

THE PANDEMIC EFFECT

Women Want Good Pay, Health Coverage, and Better Benefits as They Re-Enter Workforce

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A new national survey by IWPR finds solid pay, health insurance, job security, retirement benefits, and paid leave top the list of considerations for women as they re-enter the workforce following the pandemic.

TOPLINE SURVEY FINDINGS

- **Good pay and health insurance are the top two desired benefits for women re-entering the workforce.** When considering future jobs, a majority of women report a living wage (87.8 percent) and health insurance (86.0 percent) to be "very important" or "important" benefits, followed by retirement benefits (84.7 percent) and job security (80.7 percent). Paid vacation (79.4 percent), paid sick time (77.3 percent), and paid family leave (76.6 percent) are also "very important" or "important" considerations.
- **Women also want flexibility as they consider future jobs.** Over six in ten women (61.4 percent) surveyed consider control of their schedules to be "very important" or "important."
- **Despite more than a year of the pandemic, paid sick and family leave remains an elusive benefit for many working women.** Over one-third of women (37.5 percent) employed full-time report they do not have paid sick leave—and 65.2 percent of full-time workers surveyed report they do not have paid family leave.
- **Close to 70 percent of women report they do not have job security.** Of women surveyed, just 31.6 percent felt that their current job offered security.



In April of 2020, women's participation in the U.S. workforce increased to roughly 60 percent—having made steady progress in recent decades. Quickly, though, those gains had all but disappeared due to the pandemic. By January 2021, women's labor force participation rate fell below 56 percent, a historic dip to a rate not seen since 1987 (Djankov et al. 2021).

In November 2021, women held 2.3 million fewer jobs compared to February 2020 before the pandemic (IWPR 2021). While the current jobs deficit for women is smaller compared to the 12.2 million jobs lost between February and April 2020, job growth in the last three months has been slower than compared to the same three months ago in 2020 (IWPR calculations based on Bureau of Labor Statistics data).

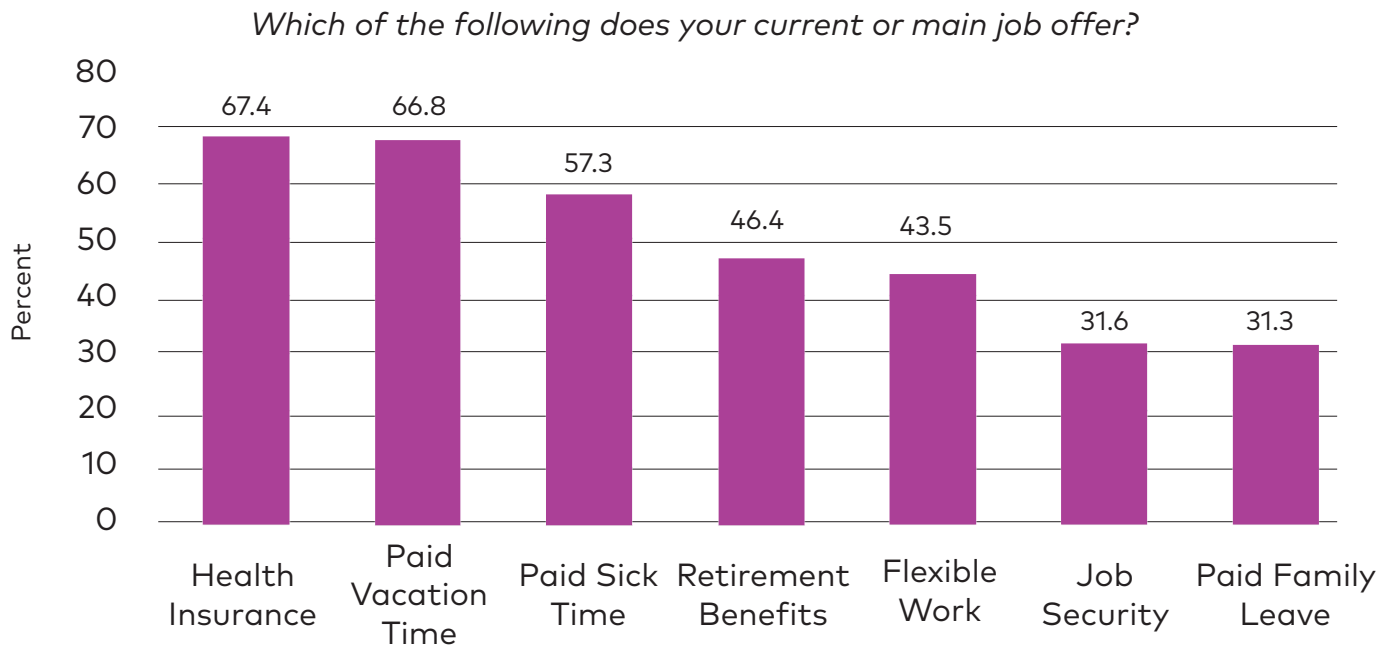
Experts point to increased caregiving responsibilities due to recent COVID surges and closures of day cares, and the working conditions of available jobs, as key factors that may be sidelining women workers and keeping them out of the workforce (Backman 2021).

