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**THE LEADERSHIP COUNCIL FOR
WOMEN IN NATIONAL SECURITY**

WOMEN ON THE EDGE: COVID-19 and working in national security

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Executive Summary

COVID-19 has disrupted life for many Americans. Minority populations and working women are facing an especially difficult time. COVID-19 has only increased existing disparities, placing an often unmanageable care burden on working women. Many women are considering leaving the workforce or downshifting to better accommodate their work-life balance during the pandemic. Women who work in the national security space are no exception. In fact, the federal government presents some of the more work restrictive environments. We set out to find out the impact of the pandemic on women in national security.

In the summer and fall of 2020, LCWINS sent out a survey via email and social media to our network of several thousand national security professionals in order to better understand what challenges women in national security are facing as a result of COVID-19. We received 381 responses. To our knowledge, this survey was the only one of its kind. We asked participants how COVID-19 had impacted their career plans, what policies their offices had in place, and what other policies they would like to see implemented. Our team hypothesized that COVID-19 would be pushing women in national security to “lean out,” just at the time LCWINS has been working to create increased opportunities for women to “lean in” to leadership positions. After closing the survey, we conducted a listening session with nine of the respondents. We presented them with our findings and asked them another series of questions in order to help us gain insights into our survey data.

Our investigation into COVID-19’s impact on our community was not intended to be rigorously scientific, but rather to uncover a narrative from women in our network to learn about their biggest obstacles during the pandemic. Not only did we want to learn about the biggest problems that women in national security were facing, but also where there might be opportunities to make meaningful and lasting changes. We learned many valuable lessons. While many of our respondents and listening session participants echoed some of the suggestions presented in the background literature, such as the desire for additional dependent care support, many emphasized that flexibility, transparency and predictability were more important. Notably, the private sector was viewed as presenting a desirable alternative to federal government service due to its comparable flexibility, transparency and predictability.

Through our investigation, we found that the pandemic presents an opportunity for change. We should not seek to return to the pre-COVID normal for the national security work-force. Instead, COVID should compel a new standard for national security employees by improving transparency with the hiring process, implementing consistent family-leave and dependent care policies, and increasing workplace flexibility. These changes would benefit all federal employees, not just women. The pandemic is an opportunity to change the culture within government for the better and introduce and maintain flexible work options to help recruit and retain talent, as well as improve work life balance for government workers.

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Introduction

At the initial peak of stay-at-home orders in late March through early April 2020, [62% of Americans](#) were working remotely. The pandemic forced many employers, including the federal government, to reconsider standard work practices and shift towards more flexible policies, such as remote work or alternative work schedules. While some employers have implemented more flexible work options, others, including many government agencies and offices, have not adapted with flexibility for their employees.

It has been reported widely that the repercussions of the pandemic have hit women particularly hard. Women are more likely to take on the [increased care burdens](#) caused by COVID-19, such as caring for children when schools are closed or looking after vulnerable elderly relatives. Our members discussed the difficulties they faced in balancing care obligations with their demanding careers before the pandemic. Childcare complications caused by the coronavirus pandemic have worsened these burdens. Add these care obligations to the many additional hours of [unpaid housework](#) and household management that women do each week, relative to men, and the burden becomes too strenuous to manage, especially for those in demanding and high-stress careers, such as in the national security sector.

“I think that [childcare] ends up being a real barrier unless you have either a dual income household or your partner or whoever can help support this or you have family nearby. For families that don't have that kind of situation, particularly if you are maybe a more junior person in your career, but you have a family, I think that limits your opportunities and ability and therefore that impacts your long term career as well. If you aren't as competitive because you have to make tradeoffs for child care, that takes you out of experiences and the pipeline for some careers.”

The already difficult balancing act between work and home life for many women in the national security sector has been further stressed by COVID-19. What's more, the December jobs report showed that 140,000 jobs were lost -- all belonging to women. Several of our listening session participants told us that COVID-19 has caused their carefully scheduled routines to break down, and as a result it has made them unable to lean into their careers in national security.

One in four women is now considering downshifting her career or [leaving the workforce](#) because of COVID-19. Women in national security are no exception. Some of our members told us that they were considering leaving government, and others are wary of leaning in because of inconsistent COVID-19 workplace policies, hiring transparency, and general job flexibility.

