

Essays *on* **Equality**

*Covid-19: the road to
a gender-equal recovery*

Essays on Equality

Foreword	4
Julia Gillard	
Covid-19 has been a crisis for women – but some governments have recognised this better than others	7
Rose Cook	
It's a distraction to focus on the success of individual women leaders during Covid	11
Clare Wenham and Asha Herten-Crabb	
Advancing a feminist Covid recovery: reflections from Canada	16
Anjum Sultana and Carmina Ravanera	
How can the UK government “build back better” for women after Covid-19?	20
Nicky Morgan	
Covid is the biggest crisis for women in memory. Philanthropists must respond	23
Sarah Haacke Byrd	
Learning the lessons of Covid, in order to teach them	26
Paula Johnson	
Covid-19 in the Global South: how women are leading the charge to combat heightened inequalities	31
Alice Sverdlik	
Covid has shown we need to do away with hyper-masculine styles of leadership	36
Blair Williams	
Work after Covid: lessons from lockdown for resilience and recovery	42
Zoe Young	
Inclusive design should be at the heart of the hybrid workplace	47
Rob Cookson	
What would a gender-equal approach to remote working look like?	52
Manuela Tomei	

Foreword



Julia Gillard
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and Chair of the
Global Institute
for Women's
Leadership

As lockdown restrictions are eased and vaccines are rolled out, it's easy to think the end of the coronavirus crisis is just in sight. But as the head of the WHO Americas office recently warned, the pandemic is not only not over, it is accelerating. Indeed, while some countries are transitioning to a recovery phase, globally, Covid infections and deaths show little sign of abating, and many developing nations – such as India, the Philippines and Pakistan – are grappling with their most dangerous phase of the pandemic to date.

Yet whatever stage of the crisis countries are facing, it's important to start thinking now about how societies can rebuild – and in a way that leaves no one behind. This includes women, who we know have been hardest hit by the social and economic impacts of the pandemic.

For example, research carried out by the Global Institute for Women's Leadership in March found that female workers in the UK were more likely to be furloughed – meaning taken off the payroll and put on government employment support payments – for longer periods and to have worse projected financial security than their male counterparts.

And at this pivotal moment, the issue of whose voices are heard, and which expertise is listened to, is of vital importance – yet our research from October of last year found that female voices and expertise have been marginalised in media reporting of the crisis. Women made up just 5 per cent of STEM experts cited in media coverage of the pandemic, meaning for every mention of a prominent female STEM expert in a news story about coronavirus, there were 19 mentions of their male counterparts. Similarly, only a third of those quoted in articles about the pandemic were women.

If we're to have any chance of ensuring women don't lose out further because of the crisis, we need to keep the issue of gender inequality high on the agenda and ensure that women's voices are at the forefront of conversations about the Covid response and how we build back.

To that end, the essays in this collection highlight not only the gendered impacts of Covid-19, but also how we can begin to undo the damage caused by the pandemic in order to achieve a feminist recovery.

Over a year on from when this crisis began for most of the world, we know a great deal more about this virus, its impacts, and what needs to be done to mitigate them. Key to this has been the work of researchers who have generated vital data about the pandemic, including its differential impacts on women. We'll need more of this data and evidence – and, crucially, for governments and decision-makers to act on it – as we embark on the recovery.

We'll also need optimism and resilience. Nothing is set in stone, and with the pandemic shining a light on issues that have long been pressing concerns for women – from childcare and inflexible working arrangements, to domestic violence and the under-appreciation of female-dominated professions – there's a chance to harness this attention and create the gender-equal world we all want to see. We just have to work for it.

I hope you find these essays enlightening and informative. If you'd like to pick up any of the themes here, or have any other thoughts, please do get in touch with the GIWL team at giwl@kcl.ac.uk.

