

Gender equality in the workplace post-COVID-19

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Abstract

Gender equality has suffered both during the recession and the recovery after it because of the COVID-19 epidemic and the economic crisis. In contrast to conventional recessions, the employment decline associated with social distancing measures significantly impacts sectors with high female employment shares, negatively influencing men's employment more than women's employment. Additionally, the need for child care had significantly increased due to school and daycare closures, negatively impacting working women. This paper seeks to understand how the current economic crisis due to the pandemic affected women and the potential long-term effects on gender equality. This study is a literature review study that follows a descriptive method. The study found that working mothers are projected to endure the effects of the crisis for a very long time because of the high returns to experience in the labor market.

Keywords: COVID-19; Gender gap; gender inequality; workforce; workplace

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1. Introduction

As the pandemic and its economic effects continue to influence people's lives and means of subsistence around the world, gender equality is already being reversed. Despite being credited with a considerable portion of the workforce worldwide, women are also thought to be a significant cause of job losses. This more remarkable impact on women can be attributed partly to the virus's substantial rise in the unpaid care load that women disproportionately carry.

Even though men and women work in different industries, these and other variables cause women's employment to fall faster than the norm. It has demonstrated numerous socioeconomic problems, many of which the pandemic exacerbates, have a disproportionately unfavorable impact on women. Women take on caring obligations at a much higher rate than men, partly because of gender norms and because women's employment tends to be given less emphasis as compared to men since it is more likely to be part-time, lower-paying, and less secure. Because of this unfairly increased vulnerability, women are more likely to experience economic insecurity, which could be short-term, long-term, and well-being reductions (Felten, 2023; Kashyap & Verkroost 2021).

It is clear that the pandemic has had a large negative impact on the global economy and is a major global health catastrophe. Due to social conventions regarding who assumes caregiving tasks and the fact that women's jobs are often accorded lower priority, single-parent households - of which single mothers head the majority, are at even greater risk. Additionally, the majority of victims of domestic abuse were women, and quarantine policies and stay-at-home directives had a disastrous impact on them (Boserup, 2020). According to Usher et al., 2020, with fewer supports available for those impacted by it, isolation combined with increasing economic and family stressors drives historic global increases in domestic violence.

1.1. Purpose of study

This paper seeks to understand how the current economic crisis due to the pandemic affected women and the potential long-term effects on gender equality.

2. Methods and Materials

This study is a literature review study that follows a descriptive method. The study uses resources from accredited sources and peer-reviewed journals in the discussion leading to the conclusion. The study acknowledges all data sources and the procedure and results of this study do not affect, harm, or disregard any person, institution, organization, or environment.

3. Results

3.1. Employment status, earnings, and advancement

The healthcare industry's driving force is women, who comprise approximately 70% of the medical staff, which puts them at a higher risk for infection. At the same time, due to the closures of schools and daycare centers and long-standing gender disparities in unpaid work, women are also carrying a significant portion of the load at home. In addition to the high danger of losing their jobs and money, women are more likely to be harassed or experience assault, exploitation, and abuse during emergencies and quarantine. In 2020, the OECD estimated employment patterns and expected that the coronavirus pandemic would have a greater effect on women's employment than it did on men. In the United States and the European Union, men's employment has historically declined more than women's because male-dominated businesses like manufacturing and construction suffer bigger losses during recessions than female-dominated areas like education and health care.

According to the United Nations, 2020, women who are the major or sole breadwinners are especially vulnerable to financial loss if they lose their jobs because they earn less than men do internationally. This circumstance due to the pandemic is unique because of the requirement for social distance; many jobs in industries with a female predominance, such as hospitality, tourism, the arts and entertainment, and retail. These may have been spared during earlier recessions but are now being lost to the epidemic. Second, the ability to telecommute is essential for maintaining employment, and males are more likely to be hired in positions that

make it simple to do so (Alon et al., 2020). Job loss impacts careers because it delays or prevents possibilities for progress; women are particularly affected by this. Losing a job also reduces future wages; these impacts are more obvious when the unemployment rate is higher when the job is lost. When compared to other times, losing a job has a bigger overall effect on earnings during a recession.

