

Diversity and Inclusion

COVID-19's impact on Asian American workers: Six key insights

As Asian Americans strive for equity in the workplace, the COVID-19 crisis has created additional challenges. Six insights show how the pandemic has affected this group.

by Grace Hua, Jess Huang, Samuel Huang, and Lareina Yee



Introduction

This past year has brought to light some of the harrowing challenges that the Asian American community continues to face and that have often gone ignored or unaddressed.

For Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, we have curated a series of charts based on survey data from McKinsey's latest Women in the Workplace report, created in partnership with LeanIn.Org, to underscore the current challenges that Asian American workers are experiencing and to chart a path forward to help support them.

In this article:

- 1 Asian Americans faced steep drop-offs in workplace representation at senior levels even before the COVID-19 pandemic.**

- 2 Breaking down the data by Asian American subgroups reveals sharper challenges faced by East and Southeast Asian American employees.**

- 3 Remote-working conditions have taken a toll on Asian American women, especially compared with their white female and male counterparts.**

- 4 Asian Americans, and particularly Asian American women, have reported a marked increase in domestic responsibilities since the COVID-19 crisis.**

- 5 Due to the challenges of COVID-19, more Asian American women have considered taking a step back from work compared with Asian American men.**

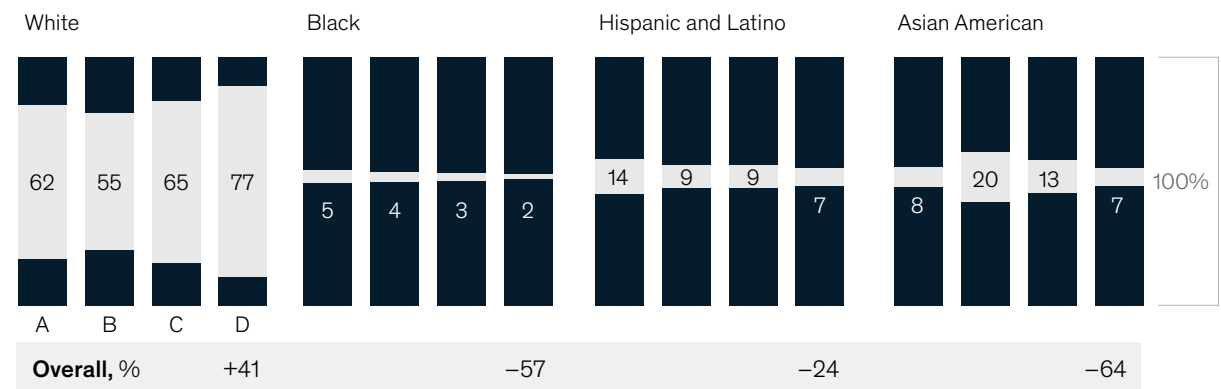
- 6 Asian Americans feel they have less opportunity to advance in the workplace.**

The share of Asian American women at senior levels is 39 percent lower than at entry-level positions. Asian American men experience an even steeper drop-off, with 64 percent less representation at senior levels compared with entry-level positions.

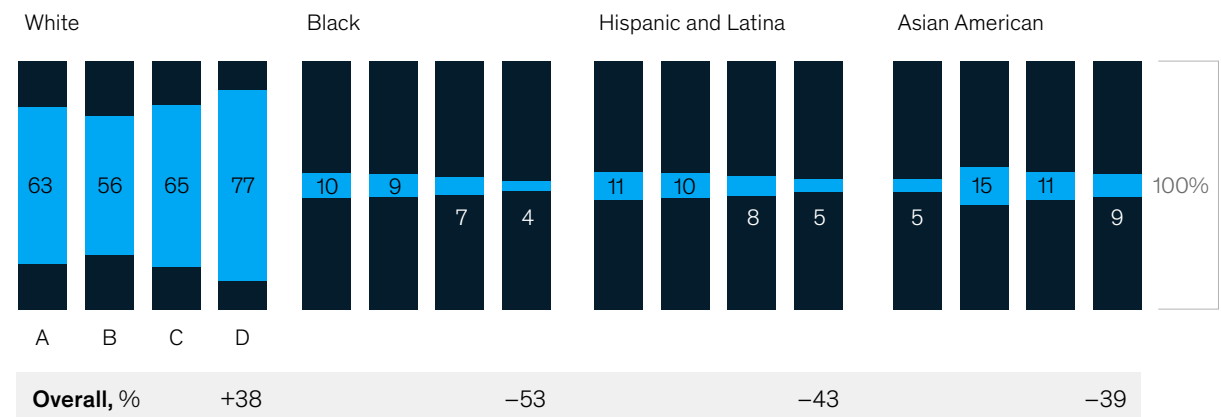
It is important to note that Asian Americans aren't the only ones facing this representation challenge; Black as well as Hispanic and Latino employees also experience drop-offs in the share of representation at senior levels.

