
Foundations for Gender Balance Can Be Built at Home



By Zoe Kinias and Vinika D. Rao , INSEAD

If we want a robust economic recovery and a fairer world, we must stem the tide of women fleeing the Covid-19 workforce.

In the early weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic, concerned observers warned that although the physical toll of the virus on men is higher, women would suffer more social and economic devastation. Nine months and counting into the global crisis, we see that their fears were well founded when it comes to women's careers.

In the month of September, as remote learning resumed for American schoolchildren, approximately 865,000 women dropped out of the US labour force, almost exactly four times the number of men who did the same. And the latest "Women in the Workplace" report from McKinsey suggests that women's labour force participation will get worse: More than one in four women are considering either leaving the workforce or downscaling their careers.

This consideration is reasonable and best understood in the context of the systemic web of challenges women face in their careers. This includes their

treatment in and by organisations in terms of norms and practices, as well as a stubborn pay gap. The situation is further complicated by broader societal norms that both describe and prescribe how women disproportionately manage the domestic space and provide unpaid labour at home. In a recent webinar, INSEAD's [Jennifer Petriglieri](#) explained how the lack of flexibility for parents of young children, coupled with the societal expectation that mothers should be primary caregivers, often places women in an impossible situation.

While respecting the choices of parents exiting the workforce or downscaling careers when in these impossible situations, as organisational leaders and as members of society, we must stem the tide of women fleeing the Covid-19 workforce and work towards the return of female talent to leadership. This will enable the critically important outcomes of a robust economic recovery and a fairer world.

Building balance in the office

The status quo of gender disparities need not be maintained or exacerbated as business leaders collectively create [the new normal](#). Highlighting the special need to stay focused on gender balance during the crisis, [Achal Agarwal](#), Chief Strategy & Transformation Officer, Kimberly-Clark Corporation, said, "Covid has changed several things but gender diversity continues to be a top priority. With 'work at home', it has become even more critical to think about ways to support and sponsor women since there are further pressures on them because of closure of schools and other pressures at home. Those organisations which continue to work aggressively on gender diversity will emerge stronger after Covid."

Aligned with this optimism, [INSEAD alumni](#) expressed their commitment to increasing gender balance during this disrupted time in a survey designed by Kinias and colleagues in collaboration with the [IWiB](#) Alumni Club. Sixty-nine percent of respondents indicated they were spending at least a moderate amount of time on maintaining and building gender balance. Notably, men and women respondents contributed similarly to gender balance efforts in their organisations, which is encouraging given the necessity of support from both groups of leaders.

The recent alumni survey also found that responders who saw themselves as [social impact leaders](#), committed to bringing about a better world, contributed more to gender balance during Covid-19. Many leaders are

currently focused on what can be done to leverage the disruption to build more inclusive businesses through and after the pandemic, and a webinar held last 25 Oct by the INSEAD Gender Initiative and Abu Dhabi Global Markets (ADGM) highlighted this.

At this webinar on the policies and practices shaping organisational culture in a gender-positive manner, the speakers and many of the over 800 viewers emphasised the need to plan for a post-Covid or possibly a Covid-normal world, with a well-defined diversity, equity & inclusion strategy and firm targets. Diana Wilde, Co-founder of the Pathway20 Initiative by Aurora50, a social enterprise working towards 20 percent female presence for boards in the UAE, said, “Boards and companies that do not accelerate their diversity and inclusion initiatives are placing themselves at a disadvantage by limiting their access to talent, diversity of thought and innovativeness. To develop the most effective boards of the future, we need to consider how our actions today will impact the talent pipeline of tomorrow. Clear goals and strategic vision is required to ensure boards and executive leadership teams are adequately equipped.”

In a crisis, longer-term thinking can prove elusive, but its **importance is clear**. We advise leaders to build their post-pandemic strategy now. As vaccines take effect and Covid-19 gradually recedes next year, organisations should be ready to receive women who were retrenched or left the workforce in 2020. As Kinias recently wrote with Henriane Morgue d'Algue in **The National** (UAE), returner programmes have a high success rate when they follow established best practices. They will likely also prove effective for winning a post-Covid war for talent.

Building balance at home

For many women now, what happens at home has a significant impact on the way the pandemic is influencing career decisions. Persistent cross-societal norms of women contributing more than men at home, a surge in required domestic labour and blurred work-life boundaries are inflaming tensions between domestic and career demands. This increases the danger that families will fall back to default arrangements where women disproportionately or exclusively carry the extra domestic weight.

Before the pandemic, this resulted in **the “second shift”** filling many women’s non-work hours with childcare and housework responsibilities. Covid-19 has destroyed the boundary between the first and second shift,

creating an even worse predicament for dual-career couples and parents, often especially working mothers. They now have to manage their own careers, lead their teams and organisations through disruption while also guiding their children through remote learning and coping with dramatically higher levels of domestic chores with everyone home and limited external support.

In worst-case scenarios, it is an unsustainable burden for any one person to carry. Thus, as the efforts of both men and women towards maintaining and developing gender balance are crucial in the workplace, the same is true at home. At this exceptional moment in history, each dual-career couple must find its own way of navigating the disruption without making potentially serious career decisions based solely on short-sighted conflict avoidance. According to [Dirk Luyten](#), INSEAD MBA '89J and Managing Director of Levante Capital Management, "In these times of Covid more than ever, inclusive leaders practice their inclusive values not just in their teams at work but also in their teams at home. It means they share all the tasks including parenting and housekeeping. That way they allow their partner to continue developing their professional career in an equitable way."

Petriglieri's book [Couples That Work](#), published before the pandemic, contains practical insights on how to do this. In it, she urges dual-career couples to stop focusing on extinguishing the fires in their lives and attend to fundamental issues. She recommends couples create a contract to help them through challenging periods of transition (such as a pandemic). This should cover three close-to-the-bone issues: values (What matters most to you?), boundaries (What would you never want to do?) and fears (as opposed to phobias). In a Covid-themed [Harvard Business Review](#) article, she invites couples to align during the pandemic by formulating a "crisis deal" setting out their shared priorities, intentions and needs from one another.

These deep, meaningful conversations can help couples find creative solutions for long-term fulfilment. For example, a common fear that may surface for traditional fathers is not being there for their children due to work obligations. A natural next step in the dialogue is to explore ways for both partners to find a more equitable balance of parenting and career. For women, revealing ultimate professional aspirations beyond the pandemic may prompt a larger discussion about how those aspirations can be sustained in the remaining months before the vaccine is available to us all.

With Covid-19 threatening to erase years, if not decades, of slow progress towards gender balance, dedication and commitment of thoughtful effort both at home and at work can ameliorate the potential devastation.

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About the series

Covid-19

Covid-19 is no longer a global health emergency but its impact on public health, the global economy and the future of work cannot be overstated. INSEAD's thought leaders — both faculty and their close collaborators in the practitioner and entrepreneurship communities — give their informed perspectives that could help us not just weather the crisis but emerge from it stronger than ever.