Julia Gillard

Women, the pandemic and the response

Covid-19 has been a crisis for women – but some governments have recognised this better than others



Rose Cook
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Based on their position before the crisis and the latest evidence on gendered impacts, female workers around the world are especially vulnerable during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹ This is leading to grave forecasts about the impacts of the crisis on women's employment, careers and economic independence.

Researchers predict large rises in female unemployment and the gender pay gap, partly due to an already notable trend of women leaving employment or reducing their working hours since the crisis began.² For example, in Italy, women accounted for nearly all of the country's 101,000 job losses in December 2020.³ One vulnerability stems from gendered labour market segregation. Analysis suggests that female-dominated sectors – such as customer service, sales, and food services – contain the most jobs at risk of furlough, redundancy, reduced pay or reduced hours, and this is especially so for the low-paid and insecure positions that women often occupy.⁴

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Additionally, while schools and childcare facilities have been closed during successive lockdowns, households with children have had to combine paid work with greater amounts of unpaid care work as well as home-schooling. Much of this has fallen to women, putting them at increased risk of job losses⁵ and heightened stress and mental health problems among mothers.⁶ To put it starkly, women are absorbing the additional labour created by the pandemic at the cost of their own wellbeing and economic security.⁷

How can governments help to mitigate these disproportionate impacts, and how have they done so thus far?

Job support schemes

Many countries have introduced income protection or “short-time working” schemes to support workers’ incomes if they are unable to work. These schemes have been widely taken up, with many jobs saved. However, our research⁸ showed that having accessed the UK’s Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), men returned to their previous working hours at a higher rate than women, who were more likely to have not worked at all between April and July 2020. Additionally, women who had accessed the CJRS also had lower perceived job security and financial security than their male counterparts. This mainly appears to result from the long-term use of the scheme in hardest-hit sectors that are dominated by female workers.

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Other countries’ job support schemes contain protections which could mitigate against some of these unequal experiences. For example, in Germany, the level of support increases over time and is more generous to those with children. Some countries, such as Norway, also introduced additional support for low-paid workers, which is likely to help women the most. Other schemes support workers in slow-recovering industries to spend their newly available time upskilling – the Singapore government ran a subsidised training programme for furloughed workers in the hospitality and retail sectors.⁹

Though they might not have been deliberately designed to prevent widening gender inequalities, and further analysis of their impacts is needed before we can tell if they indeed had such an effect, these policies do at least acknowledge and address the gender-segregated nature of employment – something which has been lacking in the UK’s approach.

Parental leave schemes

Many countries have created new parental leave schemes or expanded existing ones to help with the burdens created by the closure of schools and childcare providers. However,



provision varies greatly in its generosity and thus its likely mitigating effects on women's employment.

In Luxembourg, parental leave is made available throughout the school closure period on full pay. And in Belgium, parents can reduce their working time by 50 per cent on a higher rate of pay than they would usually get on parental leave. In other countries – such as the UK and France –there is limited access to paid leave, but job protection schemes may be accessed for childcare purposes.

But private companies have often done better than national governments. For example, Zurich Insurance offered parents 10 paid days off to ease the burden of caring responsibilities.¹⁰ While access to paid, job-protected caring time could mitigate some of the immediate burdens on families and particularly women, there is nonetheless still a risk to female workers. One problem is that, when it is not made available exclusively to fathers, generous parental leave will predominantly be used by women, potentially leading to their spending even more time out of the labour force, with a scarring effect on careers, and potentially reinforcing the gendered division of labour.

And then there are issues around the uptake and accessibility of leave. As we've seen in the UK, parents could in theory access the CJRS for childcare purposes – yet seven in 10 working mums who applied following the latest school closures have had their requests turned down.¹¹

These examples underscore the limits of policy solutions when overlaid onto unequal gender relations and suggest the need for a substantial rethink in the wake of the pandemic. This should ideally include treating childcare as a form of infrastructure and properly investing in it – an approach that would also create many more jobs, including for women.¹² Investing in employment and training programmes targeted at women and other affected groups, and retaining a focus on the gender pay gap will also be key.