Asian Americans faced steep drop-offs in workplace representation at senior levels even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Male professionals by role category, % A = field employee; B = entry level; C = management; D = senior leadership



Female professionals by role category, % A = field employee; B = entry level; C = management; D = senior leadership



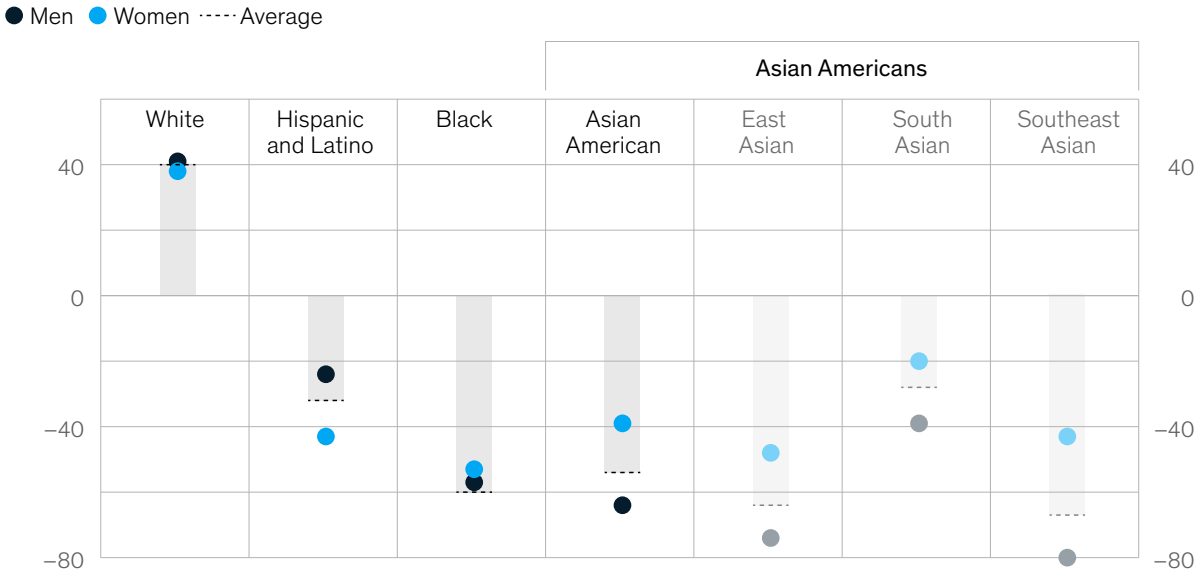
Source: *Women in the Workplace 2020*, LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2020. The report is based on research from 317 companies across Canada and the United States, building on similar research conducted annually by McKinsey and LeanIn.Org since 2015, as well as research from McKinsey in 2012

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Breaking down the data further reveals additional insights. East and Southeast Asian American men in particular experience the steepest drop-off among all groups—the share of East and Southeast Asian American men at senior levels is 74 and 80 percent lower, respectively, than at entry-level positions.

Breaking down the data by Asian American subgroups reveals sharper challenges faced by East and Southeast Asian American employees.

Change in share of American professionals from entry level to senior leadership, %



Source: *Women in the Workplace 2020*, LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2020. The report is based on research from 317 companies across Canada and the United States, building on similar research conducted annually by McKinsey and LeanIn.Org since 2015, as well as research from McKinsey in 2012

