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# Disruption as a Force for Good? Gender Balance and COVID-19



By Zoe Kinias , INSEAD Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour, and Vinika D. Rao , Executive Director, INSEAD Gender Initiative

**The pandemic may disproportionately affect women around the world - but it need not imperil the hard-earned progress towards gender balance.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted lives and livelihoods for all of us. Current and aspiring leaders – when they have a moment to breathe – are reflecting on how to sustain those they lead and how to leverage this crisis to society's benefit. How do we do this with respect to gender balance?

## **Key current challenges**

Early evidence suggests that if business and government leaders fail to guide effectively, COVID-19 will disproportionately harm women. Its potential ramifications on gender inequity are too numerous to cover in one article. But broadly speaking, any pre-existing inequality will likely be amplified and result in women bearing more than a fair share of hardship.

Consider some of the changes due to COVID-19:

Schools and institutes of higher learning have closed and education has moved online for most students. Women and girls are **less likely to have internet access than men**, with estimates varying between 20 to over 50 percent lesser access depending upon the country. As such, the move to online education **will disproportionately disadvantage** female students.

Unemployment is rising across genders but it's already hitting women harder than men, in contrast to most economic downturns in which men lose jobs early. The COVID-19 downturn reveals that women are in the most vulnerable occupations. Although many women are employed in essential healthcare roles (with low pay and high risk as frontline workers), even more hold jobs that are deemed “non-essential” and thus are the first to disappear under lockdown. Data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics shows **women comprise 59 percent of the payroll decline** in March 2020.

Further, because women on average **earn lower salaries, have lower levels of life insurance** and are **less likely to have significant savings**, the financial hardship of unemployment affects them more strongly.

Beyond finances (and even more troubling), early indications point to **a parallel pandemic of domestic violence**, as lockdowns leave women cornered at home with abusive partners. In Singapore, the Ministry of Social and Family Development is **carefully monitoring** the increasing number of people seeking help.

The optics of the COVID-19 response by governments and media also showcase the widening gender imbalance. In the United Kingdom, television and radio news coverage featuring **male experts** was recently at a three-year high, compared to female experts. In the United States, President Donald Trump's Coronavirus Task Force was **initially an all-male outfit**, and is still overwhelmingly male-dominated, as displayed in a **much-derided photo** shared on social media in March. The Malaysian government released **online posters** (for which it later apologised) encouraging wives to preserve family harmony during lockdown by dressing up, wearing make-up and refraining from “nagging” their husbands.

Images and messaging aside, we wish we could say that influential public- and private-sector actors were united in recognition of the issues facing women as a consequence of COVID-19. Sadly, that does not appear to be the case. Far from encouraging and guiding businesses to ensure women are treated fairly, many governments seem to have dropped gender as a

concern. Witness the UK's decision to suspend gender pay gap reporting for 2020, in light of the “unprecedented uncertainty and pressure” imposed upon companies by the crisis. The implication is that the well-being of half of humanity is a fair-weather consideration, not worth pursuing in this adverse business climate.

In fact, holding companies accountable for fair compensation is all the more important during a systemic crisis like this one, which threatens to worsen already dangerously high levels of inequality. The UK is hardly alone; a number of other nations appear willing to deprioritise gender balance unnecessarily. The European Commission is reportedly considering delaying its own promised pay gap transparency measures.

Ironically, this is happening despite the fact that many of the countries that have most successfully contained COVID-19 – Germany, Slovakia, Finland, New Zealand, etc. – are in fact led by a woman, as has been increasingly recognised by commentators. The argument that more male experts are being showcased because there are more men in politics may be correct in terms of the absolute numbers of men in powerful governing positions. But if quality and evident success are prioritised over quantity, the scales are clearly shifting. While there are several factors at play besides gender, these inspiring examples of female leaders certainly undercut the stale notion that women are “too emotional” or otherwise unfit to lead effectively in a crisis.

Where effective government leadership is absent, business can still intervene to protect the recent progress toward bridging the gender gap and lead future progress. Civil society guidelines, such as the UN's Women's Empowerment Principles, can help orient organisations of any size or shape.

## **Hope for the future**

The strong and visible role models provided by the female leaders mentioned above tops the list of unexpectedly positive consequences of COVID-19 on gender balance. Girls and women need to see what they may one day want to be, as famously expressed by Madeleine Albright, “I never dreamed about one day becoming Secretary of State. It's not that I was modest; it's just that I had never seen a Secretary of State in a skirt.” Aspiring leaders of all genders and generations now have stellar examples of women to emulate.

There are other ways in which the pandemic has the potential to act as a longer-term gender equaliser. Early evidence suggests that **professional mothers currently working from home** (WFH) are disproportionately bearing the burden of childcare and “homeschooling”. However, to the extent that remote work practices will remain after children return to school, this will often benefit mothers. Also, the hidden penalties associated with flexible and remote working are fast disappearing. Some companies such as Tata Consultancy Services are even declaring that they will **continue to have a portion of their workforce** WFH after the virus is contained. This will benefit both the women and men who need flexibility to best manage their personal and professional lives.

In research conducted before COVID-19, our INSEAD colleague **Alexandra Roulet** found that in France, **the daily commute** was responsible for around 10 percent of the pay gap between men and women. Even in dual-career couples, women are mainly expected to take the lead in family responsibilities, and thus are more likely to work within easy reach of their kids. Working moms accept smaller salaries so they can have a shorter commute – which can be seen as a “choice” only in the most superficial of senses, since the gender roles that drive these decisions are not optional. In a 2019 study, **all the employees at a UK company** were given permission to work from home as much as they wanted. Job satisfaction and self-reported productivity increased across the board, but especially for working mothers, with the absence of the commute cited as a key reason.

Simply by collapsing domestic and office space into one, thereby abolishing the daily commute to schools and the office, the “new normal” of remote working could lessen the work/family challenges that are a common cause of women leaving the workforce.

Moreover, one research paper claims that COVID-19 **could trigger the most dramatically egalitarian alteration** to the nuclear family since World War II, as millions of abruptly homebound dads engage in prolonged periods of high-intensity parenting – for the first time ever, in many cases.

However, another INSEAD colleague, **Jennifer Petriglieri** (author of the 2019 book **Couples That Work**) points out that being cooped up together won’t automatically advance equality within dual-career couples. **She recommends that couples talk openly** – and frequently – about their priorities, goals and fears during this time. Conversations should not get

hung up on practicalities (who does what when, etc.) but rather should delve into deeper issues for both partners. Under the cluttered surface of their busy lives, couples may find unexpected and mutually fulfilling solutions, lessening the need for resentment-inducing compromise.

## **A watershed moment**

COVID-19 has refocused the world's attention on what matters most: protecting the health and safety of our loved ones, communities and society at large. Government and business leaders should regard gender balance as an essential aspect of that effort, rather than as a secondary priority.

We cannot allow the progress women have made to be unwound – not when we have come so far, not when we have so much more to do. And not when the optimised efforts of all the world's workforce are required as the global economy prepares for recovery in the post-COVID-19 world.

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