“I was actually offered a position with DoD during July and I didn't take it. Not just because of COVID particularly, but because of the human resources response that I got to questions related to flexibility and teleworking and issues of moving my family and not

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being given proper answers that I could work with. So it actually had an effect on me joining government.”

If midlevel women exit the workforce now, it may [leave a gap](#) in the future of women holding in leadership roles. This would be a terrible loss, because having women in political leadership leads to many positive outcomes. Women in leadership tend to, more often than men, [work across party lines](#) to find solutions. As LCWINS’ member [Madeleine Albright said](#), women in political leadership “can be counted on to raise issues that others overlook, to support ideas that others oppose, and to seek an end to abuses that others accept.” This pandemic could have far reaching and long-term [negative effects on gender equality](#) in the workforce if not properly addressed. That said, there are policies and adaptations that employers in the public and private sector can enact to help women cope with the increased stressors of COVID-19, such as permanent paid family medical leave, flexible work schedules, and enhanced telework opportunities.

“The idea that COVID-19 is making it less likely that women will serve is a cop out because we know what will increase women's participation in jobs. And we have the research, we know what women need. And if it's not being done, it's because people don't care enough.”

Prior to the pandemic, only 26% of public sector employees had [paid family and medical leave](#). Some employers have tried to implement additional policies to help their employees manage the challenges of COVID-19. However, according to a survey conducted by LeanIn.org and SurveyMonkey of 3,117 adults in the US, [only 41%](#) of respondents surveyed said that their employer had implemented policies to allow for more flexibility. The [FFCRA and the CARES Act](#) have provided temporary relief for working parents, but permanent federal paid parental leave policies are non-existent. After the original FFCRA Act expired on December 31, 2020, employers are [no longer be required](#) to provide paid leave to employees who become sick with COVID-19 or leave for employees who are unable to work because of childcare responsibilities.

The Office of Personnel Management released [guidelines for federal agencies](#) to permit maximum telework flexibility as well flexible work schedules (FWS). OPM also permitted agencies to grant special evacuation leave, as deemed appropriate by office management. Despite these potential policy options, many federal employees are not able to take advantage of these policies because individual components and managers have applied OPM’s guidance [inconsistently](#). Many members of our community have expressed frustration with the disparities in COVID-19 rules and regulations.

In addition to the inconsistent application of federal working policies, the government has had difficulty scaling up its telework capacity. Remote work was not an entirely new concept for parts of the federal workforce, but telework was not used on a massive scale prior to COVID-19 lockdowns, especially not in the national security arena. Many government agencies have needed to improve their telework technologies, with better VPNs or larger networks capable of handling a high volume of

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teleworkers. A [Federal News Network survey](#) of 1,047 federal employees found technology was a common concern, with respondents saying their agency's VPNs or other networks cannot handle the increased load. Many federal employers and IT specialists cite [cybersecurity concerns](#) as a major issue that needs addressing in this age of increased remote work. There is also a new need for the [proper training](#) to make sure that all workers are able to telework effectively.

The private sector has embraced new ways to work spurred by the pandemic. In a [survey by PWC](#), more than half of employers surveyed said that they think their employees will continue to work remotely at least one day each week after the pandemic is over. In the same survey, [83% of employees](#) said that they would want the option to telework at least one day per week permanently. Additionally, 57% of employers plan to give their employees greater [flexibility in work hours](#).

In [the federal government](#), some offices are also evaluating telework options for the long term. Before the pandemic, only [22% of federal employees](#) teleworked during 2018. After COVID-19 and stay-at-home orders began, [75% of federal employees](#) began teleworking and have continued to work remotely throughout the pandemic. However, in the national security space, adaptation has been slower and with mixed results. The intelligence community and other national security agencies that rely on clearance-based work are evaluating how to become [more flexible](#), such as through alternating work schedules or rotating shifts. The [CIO of the NSA](#) specified that remote classified work from secure facilities around the world is in the plans for the IC, but the capacity for employees to do classified work from home is unlikely to be an option. It is unclear how the public sector will use flexible work options after the pandemic is over. This is a moment for the government to catch up to the telework and flexible work schedules employed in the private sector.

"I think if you do see a drain of people leaving the national security sector, it's going to be because they've realized that those remote options are out there, and it may be better for their work-life balance."