As well as this rethink, we need to comprehensively analyse the gendered impacts of government policies in response to Covid-19. This should be prioritised as a matter of urgency – to make sure the measures are correcting, not compounding, the challenges women face as we begin to emerge from the pandemic.

It's a distraction to focus on the success of individual women leaders during Covid



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Much has been made in the press about the role of women's leadership in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The media has hailed the success of leading figures such as Jacinda Arden, Tsai-Ing Wen, and Sanna Marin in managing to keep case numbers low during the last year.

This has been mirrored in academic research, with studies demonstrating women leaders may be more inclined to acknowledge the human cost of the pandemic and engage with more gender-sensitive messaging.¹ Yet, aggregate data analysis has highlighted selection bias in some such analyses,² that there are in fact some women leaders doing a good job in combatting the crisis, and some performing less well.³ Similarly, some men are doing well also.

We think that there's greater nuance to this story: rather than successful Covid-19 responses being the function of individual women executive leaders, countries which have a better social contract between population and government⁴ (the extent to which individuals are willing to sacrifice certain freedoms and bestow power to a political authority,

and in return expect to be protected by that authority for the common good) are more likely to elect women,⁵ more likely to prioritise public services like healthcare,⁶ and more likely to respond better to the pandemic.⁷

Importantly, for effective public health interventions, the population has to trust the government and be willing, and able, to adjust their behaviour accordingly.

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"Though women's executive leadership deserves to be celebrated... focusing on individual women's success can paint a false picture of the state of gender equality"

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Though women's executive leadership deserves to be celebrated, providing important role models and necessary alternatives to the rise in hyper-masculinised "strongman" politics,⁸ focusing on individual women's success can paint a false picture of the state of gender equality. By exalting women's executive leadership as *the* signpost for equality, we



inculcate the idea that individual women can independently overcome patriarchal structures (ie “if they only try hard enough”) and obscure the plight of millions of women who do not benefit from such a position.

Moreover, media emphasis of women’s leadership during Covid-19 tends to highlight traits deemed “feminine” – empathy, listening skills, the ability to see the bigger picture, and the desire to seek broad input over authoritative decision-making.⁹ The association and reproduction of these qualities as feminine by the media is not just an example of selection bias but risks essentialising women as maternal caregivers, reproducing norms of social reproduction and ignoring the men who have or would also benefit from such traits.¹⁰

“85 per cent of 115 Covid-19 taskforces from 87 countries were majority men”

Focusing on individual women’s executive leadership can further ignore the overwhelming lack of women’s voices in decision-making globally – 85 per cent of 115 Covid-19 taskforces from 87 countries were majority men – and obscures broader issues related to women’s role in the pandemic: their increased risk of gender-based violence, burden of low-paid and unpaid care work as health and social care workers and mothers, and disproportionate risk of job loss.^{12 13 14}

Thus, instead of thinking about individual women leaders, we need to focus on the societies in which these women come to power. 2018 Canadian data has shown that increased participation of women in leadership causes a decline in mortality, but this is not to say that this is because of the gender of leaders, as much as it is in governments which have increased investment in health and social care.¹⁵ One study that assessed whether women heads of state had led more successful responses to Covid-19 found that indeed they had, but that this effect was mediated by

greater historical investment in health, and universal health coverage. The authors argue that male leaders of countries with better health systems would fare just as well.¹⁶

In this respect, women's representation is a symptom of a particular society that responds well in crisis likely owing to governance structures and social contract, just as women's lack of representation is a symptom of the distance and inequality between governing structures and the people they are intended to serve.¹⁷ Women's participation in politics is influenced by broader participation in the labour market, increased development, a post-industrial society and a developed welfare state.^{18 19}

Analyses of individual women leaders should therefore be considered against the backdrop of broader equality in the social contract. Increasing proportions of women

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parliamentarians do increase the development of policies that support women through public service financing (including health and social care) and social protection,²⁰ however, having more women in leadership positions does not, by default, lead to greater gender awareness or mainstreaming in policy.²¹ For this, we need to mainstream gender expertise, and to ensure equality impact assessments of policy to understand the effects of the proposed intervention. Only through identifying the (potential) gendered effects of policy can efforts be made to mitigate against downstream consequences for women.

