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# Making the “New Normal” Better for Women



By Benjamin Kessler , INSEAD Knowledge Managing Editor

## **How individuals and organisations can keep progressing towards gender balance, in our profoundly disrupted world.**

Crises can be unflattering mirrors. The initial shock of Covid-19 accentuated long-standing gender imbalances (among other social inequities) across several dimensions, appearing to threaten hard-won development of gender equity. On the other hand, the emergency situation also produced hopeful signs, such as the destigmatisation of remote working, while highlighting examples of outstanding women leaders. With most developed economies eagerly yet cautiously reopening, we may have a chance to kick-start women’s advancement as we move towards a new normal.

Zoe Kinias, INSEAD Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour, and Dirk Luyten (INSEAD MBA ‘89J) discussed where gender-balance efforts should focus from here, during a recent webinar that was part of the INSEAD series Navigating the Turbulence of Covid-19. As a jumping-off point for the conversation, Kinias shared the results of a survey on gender balance completed by 290 business leaders (mostly INSEAD alumni, about two-thirds female). Asked whether Covid-19 had affected women’s advancement positively or negatively, the clear majority (57 percent) chose the latter, with

24 percent saying no change and only 19 percent believing it had a positive impact on women. Regarding the post-Covid future, 41 percent of respondents anticipated that things would get worse for women compared to life before the pandemic. Some 34 percent expected positive changes and a mere 25 percent believed the status quo would continue.

Interestingly, both the pessimists and the optimists cited similar reasons for their beliefs. Flexible working, for example, loomed large for both groups. Seen from a favourable angle, it offered professional women more freedom to choose when and how to work. Those with a dimmer view noted increased conflict between work and home responsibilities, due to the widely held assumption that mothers should take the lead in childcare. Respondents worried that “schools may not return to normal...Will childcare still be available in the way it was before? The potential that there will be more of a traditional-style need for someone being at home with the children is part of the concern,” Kinias said.

## **Gender balance champions**

Happily, a clear, cross-gender majority of survey participants (69 percent) reported spending at least a moderate amount of time during the crisis on developing gender balance in their organisations. Two sub-groups stood out as especially strong advocates: older professionals, regardless of hierarchical rank in their organisation, and those who self-identified as social impact leaders. About the former category, Kinias speculated that “it could be that these folks have more time on their hands. The children are grown already; there’s more time to be contributing to societal benefits”. Kinias connected the latter category to her ongoing research with post-doctoral researcher [Clarissa Cortland](#), wherein people who were primed to see themselves as social impact leaders were more likely to take up the cause of gender balance. “It’s something that’s reliably and robustly coming through in our data,” Kinias said.

To be sure, the survey respondents may not be entirely reflective of the business community as a whole. INSEAD alumni are perhaps uniquely committed to gender-equal empowerment, thanks in no small part to the activities of the [INSEAD Gender Initiative](#), of which Kinias is academic director.

That said, how exactly were these Covid-era champions contributing to gender balance? Among other actions, they reported making a deliberate effort to be supportive of women colleagues feeling squeezed by competing work-home demands. They also put an extra emphasis on mentoring and conducting frank discussions with their teams.

Extrapolating from their responses, Kinias shared five high-level takeaways for organisational advocates at this extraordinary time:

- *Consider the **systemic web of challenges*** – Don't search for a silver bullet solution. Logistical problems around parenting, for example, are likely to affect mothers of young children, but more mature women and non-mothers will face separate sets of issues. "We need to not assume that's the one thing, and if we fix it, everything will be resolved," Kinias said.
- *Build a learning culture* – This is particularly important now because of all the ambiguity and uncertainty in the air. "One of the biggest mistakes we can make is to say, I know the answer now and I'm going to forge forward with that perspective, rather than having a view to learn as much as I can."
- *Use data with purpose* – Kinias highlighted the "people analytics" within organisations that may help in updating profiles of at-risk employees in this new era.
- *Create coalitions of support within and across organisations* – Virtual meetings of alumni groups, for example, can be great for creating new connections and mutual learning. Other advocates in your company can be a critical source of support and idea sharing.
- *Develop and communicate a vision* – In these profoundly disrupted times, it's natural to focus on the sense of security we have lost. But Kinias pointed out that, in addition to discomfort, disruption brings priceless opportunities "to help us move to a better place. Starting to think about it, articulate it and share it with others can be very beneficial".

## **Working through challenges**

As a highly experienced strategic management consultant who is also a staunch advocate for gender balance, Luyten brought a grounded yet passionate perspective to the discussion. He described the difficulties employees in his home country of Belgium are experiencing in the current

awkward phase of lockdown, in which parents have returned to the office while schools remain closed. To ease the burden on working mothers, one of Luyten's retail companies has repurposed certain of the cosier areas of its stores as informal "learning corners" where employees' children can comfortably access the internet for homeschooling.

In addition, Luyten and his management team have been proactive in clearing the way for women to return to work when they might feel pressured to stay home. "Our managing director has a special eye on who's returning to work and who's not, specifically for our female colleagues," Luyten said. While treading lightly out of respect for the privacy of employees' domestic arrangements, Luyten's team has nonetheless pressed its message: "We really approached our female colleagues, and even our male colleagues with young families, 'Please come back to work and do bring the children.' ...Four out of five of our female employees were very, very grateful to come back and one of them, who is a single mom, saw it as essential for her survival, honestly."

To realise their leadership potential, women (no less than men) need active mentors. In the Covid-19 context, however, Luyten's mentoring relationships with rising women leaders have become more demanding. "Lots of the people [the mentees] I want to meet are busy ensuring their business gets through this crisis. And so there is a trade-off to be made between helping them connect and respecting the priorities of the people in your network," Luyten said. Successful mentoring in this tough period requires both more thought and more exacting time management from both mentor and mentee. "Identify the A-priority network-building activities you would require your mentee to do and put it in a measurable goal," was Luyten's advice for fellow mentors.

His message to mentees – and, by extension, to Covid-stressed women professionals globally – is "Be more focused, make it happen and set yourself a goal. Don't give in to time pressure limitations."

*INSEAD's webinar series "Navigating the Turbulence of COVID-19" feature expert inputs on key issues surrounding pandemic control and current countermeasures around the world. Watch them [here](#).*

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