The pandemic has been considered the deepest global recession since the Second World War as it has caused an abrupt and unprecedented loss of work hours globally. As a result, the income of those who lost their occupations due to the pandemic significantly decreased. According to European research, women are disproportionately harmed since they earn less than men and have acquired less money. This indicates a worsening situation of gender disparity in the workplace by reducing women's opportunities for development and salary, even if men's livelihoods have recovered from prior pandemics more quickly than women's did. The pandemic's economic losses have hardest hit small businesses because they do not have the financial resources of bigger corporations.

Small businesses owned by women have been especially at risk. Although many countries' female-owned businesses concentrate on providing services like health, personal care, and education, they exhibited more resilience during the 2008 recession (OECD, 2012). However, face-to-face service-related businesses have been more specifically targeted by the pandemic, including women-run businesses (Bartik et al., 2020). Even after accounting for prior company performance, men's businesses still receive more funding than women's, according to Badal and Robison (2020), which has contributed to more financial stress among US female small-business owners than male counterparts. They, therefore, have less capital than small businesses run by males. According to Adema et al. (2014), women account for a small minority of CEOs, company founders, and small business owners internationally; the pandemic has further reduced those percentages.

3.2. Family and domestic responsibilities

In all the countries that have been studied, it was observed that men spend less time than women taking care of children and doing other household chores, regardless of their employment position (ILO, 2018; OECD, 2016; BLS, 2020). Men and women have both dedicated more time to spending time with kids since the outbreak. Women across Europe, the USA, and Australia now spend more time with their children one-on-one than they did in the past while having more occupations (Aguilar and Hurst, 2007; Gauthier et al., 2004). Women are also more likely to provide unpaid care for elderly relatives than men (ILO, 2018; OECD, 2020). Each of these duties has gotten worse because of the outbreak.

Increasing numbers of people telecommute, several workers have lost their employment, schools have been closed, and parents are spending more time with their children at home due to COVID-19. By May 2020, nationwide school closings in nearly 150 countries affected two-thirds of all students (UNESCO, 2020). Since the pandemic, parents have been spending more time with their children. However, women have seen a higher increase than males, not because they have more time to spend with their children and have lost more jobs than men. According to the time-diary study, working mothers look after their kids for the same time as their unemployed husbands. Still, compared to their employed spouses, unemployed mothers take care of their children for double the time. In addition, it was found that mothers put in fewer hours than working parents than fathers. Because women are interrupted more frequently during their paid work hours than men, fathers enjoy almost double the number of undisturbed paid work hours compared to mothers.

According to surveys of parents in the USA, the quantity of childcare, housework, and other domestic duties that mothers and fathers must perform has increased due to COVID-19 (Carlson et al., 2020; Miller, 2020). Since the beginning of the pandemic, the percentage of egalitarian households has increased, but only a small percentage of parents reported splitting childcare and housework equally (Carlson et al., 2020). The large proportion of women working in crucial face-to-face professions, which leaves males at home to take care of the kids, may help to explain this partially. However, the studies showed that moms carry more responsibility than husbands, particularly when raising their children. According to surveys of women in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the epidemic has led to growing gender disparities in child care, elder care, and cleaning (UN Women, 2020b).

3.3. Women as essential workers

Women make up the majority of healthcare professionals worldwide, making them the most important and compassionate employees (ILO, 2018; Robertson and Gebeloff, 2020). However, they also carry a higher risk of contracting the coronavirus. In hospitals and other healthcare institutions, the majority of administrative assistants are women, as are the majority of social workers, personal care aides, cashiers, laundry and cleaning personnel, and food service employees at important retail establishments. These workers have also been at increased risk of infection because of their close physical proximity to others. Given their higher unemployment rate and additional household responsibilities, women reported experiencing more emotional distress than men, which is unsurprising. The survivors of the workforce, particularly important personnel, are likely to perform and produce less well due to the psychological problems brought on by COVID-19. Future income increases and career advancement are constrained as a result of this.