This expertise will be particularly important for overcoming the regressive nature of the pandemic, both on women's livelihoods and their ability to participate in politics. Evidence from previous economic crises indicates that women politicians may be both short in supply and demand as the Covid-19 pandemic recedes²²; the ability of women to participate in politics is diminished through their increased unpaid care work and worsened economic state, and male politicians are increasingly sought as a supposed stabilising force. Despite the increased media

interest in women's leadership, as states emerge from the damage wrought by Covid-19 and inadequate gender-blind government policy responses, as well as a societal retrenchment to more conservative gender norms,²³ it is likely that we will see a return to more traditional roles.²⁴

Policies that support women's livelihoods, their paid and unpaid labour, their ability to house and feed themselves and their families, will do more for women's political participation in the coming years than the media's disproportionate emphasis on individual women's leadership during this crisis. For example, while the UK government has offered NHS staff a 1 per cent pay increase, in France, another male-led government, has offered their equivalent health workers 10 per cent. Algeria has provided paid leave for all pregnant women and women taking care of children or persons with health vulnerabilities, and Grenada has enforced a quota, albeit small (10 per cent), on the proportion of new infrastructure jobs that must go to women.²⁵ It is policies such as these which will meaningfully redress the differential gendered effect of Covid-19 and seek to improve the social contract between government and population.

Discussions on gender (in)equality during crises requires more than just equality for individual heads of state and should include a holistic approach to improving policies which affect the lives of women and other marginalised communities. Women leaders are a symptom of a society that has prioritised the health and wellbeing of their citizens, and this should be celebrated – but not to the exclusion of meaningful gender transformative policy.

Advancing a feminist Covid recovery: reflections from Canada



Carmina Ravanera

Research Associate at the Institute for Gender and the Economy (GATE) at the University of Toronto and Co-Author of “A Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for Canada: Making the Economy Work for Everyone”

This past year has shown us that we have a window of possibility to not simply recover from the pandemic, but to transform our society and economy to prioritise care and community.

It was 50 years ago that women from across Canada came together to highlight both the struggles they faced in an unequal society and the solutions necessary to drive gender equality. In 1970, the *Report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada* marked the first time that feminists nationwide boldly called for a national early learning and childcare system, along with several other recommendations to support gender equality.¹ The 12 pillars of the 1995 UN Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on Gender Equality similarly provided a roadmap, on a global scale.²



Anjum Sultana

National Director of Public Policy & Strategic Communications at YWCA Canada and Co-Author of “A Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for Canada: Making the Economy Work for Everyone”

Since these objectives were put forward, advocates, policymakers, researchers and social movements have worked collaboratively to push towards this vision for a more gender-just world, with each generation successively building towards human rights and social justice for all. When looking at these landmark documents, it is clear that if the investments and actions called for decades ago had been taken up, we may have had a stronger foundation to withstand the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. A lesson learned here is that creating gender-just societies can lead to gains that will be realised in our lifetimes and beyond.

That brings us to the current moment. Half a century on, we are the closest we have ever been to some of these recommendations becoming a reality in Canada. While the Covid-19 pandemic has unravelled much of the progress in gender equality made over the last few decades, it could also provide the policy window to break through the political gridlock that has plagued conversations about national childcare and other policies for gender equality. The pandemic is unprecedented in its scope and magnitude of

“By the summer of 2020, the participation of women in the Canadian labour force had returned to what it was in the 1980s”

impact, but it is not the first pandemic we’ve faced as a nation. What was true during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic is true now: in times of crisis, we need care and community more than anything.