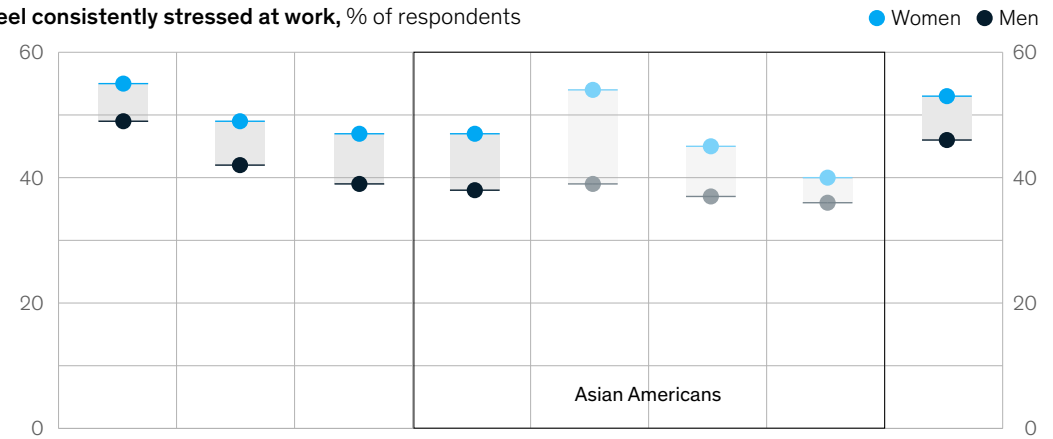
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The pandemic has upended businesses everywhere, forcing many employees to adapt to new working styles, which has not come without its challenges. Most Asian American women have reported feeling stressed, exhausted, and burned out at work because of the effects of the COVID-19 crisis.

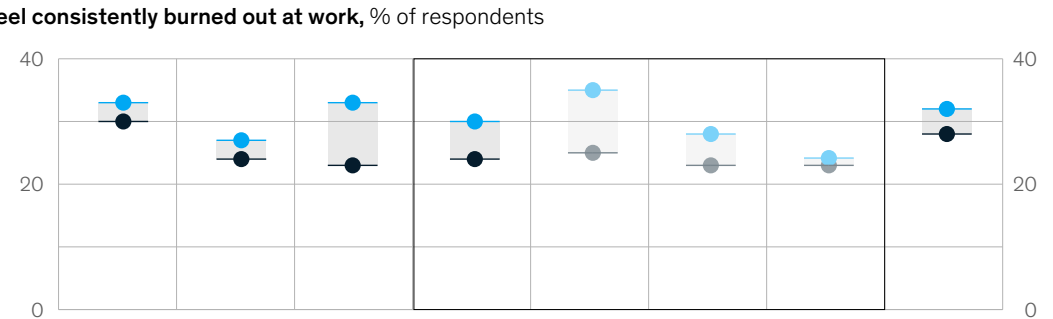
For more on how the pandemic has affected the Asian American community, see McKinsey's report on advancing Asian American recovery during COVID-19.

Remote-working conditions have taken a toll on Asian American women, especially compared with their white female and male counterparts.

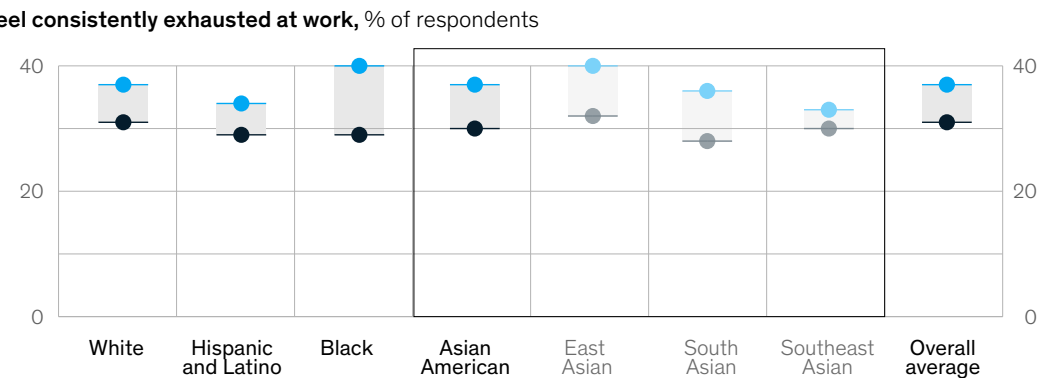
Feel consistently stressed at work, % of respondents



Feel consistently burned out at work, % of respondents



Feel consistently exhausted at work, % of respondents



Source: *Women in the Workplace 2020*, LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2020. The report is based on research from 317 companies across Canada and the United States, building on similar research conducted annually by McKinsey and LeanIn.Org since 2015, as well as research from McKinsey in 2012

Asian American women and men shouldered the largest increase of household responsibilities since the beginning of the pandemic. Asian American women in particular have experienced the greatest increase in responsibilities among all groups while also balancing work.

Asian Americans, and particularly Asian American women, have reported a marked increase in domestic responsibilities since the COVID-19 crisis.