Our Survey

As an advocacy organization working to support women leaning into leadership positions in national security, LCWINS wanted to understand how COVID-19 has impacted women in national security and whether the pandemic might be pushing them to "lean out" of the workforce. In 2020, LCWINS conducted this survey to understand. The survey was sent out during the summer and once again in the fall to the LCWINS email list and through various social media channels. In total, 381 people responded to the survey, which asked different questions of those currently serving or not currently serving in government. Of those currently serving in government, respondents represented a variety of national security-related agencies. The gender breakdown was as follows: 359 respondents identified as women, 19 identified as men, one preferred not to answer, and two respondents skipped the question. When we asked our respondents if they were currently in government, 36.48% of participants responded that they currently work for the U.S. government, and 63.52% do not currently serve in government. The

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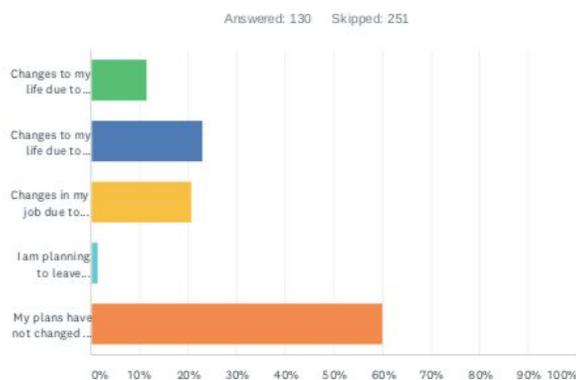
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plurality of respondents were aged 35-44 (38.85%), followed by 25-34 (24.15%), and 45-54 (15.22%). After we compiled our survey results, we selected nine of the survey respondents in order to conduct a listening session. We wanted to dig deeper into the data and gain a better understanding of our survey results.

Our Results

In our survey, we asked those who are currently working in government how the pandemic had impacted their willingness to continue to serve in government. While the majority of our respondents said that their career plans were unchanged due to COVID, more than half did respond that the pandemic had some type of negative impact on their career.

Q10 How has COVID impacted your willingness to continue to serve in government? (Select all that apply.)



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Changes to my life due to COVID are making it difficult for me to succeed in my government career	11.54% 15
Changes to my life due to COVID are making it difficult for me to fulfill my duties effectively at work	23.08% 30
Changes in my job due to COVID make me less happy at work and less interested in staying in government	20.77% 27
I am planning to leave government due to the impact of COVID on my life	1.54% 2
My plans have not changed due to COVID	60.00% 78
Total Respondents: 130	

We also asked those who were not currently working in government if COVID had impacted their potential interest in government service. We wanted to know if COVID-19 would make people less likely to pursue government service, perhaps because of the increased care burdens or the uncertain nature of working during a pandemic. When we asked our respondents who were not currently in government how the pandemic had impacted their interest in government service, almost 30% said that the pandemic has negatively impacted their potential desire to work in government. For many, the COVID-19 pandemic has meant downshifting or leaning out, but, surprisingly, for others, COVID-19 is a time to lean into government service. We were very interested to learn that nearly a quarter of the respondents said that they were more interested in government service because of COVID-19.

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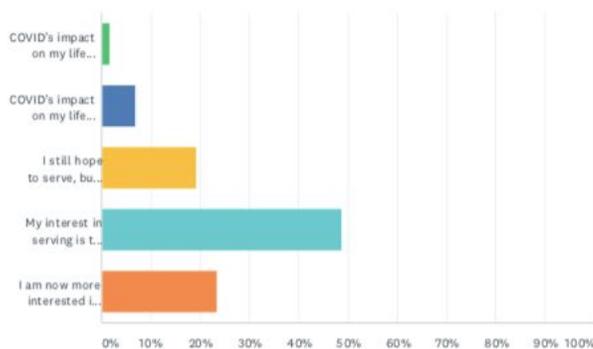
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We asked our listening session participants why they thought that survey respondents would be more interested in government service during COVID-19. Several participants said that they personally were more drawn to public service. Many echoed a similar rationale: they saw the issues that COVID-19 created or exacerbated in the United States, and felt the need to act and serve their country. We heard this especially from women without care burdens; in some cases, COVID-19 has created enhanced career opportunities for those without external demands on their time.

“I could see the country suffering so much, not only just because of COVID-19, but also because of all of the things that COVID brought up, all of the inequalities and all of the racial divisions. Everything that came up because of COVID-19 made me more inspired to serve publicly.”