To increase women's participation and re-entry into the workforce, employers in sectors dominated by women—such as leisure, hospitality, retail, education, and health care—will need to ensure all jobs provide benefits, competitive pay, and security.

Closing the Benefits and Compensation Gap for Women

New survey data from IWPR show there is a gap between the benefits women desire—such as paid leave and fair compensation—and what they currently receive from employers. At least one in three women workers say they lack a critical benefit, including paid leave, health insurance, or job security (Figure 1). However, more than 75 percent of women surveyed rate these benefits in particular to be "very important" or "important" when considering future jobs (Figure 2). **These insights point to a gap that could be holding women back from re-entering the workforce—or leading them to choose some jobs over others.**

FIGURE 1. At Least One in Three Workers Lack a Critical Benefit



Notes: Results are weighted to adjust oversamples to population totals based on Census data. See also Table 1 for breakdown of responses by race/ethnicity, educational attainment, current work schedule, and gender/sexual identity. **Source:** IWPR Survey on the Women’s Employment and Working Conditions collected December 1 to 8, 2021; 1,547 respondents aged 18 and older. (Figure 1 and Table 1 include 896 currently employed respondents.) Washington, DC: Institute for Women’s Policy Research.

Benefits that Matter Most to Women

For many workers, the COVID-19 pandemic brought into sharp focus the need for benefits such as paid sick and family medical leave, health insurance, job security, and schedule flexibility. During the pandemic, workers employed in the hardest-hit sectors faced significant hardship and economic vulnerability, including loss of employment due to illness or caretaking responsibilities (Mason, Flynn, and Sun 2020; Modestino et al. 2021). IWPR’s survey finds that, in light of this, many women consider the core terms of employment—benefits, fair compensation, and flexibility—to be critical factors in accepting a job or returning to the workforce.