After accounting for career, marital status, and other variables, research on Chinese healthcare personnel revealed that both men and women were equally likely to experience psychological impacts of dealing with COVID patients, such as elevated despair and anxiety (Wang et al., 2020). Women were shown to have higher degrees of PTSD and anxiety. The majority of workers who kept going to work outside the home admitted to being concerned about catching the coronavirus and passing it on to their loved ones. Front-line workers have isolated themselves from their families and other household members out of fear and a lack of protective clothes and equipment (Glenza, 2020), which has led to stress and isolation (Glenza, 2020). Since the beginning of the epidemic, women have a higher-than-average likelihood of working in the healthcare industry, increasing their risk of mental health problems.

Teachers and mental health professionals are two other professions that provide essential care. In all educational institutions around the world, women make up the majority of therapists, social workers, and teachers. Employees in these occupations currently have the choice to work from home and are protected against job loss. However, the quick transition from in-class to online employment has presented these workers with new difficulties. Teachers and healthcare workers suddenly had to depend on online platforms to reach out to their students and patients. This added extra responsibilities as they must learn how to use different platforms. In addition, they have to spend more time reaching out to and involving distressed or frightened students in difficult topics. Balancing home responsibilities and work was difficult when caring for children or elderly relatives. Mental health practitioners face comparable challenges and must navigate additional moral conundrums, such as upholding client anonymity and confidentiality when working online (Greenbaum, 2020). Because they make up the majority of vital workers, stress, burnout, and poor mental health are more frequently experienced by women.

3.4. Changes in job flexibility and telecommuting

The advantages of telecommuting can be beneficial to both employers and employees. Working from home has increased productivity and employee satisfaction, despite the possibility of loneliness and isolation (Bloom et al., 2015; Choudhury et al., 2020). However, depending on the employee's gender and parental status, telecommuting has different effects. A Swedish study found that having children made workers feel that their homes were sources of demand rather than places to unwind and that telecommuting helped men feel more at home while making women feel less at home (Hartig et al., 2007).

Women and parents of children in a second Swedish sample reported feeling more time-pressed than men and non-parents, respectively, even after controlling for the number of hours spent telecommuting (Thulin et al., 2019). How respondents spent their time or the reasons why women benefited from telecommuting less than men were not questions in these polls. Given the gender imbalance in childcare and household chores, it is likely that women who work from home face additional time constraints and find it difficult to manage work and family obligations.

Telecommuting increased the gender gap in work hours while decreasing the gender disparity in childcare, according to an American quasi-experimental time-diary study. However, it also exacerbated the gap between the sexes in terms of hours worked and family time (Lyttelton et al., 2020). These results are consistent with earlier

studies on the epidemic's impact on childcare. Whether they are residing at home owing to the pandemic or telecommuting, parents' contributions to childcare and other household duties are improved by working from home. To care for their children, women continue to put in more effort than men, which may lead to worse performance and productivity when compared to males. Women also frequently interrupt and abbreviate their workdays.

The number of telecommuting workers has increased dramatically due to the epidemic (Hickman & Saad, 2020), and this tendency may continue to grow. Working from home during COVID-19, however, provides more challenges than usual. Employees may share workstations with family members or roommates due to the pandemic, which also causes a loss of privacy and makes it difficult for them to balance work and personal obligations. People are afraid of the coronavirus, the state of the economy, and losing their employment. Loneliness is more likely to affect people who live alone. As was already established, parents—particularly mothers—have more childcare responsibilities, which leads to reduced work hours. Productivity has fallen as a result of these circumstances. Even when given the option, not all employees enjoy working from home (Bloom et al., 2015; Hickman & Saad, 2020), and people currently have few options.