Q12 How has COVID impacted your interest in possibly serving in the U.S. government?

Answered: 234 Skipped: 147



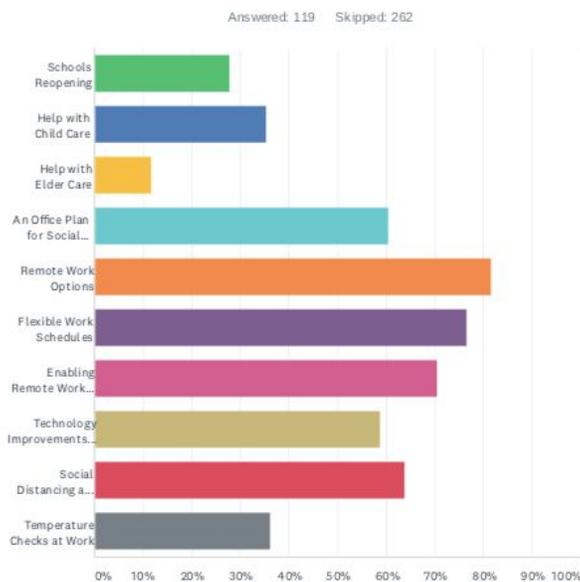
ANSWER CHOICES	PERCENTAGE	RESPONSES
COVID's impact on my life makes it impossible for me to serve	1.71%	4
COVID's impact on my life makes it less likely I will serve	6.84%	16
I still hope to serve, but COVID makes me less likely to serve	19.23%	45
My interest in serving is the same as before COVID	48.72%	114
I am now more interested in serving in government than before COVID	23.50%	55
TOTAL		234

We also asked participants what changes would make them more likely to potentially serve or to continue to serve in government. In much of the literature on COVID-19 and women, unpaid care labor is cited as a major factor in causing women to reconsider their careers and [leave the workforce](#). Many women in the broader workforce feel that they cannot manage both the increased care burdens caused by COVID-19 and their full-time professional careers. In fact, at the time of publication, the latest jobs report showed that the government lost [45,000 jobs](#) in December 2020, and women accounted for 91.1% of

those losses.

We expected that our participants would respond that they wanted more childcare or dependent care options, but we were surprised to learn that our respondents, many of whom are women working in demanding jobs in national security, were less interested in care support and more interested in flexible work policies, such as telework options and flexible work schedules. In our survey, between 70 and 80% of respondents said that they wanted remote work options, flexible work schedules, and/or remote work with classified information. Only 35%, 28%, and 12% of our survey respondents said that help with childcare, schools reopening, or help with elder care, respectively, would make them more likely to serve or to continue to serve. It is clear that flexibility is becoming increasingly important to workers in national security.

Q13 If you said that COVID was affecting your views on working in government, what changes would make you more likely to serve or continue to serve? (Select any or all that apply.)



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Schools Reopening	27.73% 33
Help with Child Care	35.29% 42
Help with Elder Care	11.76% 14
An Office Plan for Social Distancing	60.50% 72
Remote Work Options	81.51% 97
Flexible Work Schedules	76.47% 91
Enabling Remote Work with Classified Info	70.59% 84
Technology Improvements for Remote Work	58.82% 70
Social Distancing and Mask-Wearing Laws/Regulations	63.87% 76
Temperature Checks at Work	36.13% 43
Total Respondents: 119	

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When we delved deeper and heard from our listening session participants, many informed us that additional care support would be nice, but they primarily wanted flexibility within their work to allow them to accommodate their personal lives and responsibilities. Childcare was not viewed as an end-all solution. Several listening session participants cited that their previous childcare arrangements merely allowed them to “barely hold it together” prior to the pandemic.

“COVID-19 and the pandemic just makes me less available to take on those positions [in national security]. I can't be in a SCIF five days a week where a nanny or a carpool in a school can't call me if they need to. I can't travel around the world on a moment's notice. I was barely holding it together before. ... I was able to work more hours because at least my husband and I had a system in place. We knew where the kids were at any given hour. ... But there was a system in place that's now just gone”

A lack of consistency within and across agencies for COVID-19 policies was another one of the major concerns that our listening session participants reiterated. While OPM provided general guidelines to federal agencies, it left a great deal of room for discretion for each individual office. Our participants emphasized that the inconsistencies among agencies, and even among offices within the same agency, made it difficult to know what COVID-19 work options they might be permitted to utilize. This inconsistency also meant that some of our respondents were hesitant to consider promotions or apply for better jobs because of fears that their new office and manager might not provide them with the same policies as their current position. They were electing to stick with the “devil they know” over the uncertainty of a new position with new supervisors who might not be as generous with COVID-19 flexibility. In this way, COVID-19 and the uneven application of flexibility policies has kept some, especially women, from leaning in and trying to advance their careers.