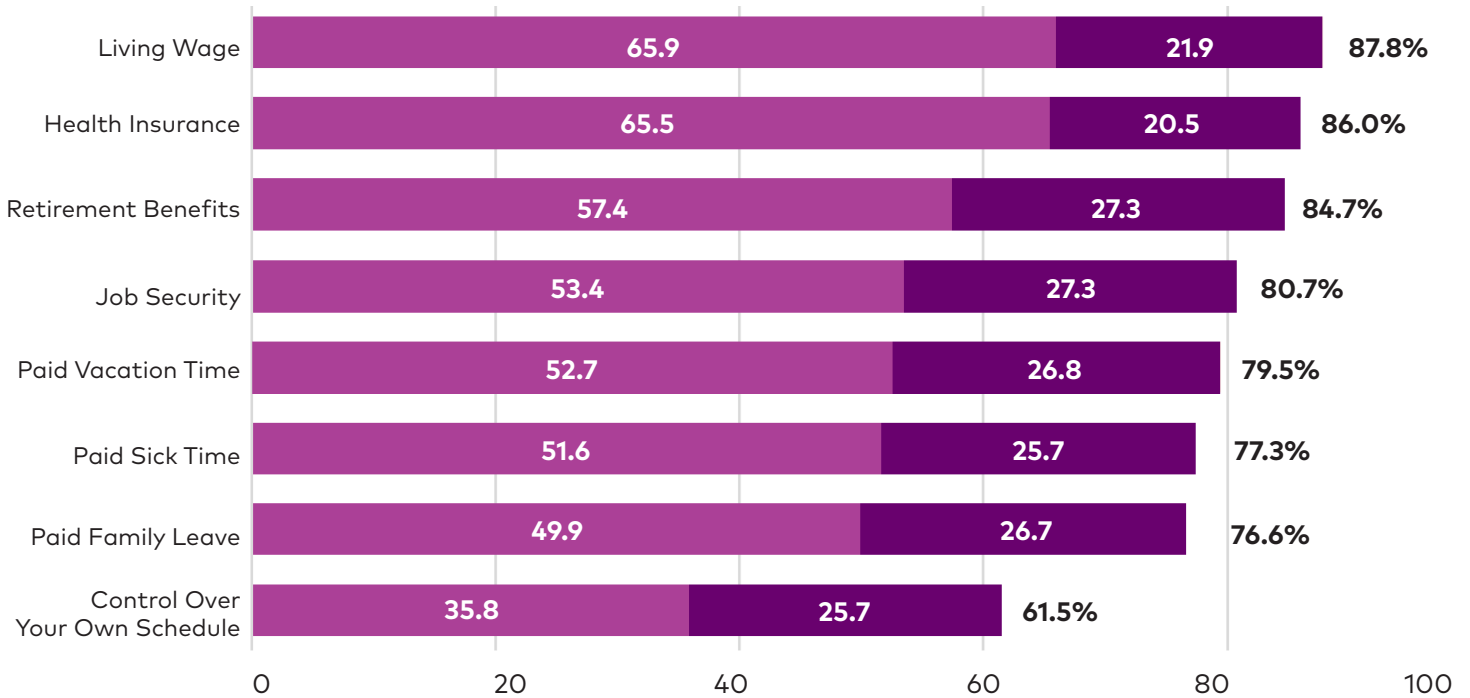
For women surveyed, a living wage (87.8 percent) and health insurance (86.0 percent) are the top two desired benefits (rated “very important” or “important”), followed by retirement benefits (84.7 percent) and job security (80.7 percent). Paid vacation (79.4 percent), paid sick time (77.3 percent), and paid family leave (76.5 percent) are also considerations for workers (Figure 2).

Women with higher levels of educational attainment were more likely to cite pay, and other non-monetary characteristics like flexibility and job security, as important compared to women with a high school diploma or less. For example, 78.0 percent of women holding a Bachelor’s degree rated a living wage to be “very important,” compared to just 56.1 percent of women with a high school diploma or less (Table 2).

In terms of flexibility, 61.5 percent of women surveyed said control of their schedules was “very important” or “important” (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. A Majority of Women Want a Living Wage, Health Insurance, and More

Thinking about future jobs, how important are the following benefits to you?



Notes: Results are weighted to adjust oversamples to population totals based on Census data. See also Table 2 for breakdown of responses by race/ethnicity, educational attainment, current work schedule, and gender/sexual identity.
Source: IWPR Survey on the Women’s Employment and Working Conditions collected December 1 to 8, 2021; 1,547 respondents aged 18 and older. (Figure 2 and Table 2 exclude 78 respondents who reported being retired and not working in 2021.) Washington, DC: Institute for Women’s Policy Research.

Better Pay Is Important for Women Returning to the Workforce

During the pandemic, a significant number of women and working mothers worried about their ability to pay their bills and meet their financial obligations. In an IWPR survey conducted in March of 2021, fifty-three percent of mothers reported being pessimistic about achieving equal pay and felt their employers believed they are less committed to their work (Hayes and Mason 2021).

Earnings still play an important role in women’s considerations for future work. In the survey conducted for this brief, across racial and ethnic groups, nearly nine in ten women (87.8 percent) who plan to re-enter the workforce say a living wage is “very important” or “important” (Figure 2).

Conclusion

As the nation turns toward a full economic recovery for all, getting women back into the workforce will be key. IWPR survey findings suggest improving job quality and working conditions for women, particularly among women of color employed in the hardest-hit sectors, can go a long way to spur re-entry and help sustain employment.

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Photo credit: martin-dm/Getty Images.