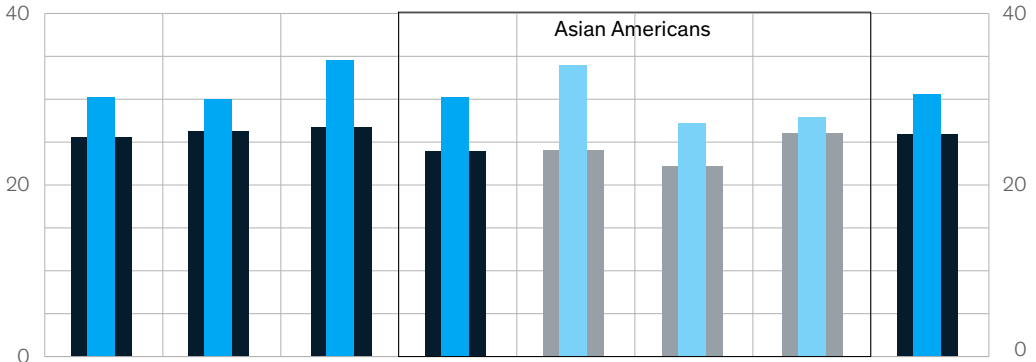
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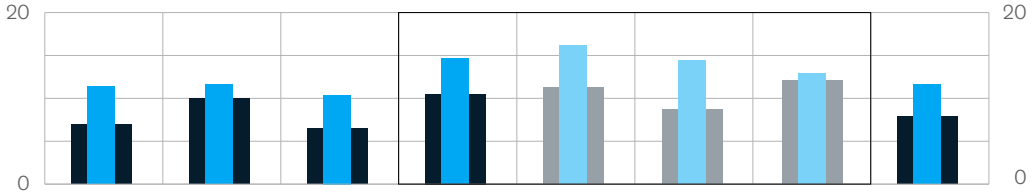
According to the Women in the Workplace study, 30 percent of Asian American women indicated that they have considered downshifting their careers, either through reducing work hours, taking a leave of absence, or switching to a less demanding job. Asian American women were 14 percent more likely to cite increased household responsibilities as a direct reason for why they are considering stepping back from work.

Due to the challenges of COVID-19, more Asian American women have considered taking a step back from work compared with Asian American men.

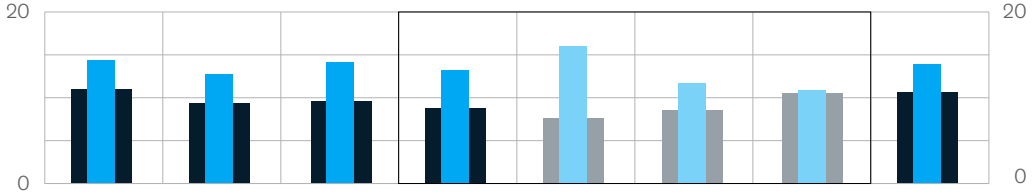
Generally consider taking a step back since start of COVID-19 crisis, % of respondents ● Women ● Men



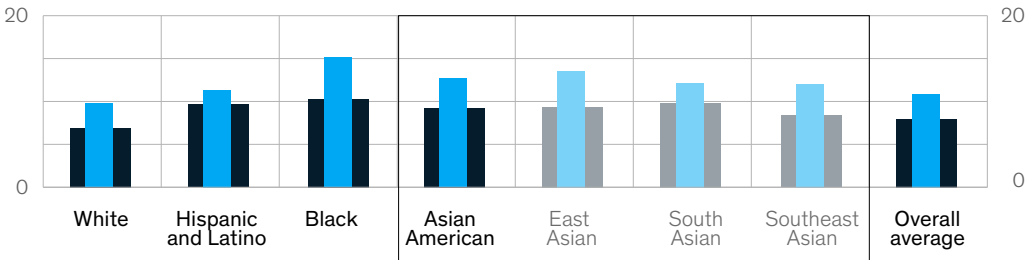
Generally consider reducing hours since start of COVID-19 crisis, % of respondents



Generally consider switching job since start of COVID-19 crisis, % of respondents



