

Editorial

Changing Realities for Women and Work: The Impact of COVID-19 and Prospects for the Post-Pandemic Workplace

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COVID-19 plunged the globe into a multi-year pandemic that still continues to this day, meting out devastating repercussions on the international economy and the wellbeing of people everywhere. Women in particular were harmed by the virus, because many risked their lives and the lives of their families by working on the medical front lines, while others lost jobs in service-oriented professions and the non-formal sector hit hardest by the lockdowns. The pandemic has served as a time for reflection, as many women began to dream and debate what a post-pandemic world would look like both politically and economically. How the working world should change became a topic of critical importance as the pandemic revealed the lack of adequate consideration for social safety nets and childcare and the need for a healthy work–life balance. The impact of the pandemic on women in the workplace and the emerging novel vision of the post-pandemic work environment have created a backdrop, highlighting the importance of this *Merits* journal Special Issue.

COVID-19 put a damper on key gender equality goals, and even reversed some key gains women had achieved to expand the rights of women worldwide [1–3]. The women in work index fell for the first time in history during the pandemic [4]. Women suffered disproportionate job and income losses compared to men because of their over-representation in the hardest-hit sectors, and many continued to work on the front lines, maintaining care systems, economies, and societies, while often also performing the majority of care work, which remained unpaid [5–8]. Approximately 4.2 percent of women’s employment declined, representing 54 million jobs, compared to 3 percent of men’s employment or 60 million jobs [8,9]. The jobs that were the most vulnerable to furloughs or layoffs, from the most vulnerable to least vulnerable, included: (1) accommodations and food services; (2) wholesale, retail, and repair of autos; (3) arts, entertainment, and recreation; (4) administrative and support services; (5) other service activities; (6) real estate; (7) water supply, sewage, and waste; (8) manufacturing; (9) professional scientific and technical information and communication; (10) energy production and supply; (11) mining and quarrying; (12) health and social work; (13) education; and (14) agriculture, forestry, and fishing [9]. Women working in the informal sector lost their livelihoods in many cases when they were forced to temporarily or permanently close, resulting in a dramatic loss of income and risk of falling into poverty [10]. Domestic workers, who globally earn only 56.4 percent of the average monthly wage, were especially harmed by the pandemic, as many lost their jobs or worked less hours [9].

The groups that were the most severely disadvantaged by the lockdown were less educated childless women and unmarried mothers. Less-educated mothers of school-aged children also experienced relative disadvantages [10,11]. The loss of employment of women with young children due to the burden of additional childcare is estimated to account for 45 percent of the increase in the employment gender gap, which reduced the total output by 0.36 percent between April and November 2020 [12].

Different regions of the world suffered different pandemic impacts. The Americas suffered the greatest reduction in women’s employment, which declined by 9.4 percent



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compared to 7.0 percent for men [9]. The Arab States suffered the second-highest drop in the number of women employed at 4.1 percent compared to 1.8 percent for men. Women's employment in Asia and the Pacific declined by 3.8 percent compared to 2.9 percent for men. Women's employment in Africa suffered less than in other regions [9].

The pandemic catalyzed a "shecession" rather than a "mancession", which generally occurs during economic crises, such as in 2008, when men suffered the greatest job loss [13]. More than one in four women in the corporate world globally downsized their careers or departed from the workforce [14]. In total, 1.8 million women dropped out of the labor force in the United States because of the pandemic [15]. The KFF Women's Health Survey showed that (1) one in ten women quit their jobs due to a pandemic-related reason, with almost half reporting that they felt unsafe in the workplace; (2) one in ten working mothers with children quit because of COVID-19, with half of them citing school closures as one of the reasons and three of ten reporting they quit because school or daycare was closed; and (3) 47 percent of working mothers overall took sick leave because school or daycare was closed. This included 65 percent of low-income women and 70 percent of those working part-time jobs [16].