TABLE 1. At Least One in Three Workers Lack a Critical Benefit

Which of the following does your current or main job offer?

| | Paid Sick Time | Paid Vacation Time | Paid Family Leave | Health Insurance | Retirement Benefits | Job Security | Flexible Work |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Overall | 57.3 | 66.8 | 31.3 | 67.4 | 46.4 | 31.6 | 43.5 |
| Race/Ethnicity | | | | | | | |
| White | 61.9 | 72.2 | 31.7 | 71.0 | 54.0 | 32.6 | 40.8 |
| Black | 53.9 | 58.9 | 43.5 | 65.7 | 36.2 | 36.4 | 52.3 |
| Hispanic | 56.2 | 55.1 | 31.4 | 58.5 | 34.1 | 23.3 | 46.9 |
| All Other | 40.6 | 65.3 | 19.3 | 65.2 | 38.1 | 35.1 | 43.6 |
| Educational Attainment | | | | | | | |
| HS/GED or Less | 43.2 | 51.1 | 27.4 | 51.2 | 29.9 | 23.1 | 41.8 |
| Some College or Associates | 61.3 | 63.3 | 42.0 | 63.5 | 46.9 | 40.6 | 50.2 |
| Bachelors | 59.5 | 79.1 | 13.6 | 81.3 | 45.6 | 25.1 | 39.4 |
| Graduate or Professional | 73.3 | 87.6 | 38.7 | 88.4 | 75.8 | 38.1 | 39.5 |
| Current Work Schedule | | | | | | | |
| Full-Time | 62.5 | 74.5 | 34.8 | 74.6 | 52.5 | 35.4 | 40.9 |
| Part-Time | 40.8 | 42.4 | 20.3 | 44.6 | 27.3 | 19.8 | 51.7 |
| Gender and Sexual Identity | | | | | | | |
| Straight | 60.8 | 70.2 | 32.1 | 69.7 | 50.2 | 31.1 | 42.6 |
| LGBTQ | 41.9 | 51.4 | 28.2 | 57.1 | 29.9 | 33.9 | 47.4 |

Notes: Results are weighted to adjust oversamples to population totals based on Census data. Women of "all other" racial/ethnic groups include women who self-identified their race/ethnicity as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Other. This category also includes women who selected two or more races/ethnicities.

"Straight" refers to respondents who identified as heterosexual, cisgender women; and "LGBTQ" includes respondents who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or gender nonconforming.

Source: IWPR Survey on the Women's Employment and Working Conditions collected December 1 to 8, 2021. 1,547 respondents aged 18 and older (896 currently employed). Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.

TABLE 2. A Majority of Women Want a Living Wage, Health Insurance, and More

Thinking about future jobs, how important are the following benefits to you?