“The way that rules and regulations are being implemented, not quite or not at all uniformly from office to office, I think has a big impact. I'm fortunate right now that I have a great supervisor who's very flexible and has been very understanding of my situation of having a small kid at home. But I have hesitated in applying for other jobs that would be a promotion for me because either I know the manager is not as flexible or supportive or I at least know what I'm getting with my current office. Right now, I'm not feeling like I'm in the position to be able to move anywhere without some certainty that I would have at least the same amount of support.”

Transparency topped our participants' list when it comes to being hired. They said that they wanted transparency and predictability in the hiring process, so that they would fully understand the demands of a position before applying. Many of the women in our listening session shared the same frustrations with government job postings: they are too often vague about important details such as the position's responsibilities, the position's location, and the potential travel demands. Our participants also

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wanted management to be transparent about their expectations, and they wanted clarity related to the office's COVID-19 policies.

"I did not apply for a couple of SES positions this year of COVID because I didn't know how much time I'd have to spend in a SCIF, if the SCIF would be at the Pentagon or Quantico. I didn't know how much work life balance would actually be allowed in this job. ... But there's still such a lack of transparency into what exactly am I applying for? What's this job really going to be like, what's really expected of me in this role? ... And that's the thing that really keeps me from leaning in too much, because it's a lot of work to apply for a government job, especially at the SES level. There's a lot of documentation needed. It's a lot of hours of my life to fill out that application just to get to the end and to think that I might not actually end up wanting this."

The painfully slow hiring process can hinder the government from hiring the best people. The delays imposed by the bureaucratic hiring process can cause offices to lose out on qualified candidates who turn to other offers. We learned that people on both sides of the federal hiring process want to see it improved.

"The amount of time that it takes to list a position and to hire a position from the federal manager side is incredibly long compared to the private sector. ... At least I know for my office that's been on both sides, we've had senior level positions that have been vacant for years because it is taking so much time to review the PD and get it back out on the street ... We've lost out on talented people because in between their interview and when we could actually offer them the job, they've taken another position because they can't wait around for us to tell them, 'Congratulations, you've received this job'. They say, 'Thanks, but we've taken something better' or something that was immediately available because they needed a salary."

Conclusion

Nearly twice as many working parents say they want a **flexible work life than did before the pandemic hit**. In an [independent survey](#) by Wandera, 86% of surveyed working parents now want to work flexibly, compared to 46% pre-coronavirus. Government agencies that were previously uninvested in flexible work schedules and telework must now seize the chance to overhaul their structure and implement more accommodating work options for their employees. If not, the government may risk losing out on talented and dedicated public servants. Flexibility has the potential to cause [positive long-term effects](#) and improve employee satisfaction and retention.

"I think one positive thing is [the COVID-19 pandemic] has highlighted that more flexible arrangements make you feel like you're doing more than just barely holding it together. So that's a real opportunity here."



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The national security workforce should not seek to return to the pre-COVID normal. Many employers in the private sector are planning to continue the flexible policies such as increased telework and flexible work schedules for the long term, and the public sector would benefit from similar adaptations. It is a moment for the national security apparatus to create a new standard that includes improving transparency with the hiring process, implementing consistent family-leave and dependent care policies, and increasing workplace flexibility. These changes would ultimately benefit all federal employees, not just women.

“There needs to be a reframing of the discussion as well. Flexibility does not equal lower commitment. And, certainly, becoming a mom made me far more efficient. I look at some of my colleagues like me, and it's just that you get things done faster. ... It's not just all flexibility, less commitment. ... It's just a different way of working. I currently work. I have a global team. I'm on the phone all hours. I work as much as I did before. It just doesn't happen to be between eight and six every day. And so how do we reframe this discussion? ... I have male colleagues who are also much more involved parents, certainly more than their fathers were. How do we make this about just reframing the way we work? Because the world is different. The technology is different. We are working in a global world as opposed to one where only women need more flexibility, which just always puts us to the side.”

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