help from friends and family.

"The interviewer isn't allowed to ask if you have kids," said Ms. Nelson, 32, of Indianapolis. "But you want to mention you have kids because they are part of the reason you have to put your schedule this way."

Ms. Nelson said that pandemic-era hiring practices have also presented her with challenges during her job hunt. She prefers to deliver job applications in person – which has been more difficult during the pandemic.

"I want them to see me, meet me, hire me based on my appearance, personality and experience," said Ms. Nelson. "But that is definitely a struggle when jobs want to do everything digitally."

Among those who have struggled the most to stay in the labor force are women of color with children.

Black and Hispanic women disproportionately work in industries – such as leisure and hospitality – that were most negatively affected by the pandemic, said Valerie Wilson, director of the Economic Policy Institute's Program on Race, Ethnicity and the Economy.

Since February of last year, participation rates for white women, including mothers, haven't dropped more than 3.2 percentage points. Rates for women of color – especially Black and Hispanic mothers with children under five – have at times fallen more.

Large numbers of Black and Hispanic women work in essential sectors – most notably healthcare – that have seen increased demand in the past year. But in those industries, according to Dr. Wilson, they tend to hold jobs that offer comparatively low pay and flexibility.

Because many of the child-care options women in those jobs relied on before the pandemic have disappeared, a lack of workplace flexibility has also driven Black and Hispanic mothers out of the labor force, according to Dr. Wilson.

THE CAREGIVING IMBALANCE – AND WHY IT MATTERS

The average number of hours men and women work per week has varied more widely since the start of the pandemic than in recent years. People have worked fewer hours overall, with men's time dropping more significantly. That has narrowed – but not closed – the gap between hours worked by men and women.

For parents with both school-aged children and those with children under five, in the month when fathers worked the fewest hours during the past year, they still worked more than the month when mothers worked the most.

In a summer 2020 McKinsey & Co. and LeanIn.Org Women in the Workplace survey, 51 percent of women reported that they were responsible for most or all household labor during the Covid-19 pandemic. Forty-four percent said they shared responsibilities equally with their partner. Men reported 16 percent and 72 percent, respectively, about themselves. More women also said they felt pressure to do more work and had feelings of burnout and exhaustion, according to the same survey.

Those findings echoed pre-pandemic data. Between 2015 and 2019, annual American Time Use Surveys found that women spent roughly twice as much time on average caring for children as a primary activity – time spent caring for household children as the main activity – as men.

For mothers, Ms. Stevenson said, it often seems to fall to them to do more. “It never quite feels like a choice,” she said.

According to Kim Rohrer, co-founder and COO of TendLab, a consulting firm focused on changing the cultural narrative around caregiving and work, the chaos of the past year is an opportunity to address inequities in parenting.

“The relationship between work and caregiving was broken before Covid,” said Ms. Rohrer. “But now we’ve ripped off the Band-Aid and laid bare just how broken it is.”

Some economists, however, worry the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequities and has made it more difficult for mothers to advance in their careers. The longer a woman is out of the workforce, according to Dr. Wilson, the more challenging it is for her to re-enter because her skills and connections to the workforce have degenerated. Even mothers who don’t leave jobs completely miss opportunities to lead projects, connect with co-workers and land promotions, Dr. Heggeness said.

Failing to address these issues, Dr. Heggeness said, means “we are going to continue to have a group of working age, able-bodied adults who could be contributing to the formal economic center of our society that are not able to.”

Ms. Anthony’s two older daughters have spent most of the past year learning remotely. Juggling their education and her other child-care and household responsibilities, Ms. Anthony said, has made it impossible to commit substantial time to her business – though she has tried.

Meanwhile, Ms. Anthony’s daughters have noticed that their mother isn’t working, asking: “Why is dad the only one that takes work calls?”