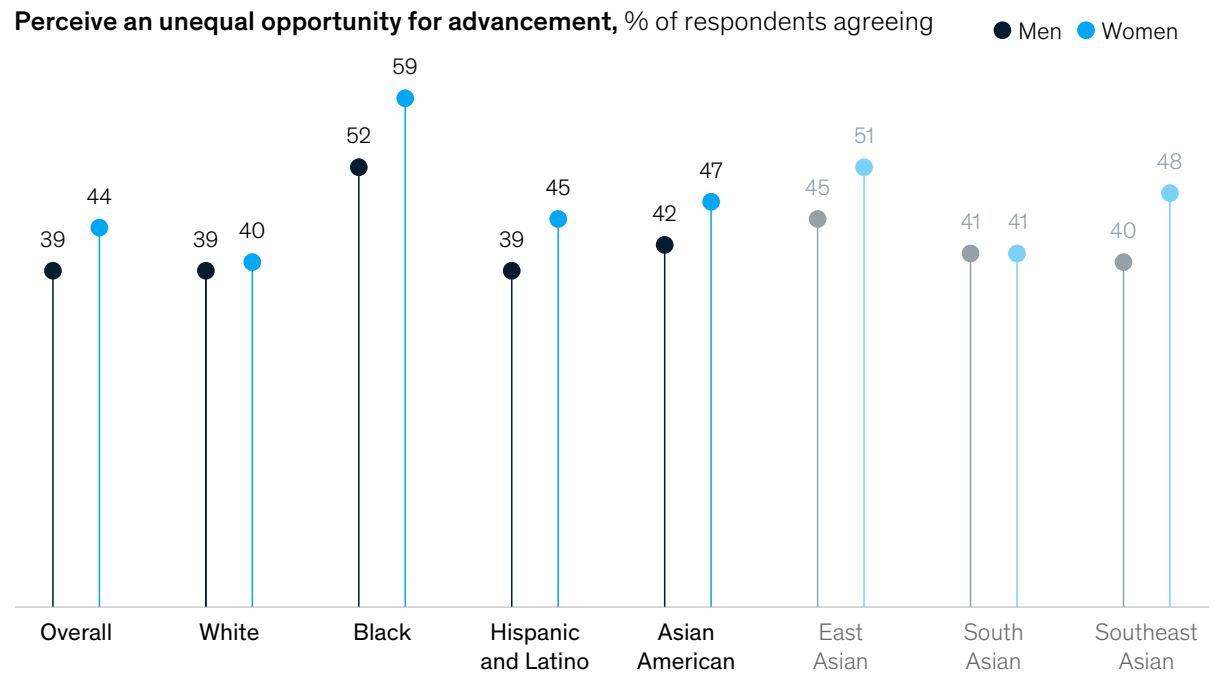
Generally consider taking leave since start of COVID-19 crisis, % of respondents



Source: *Women in the Workplace 2020*, LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2020. The report is based on research from 317 companies across Canada and the United States, building on similar research conducted annually by McKinsey and LeanIn.Org since 2015, as well as research from McKinsey in 2012.

Scaling back work may be particularly harmful for Asian American career trajectories. The combination of existing inequities in representation and new burdens of added psychological stress, remote working, and household responsibilities compounds the challenges that Asian Americans face with respect to workplace advancement.

Asian Americans feel they have less opportunity to advance in the workplace.



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A path forward

Achieving equity in the workplace includes understanding and addressing the challenges that Asian American workers experience. To advance a more nuanced approach to workplace diversity, inclusion, and equity, we have compiled the following actions for organizations to consider:

1. Recognize and diagnose representation challenges along the promotion pipeline.

Asian American representation across tenures will differ for each organization. Collecting disaggregated data by gender and ethnicity can help identify drop-offs during recruitment, promotion, and retention. Since the Asian American experience can vary significantly across subgroups because of historical immigration trends and cultural differences, further disaggregating the data can reveal important insights.

2. Mitigate implicit and unconscious bias during promotion and performance evaluations.

Unconscious bias can have a tangible effect on hiring, promotion, and compensation outcomes. Diversity and inclusion trainings for all employees, as well as implicit bias training for evaluators and managers, can serve as a first step to actively correct for potential associations of cultural differences with professional weaknesses.

3. For Asian American leaders and allies alike, foster sponsorship for lower-tenure Asian American employees.

Sponsorship—more so than simply mentorship—involves providing honest coaching, creating career opportunities, and “pounding the table” for earlier-stage employees. Given the lack of representation of Asian American leaders in the workplace already, this responsibility cannot fall solely on their shoulders. Other allies can also lean in and provide sponsorship opportunities to actively help nurture the next generation of Asian American leaders.

4. Expand workplace flexibility and support.

Asian American workers have been feeling the stresses of combined work and household responsibilities since the start of the COVID-19 crisis. Workplace benefits such as expanded paid sick leave, concierge services, and childcare support can greatly benefit workers who are balancing professional and home commitments.

The Asian American experience varies significantly across subgroups because of historical immigration trends and cultural data, so further disaggregating the data can reveal important insights.

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