Telework, or working via electronic devices, and working from home proliferated globally during the pandemic lockdown commencing in early 2020. The ILO [17] estimated that prior to the pandemic, approximately 7.9 percent of the world's workforce, or 260 million workers, worked from home on a permanent basis, although most of these were not teleworkers, but rather were self-employed or outworkers rather than employees, who accounted for approximately one out of five home-based workers. Most home-based workers lived in low–middle-income countries. During the second quarter of 2020, 557 million workers, or 17.4 percent of the world's employment, worked from home, according to the [17]. During the pandemic lockdown, the number of home-based workers worldwide increased to almost 19 percent, although the number reached over 50 percent in higher-income countries.

Some studies have shown that telework has benefited men more than women. The Boston College Center for Work and Family [18] surveyed parents who worked from home, and men reported far higher benefits of teleworking than women, including pay raises (26% men/13% women), promotions (34% men/9% women), additional leadership roles (29%men/10% women), responsibility for important projects (28% men/10% women), recognition inside company (19% men/10% women), and positive formal reviews (15% men/7% women). Although many women may prefer to telework so that they can balance work and family life and catch up with work responsibilities, telework can have negative consequences for women's advancement [19].

The pandemic lockdown and the need for some professional women to work from home created a "third shift" for many women globally, who were required to work, care for their families, and educate their children when schools were closed [20,21]. Research sponsored by UN Women found that, during the pandemic, women in the 16 countries surveyed spent on average 36.4 h per week on childcare during the pandemic, as opposed to 26 h per week prior to the pandemic, while men spent on average 24.5 h per week as opposed to 20 h per week pre-pandemic [22]. Surveys regarding the distribution of childcare between women and men during the pandemic found that women in Mexico spent 44.2 h per week on childcare compared to men who spent 34.4 h per week. Women in the United States spent 27.6 h per week compared to 22.4 h per week for men. In the UK, women spent 26.4 h compared to 20.1 h for men. In all the other countries surveyed, women spent considerably more time caring for children than men, and men did not increase their care time during the pandemic, although they did slightly increase the time they spent doing housework during this period [23].

Mothers often worked more h than they did during the pre-pandemic years and combined professional work with care work [24]. Their work-life balance became merged and women reported increased stress and guilt about not being able to complete work or complete it carefully enough to meet their own standards. Deloitte surveyed 385 women

working at all levels in the corporate world in Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, India, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Respondents confirmed findings from other studies, including the excessive pressure placed on them by family, childcare, and housekeeping responsibilities while attempting to perform their jobs at home [25].

As a serious consequence of families required to quarantine together, domestic violence increased during the early days of the pandemic [3,26]. In total, 243 million women and girls reported physical and/or sexual abuse in 2020 [27]. In some cases, such violence led to homelessness. Barua [1] reported that homelessness due to domestic violence in England increased by 12 percent between April and June 2021, compared to the same period in 2020, and 30 percent higher than the same period in 2019.

The 2021 McKinsey and Company Report [28] on women in the global corporate sector found that women in this sector had performed well since 2020, despite the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, certain barriers that existed prior to the pandemic continued to persist. The “broken rung” that keeps women from obtaining the first-line promotion and, hence, entering the pathway to the C-Suite continued to block women from career advancements. Furthermore, women reported that since they had to bear the emotional impact of the pandemic on their teams, they were more burnt out than previously. Women were more active than men in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), which has a positive impact on corporate success, yet the survey found that women were still not receiving credit for their work in this critical area. In addition, “onlys”, people who are the only one of a particular ethnic or racial group, only woman with children, or only woman from an LGBTQI+ group, etc., still faced discrimination. Because of these challenges, women continued to question their work lives [28].