Soon after Covid-19 struck, it was clear that it was not affecting people across Canada equally. Women; Two-Spirit and gender diverse people; Black, Indigenous and racialised communities; those experiencing low income; immigrants; and people with disabilities have faced the brunt of economic downturn and health risks.

By the summer of 2020, the participation of women in the Canadian labour force had returned to what it was in the 1980s. Women, who disproportionately take on unpaid caregiving, were leaving work to look after their families when schools and childcare facilities closed.³ There was an alarming rise in the rate of gender-based violence due to quarantining.⁴ Racialised and immigrant women, who are concentrated in frontline care jobs such as personal support workers – jobs which often do not have paid sick leave – were contracting Covid-19 at higher rates.⁵ Many



communities across the country, especially Indigenous communities and those in rural and remote areas, did not and still do not have access to clean water and affordable, quality housing to allow for safe quarantining.

In response to these impacts, we wrote *A Feminist Economic Recovery Plan: Making the Economy Work for Everyone*, a joint project of YWCA Canada and the Institute for Gender and the Economy at the University of Toronto.⁶ This was the first national feminist economic recovery plan. It provided policy recommendations for all levels of government with the aim of creating a resilient recovery and preventing these adverse effects of the pandemic on women and other marginalised groups from happening again. Its eight pillars included addressing the root causes of systemic racism; combating gender-based violence; valuing unpaid care work; and investing in good jobs. Some of its 27 recommendations involved investing in national affordable childcare, legislating paid sick leave for all workers, ensuring diverse voices in policymaking, and creating a national action plan against gender-based violence. It was built on research and advocacy by communities and organisations across the country and around the world, including the first feminist economic recovery plan from the Hawaii State Commission on the Status of Women.⁷

Alongside the advocacy of other organisations, our plan was heard across the Canadian policy and political landscape. The YWCA federation organised in communities nationwide to make the need for a feminist recovery undeniable. During the Speech from the Throne in the fall of 2020, the Governor General announced the Canadian government's plan to create an Action Plan for Women in the Economy, and its commitment to a feminist, intersectional response to Covid-19.⁸ We saw many of the recommendations and policy directions we outlined in our recovery plan echoed in Canada's Fall Economic Statement.

Although understanding of the need for a feminist recovery is growing, there is still a long way to go. At the time of writing this, Canada's Federal Budget for 2021 has not yet been released, but a few of the "guardrails" being used to

guide fiscal and monetary policy for the future are focusing on job recovery numbers and GDP. However, these may not paint the full picture of a resilient recovery. We need to see that jobs that are coming back are providing decent work and that GDP is being distributed equitably. We also need to look to indicators that signify different kinds of progress. For example, have poverty rates reduced? How are we valuing the unpaid and paid care work that is disproportionately done by women? Have rates of gender-based violence reduced?

“Governments and leaders must understand that unless their recovery policies centre women, girls, Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people, any recovery will be ineffective”

As countries around the world vow to build back better, governments and leaders must understand that unless their recovery policies centre women, girls, Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people, any recovery will be ineffective because it will not address the inequities that have been laid bare during this crisis.

This time has been one of profound change and uncertainty. The question remains: will it be a time of transformation? And what do we want our legacy to be in the future? For us, a society and economy grounded in care and community point the only way forward.

How can the UK government “build back better” for women after Covid-19?



Nicky Morgan
Conservative peer
and former Minister
for Women and
Equalities

At the start of 2020, and under the Conservative government, the rate of women in employment in the UK had reached a record high of 72.4 per cent.¹ As a former Minister for Women and Equalities, I know just how much hard work went into achieving that target and how getting there required a multi-layered approach.