| | Overall | White | Black | Hispanic | All Other | HS/ GED or Less | Some College or Associates | Bachelors | Graduate or Professional | Full-Time | Part-Time | Not currently employed | Straight | LGBTQ |
|---------------------------|---------|-------|-------|----------|-----------|-----------------|----------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------------------|----------|-------|
| Paid Sick Time | Overall | White | Black | Hispanic | All Other | HS/ GED or Less | Some College or Associates | Bachelors | Graduate or Professional | Full-Time | Part-Time | Not currently employed | Straight | LGBTQ |
| Not important | 5.5 | 3.8 | 17.2 | 3.9 | 3.3 | 7.9 | 6.5 | 2.1 | 0.1 | 2.7 | 7.6 | 8.3 | 5.4 | 5.9 |
| Somewhat important | 17.2 | 15.7 | 15.1 | 17.2 | 27.0 | 17.4 | 19.0 | 18.6 | 9.7 | 18.2 | 22.6 | 13.6 | 16.3 | 21.6 |
| Important | 25.7 | 26.9 | 18.0 | 28.5 | 23.4 | 34.9 | 23.2 | 14.6 | 18.9 | 26.4 | 36.5 | 20.2 | 24.7 | 30.3 |
| Very important | 51.6 | 53.6 | 49.7 | 50.3 | 46.3 | 39.8 | 51.3 | 64.8 | 71.3 | 52.7 | 33.3 | 57.9 | 53.6 | 42.3 |
| A Living Wage | Overall | White | Black | Hispanic | All Other | HS/ GED or Less | Some College or Associates | Bachelors | Graduate or Professional | Full-Time | Part-Time | Not currently employed | Straight | LGBTQ |
| Not important | 2.3 | 1.9 | 5.6 | 2.5 | 0.2 | 4.9 | 1.2 | 0.0 | 0.1 | 0.9 | 1.8 | 4.4 | 2.0 | 3.6 |
| Somewhat important | 9.9 | 6.3 | 16.3 | 15.4 | 9.9 | 12.4 | 10.3 | 8.1 | 3.2 | 9.5 | 9.8 | 10.5 | 9.8 | 10.5 |
| Important | 21.9 | 18.3 | 27.0 | 28.6 | 21.0 | 26.5 | 21.9 | 13.9 | 18.3 | 18.9 | 36.2 | 19.9 | 20.3 | 29.3 |
| Very important | 65.9 | 73.5 | 51.1 | 53.5 | 68.9 | 56.1 | 66.6 | 78.0 | 78.4 | 70.8 | 52.3 | 65.2 | 67.9 | 56.7 |
| Paid Vacation Time | Overall | White | Black | Hispanic | All Other | HS/ GED or Less | Some College or Associates | Bachelors | Graduate or Professional | Full-Time | Part-Time | Not currently employed | Straight | LGBTQ |
| Not important | 5.1 | 4.7 | 7.4 | 5.0 | 4.4 | 7.4 | 5.7 | 1.6 | 0.7 | 3.6 | 8.0 | 5.8 | 4.1 | 9.6 |
| Somewhat important | 15.5 | 13.7 | 23.0 | 18.0 | 10.8 | 18.8 | 18.4 | 7.7 | 8.0 | 12.3 | 30.5 | 13.4 | 14.3 | 21.2 |
| Important | 26.8 | 25.7 | 22.4 | 30.1 | 31.1 | 32.2 | 21.5 | 30.1 | 19.2 | 27.0 | 27.3 | 26.2 | 25.5 | 32.5 |
| Very important | 52.7 | 56.0 | 47.1 | 46.8 | 53.7 | 41.6 | 54.4 | 60.6 | 72.1 | 57.1 | 34.2 | 54.6 | 56.1 | 36.7 |
| Paid Family Leave | Overall | White | Black | Hispanic | All Other | HS/ GED or Less | Some College or Associates | Bachelors | Graduate or Professional | Full-Time | Part-Time | Not currently employed | Straight | LGBTQ |
| Not important | 7.7 | 7.1 | 16.9 | 4.4 | 6.7 | 8.2 | 9.7 | 3.3 | 7.3 | 6.1 | 12.2 | 8.0 | 7.1 | 10.4 |
| Somewhat important | 15.8 | 18.6 | 8.6 | 17.8 | 6.0 | 19.4 | 13.1 | 10.0 | 19.4 | 17.6 | 16.8 | 12.8 | 15.5 | 17.1 |
| Important | 26.7 | 26.3 | 20.1 | 24.3 | 40.4 | 26.0 | 28.5 | 32.1 | 16.0 | 29.2 | 36.2 | 19.2 | 26.1 | 29.0 |
| Very important | 49.9 | 48.1 | 54.4 | 53.5 | 46.9 | 46.5 | 48.8 | 54.5 | 57.3 | 47.0 | 34.9 | 60.1 | 51.3 | 43.5 |
| Health Insurance | Overall | White | Black | Hispanic | All Other | HS/ GED or Less | Some College or Associates | Bachelors | Graduate or Professional | Full-Time | Part-Time | Not currently employed | Straight | LGBTQ |
| Not important | 5.2 | 6.4 | 5.8 | 2.6 | 3.7 | 9.0 | 2.6 | 4.3 | 1.3 | 3.5 | 8.3 | 6.2 | 4.9 | 6.6 |
| Somewhat important | 8.9 | 6.6 | 11.0 | 15.0 | 6.0 | 14.7 | 6.3 | 3.9 | 3.9 | 8.5 | 9.1 | 9.2 | 8.1 | 12.2 |
| Important | 20.5 | 17.9 | 26.2 | 19.6 | 28.4 | 25.8 | 20.2 | 15.2 | 11.3 | 22.6 | 21.0 | 17.4 | 19.0 | 27.4 |
| Very important | 65.5 | 69.2 | 57.0 | 62.9 | 61.9 | 50.5 | 70.9 | 76.6 | 83.5 | 65.4 | 61.6 | 67.3 | 68.0 | 53.9 |

