

Women are facing unprecedented challenges in the COVID-19 workplace



COVID-19 has upended the world of work, but societal disparities have not changed. In fact, the pandemic has amplified gender, race, ethnic and socioeconomic inequities. East Asian communities are documenting a [rise in racism](#), women are facing a [disproportionate loss of jobs](#), and [domestic abuse](#) is on the rise. The pandemic is unevenly affecting people and nowhere is this more true than in its [effect on women](#).

Unlike the 2008 financial crash, when men's jobs were most at risk, now women's roles are [in the firing line](#). One reason is that men's jobs today are more flexible, allowing them to work remotely, unlike many female-dominated sectors like hospitality, retail and social care.

Also, when companies downsize, diversity, equity and inclusion efforts can become a secondary consideration. [Research](#) shows that this crisis is making inequities worse. Compounded by the [gender pay gap](#) (roughly, 20% in the U.K. and the U.S.), and the problem of children out of school, women are facing unprecedented challenges.

Prioritising equity and inclusion is [essential in this crisis](#). The 'new normal' of operating remotely, which happened almost overnight for many organisations, has enabled more flexible work options. A more agile, flexible workplace has long been on many working women's wish list, and we know from [our research](#) that a lack of flexible working options has been a barrier to women's advancement. Men and women want these options, but women's careers are stalled the most when it isn't available.

This shift to a new remote working environment, as working from home policies become more the norm, can only be good news for making workplaces work for women in the future, but we must not lose sight of the promise of recovery, and the rebuilding that will need to take place. As companies look at their people strategy, these questions can be considered:

- How did we treat women during the downturn?
- Are we a desirable place for women to work?
- What kinds of meaningful opportunities are we going to make available to women when the economy begins to turn upward?
- How are we tracking trends, such as job losses, to get data on what's going on?

Secondly, organisations should be purposeful about what they are doing and why gender equity matters now? Redefine what gender equity looks like in your organisation and [build a strategy](#) that encompasses this new working world.

Thirdly, we need to encourage inclusive behaviours. Almost half (45%) of the working environment, according to [Catalyst research](#), which predicts inclusion, comes from the actions of the first line manager. In this remote working space, this relationship is even more crucial to fostering an inclusive team culture.

Leaders [in this crisis](#) should acknowledge the widespread uncertainty and lead with empathy. They should be curious and ask questions to explore myths about why women are not advancing. It's also important to avoid stereotypes or assumptions around women's roles. For example, they may not be the primary caregiver, if there are young children in the house.

Women of colour also face an additional burden at work. Catalyst research calls this an '[emotional tax](#)'. Women, from non-dominant ethnically and racially diverse groups, may feel different from their work peers and this has consequences for their overall health, well-being and ability to advance. They often feel their contributions are undervalued and feel the need to stay 'on guard' for acts of possible bias or discrimination. Leaders must be mindful of micro-aggressions that women of colour may suffer, be empathetic and understanding, and work to ensure their voice is heard.

An [inclusive work environment](#) has many benefits and is a key competitive advantage for organisations. Teams work better together, are more engaged and more innovative, which is important in this [fast-moving situation](#).

Disruptive times can [exaggerate the barriers](#) that women and other non-majority workplace groups encounter, but it also creates an opportunity for change. Leaders need to look at the values of their organisation and how they promote and recruit talent. They need to model [inclusive leadership behaviours](#) and there needs to be an alignment between a company's stated values, policies and practices, and culture that is then reflected in the rewards and recognition given.

Collect the data. Does the representation on your leadership team accurately reflect your marketplace? [Unconscious bias](#) can easily creep into the talent pipeline, causing people to give roles to people they feel comfortable with, who look like them and come from a similar background, but, in this environment, it is critical that a diverse talent pool is leveraged.

Leading companies around the world have worked to break barriers and build environments where women can thrive at work. Rather than lose this momentum, [companies should use this time](#) to tackle remaining gender inequities and create a more equitable, inclusive and fulfilling future for everyone.



Notes:

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