What impact might the epidemic have on gender equality if telecommuting gains popularity? Time diaries show that parents who can work from home provide more child care than parents whose employment is less flexible (Alon et al., 2020). Even so, when their partners work from home as well, fathers do not extend their daycare hours. Even in homes where both parents telecommuted during the epidemic, mothers are more likely than fathers to have cut back on their work hours to suit rising childcare demands, widening the gender pay disparity in hours worked (Collins et al., 2020; Lyttelton et al., 2020). This demonstrates the differences in how men and women approach employment flexibility.

Even though both men and women are equally likely to have flexible schedules and work from home, women are more likely to say they telecommute to balance work and family responsibilities and to catch up on work, while men say they like to work from home. Flexible work arrangements have made it harder for women to obtain high-status positions and reinforced traditional gender stereotypes. For instance, family-friendly laws like those allowing for paternity leave and part-time employment increase the employment rates of women. However, as women abuse them more than men do, they also stop women from progressing up the corporate ladder and cutting their compensation (Blau and Kahn, 2013; Flabbi and Moro, 2012), which limits the job experience of women to that of men.

The gender wage and advancement gap has also widened as more women choose to telecommute since they spend less time working and more time caring for their families and homes than men do. Telecommuting, however, has the potential to have the complete opposite effect. As already indicated, fathers who telecommute or work from home spend more time on childcare (Andrew et al., 2020; Carlson et al., 2020; Miller, 2020), and even taking a brief family leave enhances fathers' childcare contributions long after the break has finished (Buening, 2015; Huerta et al., 2013). Therefore, increased telecommuting may change gender norms, increasing the prevalence of fathers providing childcare. If it works, this might help close the gender pay and promotion gap by decreasing the time spent caring for children and the number of women taking family leaves, working part-time jobs, and utilizing other flexible work schedules.

4. Discussion

Because single moms are among the demographics most severely impacted by the pandemic, we must prioritize programs that meet their most urgent needs. Due to the closure of schools and daycare centers, millions of single moms are now forced to choose between making a living and providing for their children's needs. First, states with "workfare" laws (which require welfare recipients to work to get benefits) must make getting rid of them a major priority (Peck, 2001). Second, there is research that shows women who were previously hampered by a lack of childcare options greatly benefit from access to and utilization of publicly financed daycare (Schmitz, 2020). Governments must therefore make excellent childcare available to all families as situations in the families affect the academic outcome of children (Alammar et al., 2022). As long as the only source of income for the family

is maintained, doing this is essential for the well-being of single parents. Employers should be forced to give caregivers the desperately needed paid family leave to achieve the same goal. Direct payments for single parents who have already lost their jobs due to government action should be prioritized. Evidence suggests that large unemployment benefits like this cancel out the psychological suffering brought on by unemployment and the apparent gains in well-being associated with meeting one's necessities (Di Tella et al., 2003).

The increased need for care work in households with both a mother and a father would encourage men to take on more of it if emergency paid family leave were in place. Not only would this allow moms to keep their work, but it would also prevent the long-term negative impacts of unemployment on well-being. Allowing men to take parental leave may have a long-term impact on how much time they spend at home and caring for their children, according to some studies (Huerta et al., 2013; Almqvist & Duvander, 2014; Bünning, 2015; Pattnaik, 2019). Women are far more likely to limit their paid employment due to the increased demand for childcare, so the state must boost the benefits that companies are compelled to provide, such as paid sick leave, parental leave, and health insurance (Shaw et al., 2020). To meet women's growing need for part-time work, we should think about creative ways. According to some researchers, organizational training that shows employers how to offer more job flexibility (by letting employees set their hours and giving them the option of working from home) would greatly benefit employees who are in charge of taking care of others by lowering stress and psychological distress (Kassek et al., 2019).