| Retirement Benefits | Overall | White | Black | Hispanic | All Other | HS/GED or Less | Some College or Associates | Bachelors | Graduate or Professional | Full-Time | Part-Time | Not currently employed | Straight | LGBTQ |
|---------------------------------------|---------|-------|-------|----------|-----------|----------------|----------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------------------|----------|-------|
| Not important | 4.6 | 4.7 | 6.9 | 2.8 | 4.3 | 6.8 | 2.7 | 2.2 | 5.7 | 3.5 | 6.3 | 5.3 | 3.8 | 8.1 |
| Somewhat important | 10.8 | 8.4 | 13.7 | 17.5 | 6.6 | 16.0 | 9.0 | 3.1 | 9.7 | 11.5 | 14.0 | 8.4 | 8.9 | 19.6 |
| Important | 27.3 | 28.7 | 28.7 | 20.4 | 32.1 | 31.4 | 28.7 | 24.3 | 14.7 | 29.6 | 28.8 | 23.6 | 26.8 | 29.6 |
| Very important | 57.4 | 58.2 | 50.7 | 59.3 | 57.0 | 45.9 | 59.5 | 70.3 | 70.0 | 55.5 | 50.9 | 62.6 | 60.5 | 42.7 |
| Job Security | Overall | White | Black | Hispanic | All Other | HS/GED or Less | Some College or Associates | Bachelors | Graduate or Professional | Full-Time | Part-Time | Not currently employed | Straight | LGBTQ |
| Not important | 4.5 | 3.3 | 9.7 | 4.9 | 3.7 | 7.4 | 3.1 | 3.6 | 0.1 | 1.2 | 6.2 | 8.1 | 4.1 | 6.2 |
| Somewhat important | 14.8 | 13.5 | 18.8 | 17.6 | 11.7 | 17.9 | 13.0 | 8.8 | 18.8 | 12.4 | 31.7 | 11.0 | 15.0 | 13.9 |
| Important | 27.3 | 28.7 | 24.8 | 22.1 | 32.9 | 25.5 | 30.5 | 31.5 | 18.8 | 27.2 | 32.2 | 25.4 | 25.6 | 35.1 |
| Very important | 53.4 | 54.5 | 46.7 | 55.5 | 51.7 | 49.3 | 53.5 | 56.2 | 62.3 | 59.3 | 30.0 | 55.5 | 55.2 | 44.9 |
| Control Over Your Own Schedule | Overall | White | Black | Hispanic | All Other | HS/GED or Less | Some College or Associates | Bachelors | Graduate or Professional | Full-Time | Part-Time | Not currently employed | Straight | LGBTQ |
| Not important | 10.2 | 9.9 | 14.3 | 12.1 | 3.2 | 18.8 | 6.3 | 1.9 | 5.1 | 10.0 | 14.3 | 8.7 | 10.2 | 10.2 |
| Somewhat important | 28.4 | 29.8 | 24.4 | 27.1 | 28.2 | 27.0 | 26.1 | 33.2 | 32.1 | 32.0 | 35.9 | 20.4 | 28.5 | 27.9 |
| Important | 25.7 | 23.1 | 33.9 | 24.1 | 31.9 | 24.0 | 31.4 | 26.7 | 14.1 | 30.6 | 25.4 | 19.3 | 25.6 | 26.2 |
| Very important | 35.8 | 37.2 | 27.4 | 36.7 | 36.8 | 30.3 | 36.2 | 38.3 | 48.6 | 27.5 | 24.4 | 51.6 | 35.8 | 35.8 |

Notes: Results are weighted to adjust oversamples to population totals based on Census data. Women of "all other" racial/ethnic groups include women who self-identified their race/ethnicity as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, or Other. This category also includes women who selected two or more races/ethnicities.

"Straight" refers to respondents who identified as heterosexual, cisgender women; and "LGBTQ" includes respondents who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or gender nonconforming.

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