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More women in workplace leadership could make the difference post-Covid



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As we struggle to imagine what a post-Covid-19 world of work might look like, the disproportionate effects that the pandemic has had on women need to be made visible. We could be living through another era where the hard-fought rights and protections female workers currently enjoy are wound back and future efforts made more difficult.

Many of the problems we are currently seeing have existed for some time: a concentration of women in frontline and caring occupations; their greater share of unpaid care work; their higher representation in precarious jobs; exposure to harassment and discrimination²⁶ and a lack of access to decision-making teams and opportunities to make themselves heard in the workplace.²⁷ However, Covid-19 is exacerbating many of these gender inequities and highlighting the connections between them.



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First, women are disproportionately working on essential jobs that require frontline contact with people who are potentially infected with the virus – from cashiers in supermarkets and early childhood carers, to nurses and doctors in hospitals²⁸ – adding to the occupational hazards to which women are normally exposed.

Second, women were already struggling with competing demands at work and at home; in the current crisis, working mothers are spending longer caring for children and sick relatives, while either having to remain productive or reducing their work hours and taking a pay cut.²⁹ Particularly for single or migrant mothers, this increases the risk that many women will lose their jobs and fall into poverty.³⁰

Third, women are more likely to be employed in precarious and casual roles. In many sectors, casual jobs – such as sessional teachers at universities, beauticians and waiters – were the first to disappear once Covid-19 hit,³¹ leaving significant numbers of women depending on government

support or, as in the case of many migrant workers, without any government support whatsoever.

Fourth, even when they occupy the same professions and level in the hierarchy as men, women are likely to be afforded lower status in workplace contexts. This holds whether women are in so-called “low-skilled” and low-paid jobs or elite professions.³² These conditions mean that, on a regular basis, women are more likely to fear speaking up when they experience workplace discrimination and harassment, and to suffer both negative health consequences³³ and greater penalties once they speak out about these experiences.³⁴ Given the pressures that Covid-19 is placing on the job market, and the many sacrifices employees are being asked to make to keep businesses afloat, women’s exposure to workplace discrimination and harassment is bound to increase.

These exacerbated vulnerabilities for female workers are taking place in an environment where private sector organisations will be concerned with securing their financial position and survival moving forward. Similarly, public sector organisations will be focusing on restricting expenditure.

Unfortunately, these two conditions in the labour market are more likely to hinder workplace gender equality strategies. These initiatives are often wrongly construed as discretionary, not core business, and as having a negative impact on productivity and financial restraint. We have already observed organisations cutting budgets for support that will directly impact women, such as defunding daycare centres, in a supposed attempt to secure their financial position.³⁵

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Yet decades of scientific evidence shows that taking steps towards workplace gender diversity does not hinder productivity. It also finds that such efforts are linked to better organisational governance; social responsibility; greater occupational wellbeing,

in the form of lower rates of workplace sexual harassment and bullying; lower physical and mental health risks for all workers, not just women; and healthier economies, bolstered by higher labour force participation.

Perhaps more importantly, workplace gender inequality is an issue of social justice. Manifestations of gender inequality such as direct and indirect discrimination, and sexual harassment, are clear obstacles to women's access to the many goods of paid work. They also contribute to the pervasive social, political and financial disadvantages women confront on a daily basis. Women have a human right to just and favourable work conditions that do not hinder their and their families' wellbeing.

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So how can we create workplace conditions that can help mitigate the disproportionate negative impact of Covid-19 on women?

There is, of course, no simple or single answer to this question. However, research shows that having women in leadership roles helps to create employment conditions that support women and their families.



Studies have identified some small differences between men and women in work-related values and leadership styles. While these differences might not manifest in each individual, when collectives are making decisions, it is likely that having a balance of men and women will help create a situation where women's values and needs are not neglected and where the implications of decisions for their welfare are more likely to be discussed.

In the political arena, women in leadership are more likely to advocate for the welfare of women, families and in particular children. Female politicians are also more likely to consult with their electorates before making decisions.³⁶ Similarly, women in workplace leadership roles are more likely to advocate for and implement practices that improve work-life balance for all members of the organisations,³⁷ which have a direct impact on the wellbeing of their employees and indirectly on the welfare of their families.

Female leaders are also more likely to embrace a democratic and participatory leadership style than their male counterparts.³⁸ Such an approach would be crucial in the current situation, where many organisations will have to negotiate with their employees how to navigate an unprecedented crisis in a way that protects the largest number of employees and the organisation from further harm.

Research has shown that organisations with more gender balance in positions of leadership, such as their top management team and boards, have better governance processes and are more likely to engage in socially responsible business practices that are less likely to harm the environment, community and customers.

During Covid-19 and its aftermath, greater representation of women in workplace leadership roles is critical. It is the most straightforward way to help alleviate the disproportionate negative impact of the pandemic on female employees. It might also facilitate a healthier relationship between organisations and the broader community in the future.