Policies can have a long-lasting, generational impact on cultural norms and beliefs, whether they exist or not (Cooke & Baxter, 2010; Gupta et al., 2023). The long-term initiatives mentioned above are meant to help shift gender stereotypes, particularly those that have to do with caregiving, to promote an equal society. Even if current societal and cultural norms about gender roles in caring were unaltered, we might still anticipate a sizable impact on women's liberty and well-being (Zhu & Chang 2019). There would be fewer single mothers, a smaller income gap, and a more equitable division of unpaid labor if there were no gendered assumptions about who would carry out caregiving tasks as men earn more in most communities presently (Qing, 2020). The more freedom women have to choose a career that fits their preferences, values, and interests, the less forced they are to fulfill unpaid caregiving duties. It is necessary to view the government's decision to sustain a system that actively harms and represses women as a decision to uphold gender equality rather than as respect for individual freedom. Further research must be done on the specifics, practicalities, and effectiveness of policies that alleviate gender disparity. To move beyond an individualistic approach to enhancing women's well-being, further study on well-being is urgently required (and well-being in general).

Governmental and social institutions are in a unique position to have a major positive impact on the well-being of their populations, both epistemically and practically. As a result, more scholars need to widen their perspectives on what can be accomplished by those institutions and what can be expected of them to promote the welfare of underrepresented communities. To comprehend how various policies affect people in terms of gender, color, ability, sexual orientation, geography, and class, further research is required. It is important to avoid having a stereotypical image of women because different groups have different demands, which a generalized strategy cannot successfully meet. For instance, a study found that access to flexible work alternatives was not found in Latin America and Asia but was associated with higher job satisfaction and lower work-family conflict in Australia, North America, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand (Masuda et al., 2012). Understanding how women's challenges vary along the above-mentioned dimensions should be considered while developing our policy. We must be prepared and willing to adapt our reaction to the pandemic as our understanding of its consequences changes. Because the pandemic's effects are still being felt, research on how it affects women's welfare is ongoing. The effects covered on this page shouldn't be taken as exhaustive.

5. Conclusion

The gender pay gap must be eliminated, and efforts must be made to do so. As long as it makes economic sense for women's paid labor to drop rather than men's amid economic crises like the one caused by the epidemic, women will be more willing to take on unpaid caregiving responsibilities. They will consequently have less economic

freedom and bargaining power, which will impair their well-being (Hess et al., 2020). Closing the wage gap is likely to boost women's subjective well-being and protect them against job loss brought on by forthcoming economic crises (Oishi et al., 2011; Oishi & Diener, 2014). The gender gap is dramatically worsened by COVID-19. Although it is imperative to enact legislation addressing the pandemic's needs, we shouldn't stop there. We must embrace this opportunity to talk about the global injustices and inequality women face and the specific actions our institutions can take to address them. Instead of merely helping them go through COVID-19, the goal should be to establish an environment where women can thrive. We can study the intricate interrelationships between macroeconomic difficulties, governmental policies, intersectional oppressions, well-being, and gender belief systems within the context of this catastrophe. The connection between state policies and gender dynamics is particularly important to women's well-being since the state has the unique ability to implement legislation that will result in major change.

To stop future economic crises from disproportionately affecting women, long-term gender imbalance must be addressed through a more comprehensive economic transformation (Antonopoulos, 2008). These kinds of solutions are essential in the near term to reduce some of the discriminatory costs that COVID-19 subjects women to. We must first formally value women's unpaid work if we hope to achieve gender equality in the long run (Hoskyns & Rai 2007; Folbre, 2012). This recognizes the importance of uncompensated care labor and enables legislators to take it into account when making decisions. It is commonly agreed that to alleviate gender inequality about the disproportionate global burden of care that falls on women, policies must provide care services, paid leaves, and flexible working hours (Daly & Rake, 2003; Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Bettio & Plantenga, 2004; Leitner & Wroblewski, 2006; Lewis, 2006, Craig & Mullan, 2010; Ghodsee, 2018). Governments should implement long-term policies that support distributing unpaid labor equally among men and women.

The economic cost of these policies, which may include those that limit the number of hours that can be worked each week, require paternity leave for fathers, grant parents of young children extended job leaves with partial wage coverage, lessen the pay and benefits gap between full-time and part-time employment, provide family allowances, or base social security or pension credits on caregiving rather than marriage to a wage earner, appears to be lessened (Sayer, 2005, p. 298).

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