Despite the continuation of COVID-19 variants around the world, people have been returning to “normal” or to a “new normal” in 2022. Global data show that, in some countries, women are regaining employment at a faster rate than men, while in other countries, the opposite trend is occurring. The United Nations [29] reported that fewer women than men would regain employment in the post-pandemic era. The ILO [30] estimated that global female employment in 2021 was still approximately 13 million lower compared to 2019, while male employment surpassed pre-pandemic levels. Men filled 875,000 new jobs, while women filled 62,000 [1]. Most of the gains for women were in lower-paying jobs that were the hardest hit during the pandemic, such as retail and restaurants. Women were seriously outstripped by men in terms of job gains. While 1,322,000 jobs for women still have not been recovered, 435,000 jobs for men remain to be regained [1,31]. The ILO [32] estimated that increases in women’s employment globally in 2021 would not be sufficient for a post-pandemic recovery.

In the Americas, the regional employment-to-population ratio is estimated to be 46.8 percent compared to 66.2 percent for men. The employment-to-population ratio for women in the Middle East is likely to be 14.3 percent compared to 70.8 percent for men. In Asia and the Pacific, men’s employment is estimated to supersede pre-pandemic levels, while women’s employment losses are likely to not be regained. The pandemic halted employment gains for women in Europe and Central Asia, with the employment-to-population rate for women presenting at 46.0 percent compared to 60.8 percent for men. The employment-to-population rate of women in sub-Saharan Africa is the highest in the world at 57.1 percent, although the quality of women’s work is among the poorest in the world. This rate is estimated to continue to catalyze post-pandemic recovery [32].

According to the Deloitte 2022 survey of 5000 women from ten countries, 55 percent of women felt greater stress than last year, and 46 percent reported that they were burnt out. Women also feared that if they were not available 24/7 that their jobs were at risk. In total, 47 percent of respondents stated that their work–life balance was poor or extremely poor. The great resignation is continuing, according to Deloitte (2022) [33], with 40 percent of respondents actively looking for a new employer. Because of their perceived lack of opportunity, unsatisfactory work–life balance, poor pay, and burn out, 64 percent of middle management will be seeking new employment in the next two years because of their

perceived lack of opportunity, unpleasant work–life balance, lower-than-deserved pay, and burn out. In total, 59 percent of women in non-managerial positions will also seek new employment. Only 10 percent of respondents reported that they planned to stay with their current employer for more than five years [33].

A 2021 personnel survey conducted by Perceptyx found that 48 percent of women respondents had become much less or somewhat less likely to want to return to the physical workplace full-time. Approximately 24 percent of both women and men reported that they would prefer a hybrid working arrangement after COVID-19, although men would spend 3 to 4 days in the physical workplace, whereas women would spend 2 to 3 days there [34].

Recommendations for a post-pandemic workplace that offers more flexibility, the opportunity to telework or work from home, and jobs that provide more emotional support and material resources to have a healthy work-life balance have proliferated. Although there is considerable support for telework being relied upon more, there are also concerns about health, safety, isolation, and the demand to always “be on” that are risks inherent in such a work arrangement [35].

Specific recommendations for a post-pandemic workplace include: (1) promote gender-responsive employment policies for an inclusive and job-rich recovery at the macro level through macro-economic policies, investments to increase demand, income support, and public employment projects; (2) invest in care economies such as health, education, and social work that provide employment for women and more social support for the care working women perform for their families; (3) invest in social protection so that all women have a social safety net, even those working in the informal sector; (4) promote equal pay for equal work; (5) prevent, address, and eliminate sexual harassment and violence; (6) promote more women in decision-making positions; (7) develop flexible work options, including teleworking, reduced working hours, part-time schedules, flexible working hours, compressed work weeks, and role sharing, among others, in the new “build back better” norm; (8) provide re-entry or “returnship” programs, mentorships, and training for women who have been out of the workforce for a long period of time; (9) encourage men through awareness-raising campaigns to perform their share of unpaid care work by providing paid paternity and care leave; (10) support survivors of domestic violence access services and support, including paid leave, relocation, and information about local services; (11) take an intersectional approach when designing policies and programs; (12) design a gender-responsive recovery that includes the most vulnerable, such as the 190 million women around the world who work in the global supply chain; (13) confront gender-based violence at work and beyond; and (14) mobilize union agency through gender equality bargaining [36–43].

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