Despite the highly successful furlough scheme, we already know that the rate of unemployment has increased as part of the economic downturn caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The UK’s female employment rate had fallen to 71.8 per cent by the end of 2020² and we know that more women were furloughed than men. This is because many of the roles which were furloughed were in sectors where more women are employed. So, in “building back better”, it is incumbent on the government and employers to ensure that women don’t bear the brunt of the economic shock and consequent redundancies.

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After a decade of progress towards achieving greater gender diversity in our workplaces, the place of women in the workforce must be at the forefront of any economic recovery package. So, how can this be achieved?

First, the Treasury needs to make proper strides towards producing robust gender impact equality assessments. As Chair of the Treasury Select Committee, we made clear that these assessments aren’t yet detailed enough. What gets measured gets done. We need to see the Treasury make real progress on this.

Second, to try to lessen the burdens on employers, the requirement for large companies and public sector organisations with over 250 employees to publish their gender pay gap data in Spring 2020 was suspended at the start of the first lockdown.

The government has said that the publication requirement will be reinstated from October 2021. This is too slow. The regulations should restart from spring 2021 to signal the importance of employers keeping a handle on the pay gap. In any event, there is nothing to stop our largest companies from publishing sooner on a voluntary basis. They could publish their 2020 figures too: given last year's suspension only happened a fortnight before the deadline, the data must have been collated internally within employer organisations and have been almost ready for publication.

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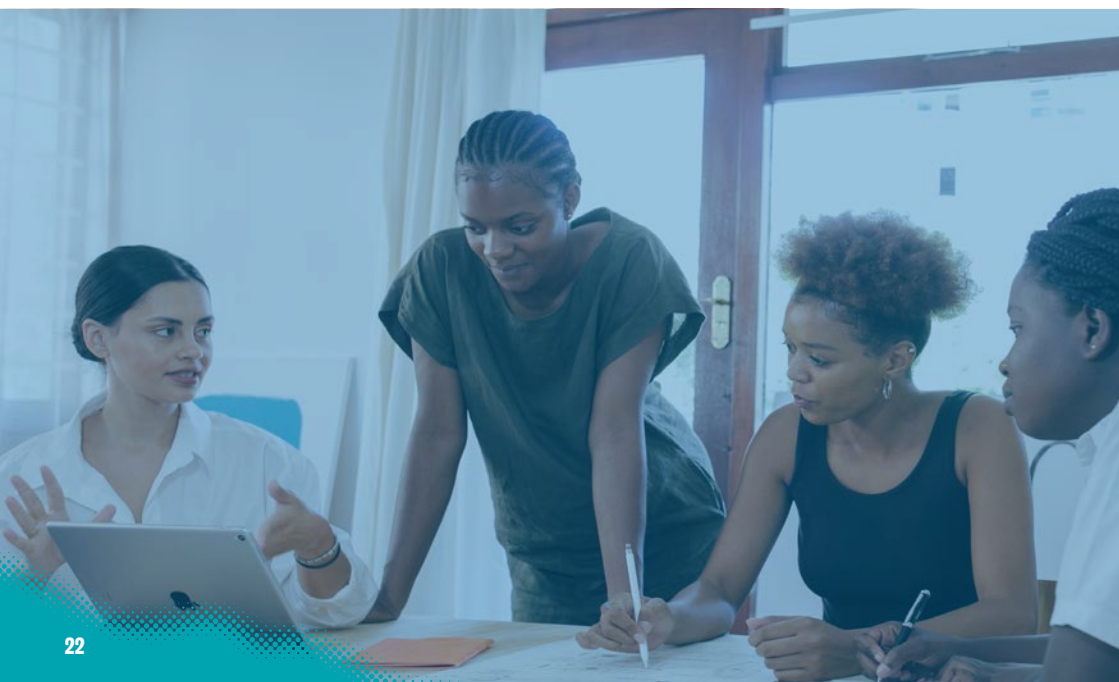
Third, there is much talk of investment in infrastructure as part of the government's “levelling-up” agenda. Childcare provision is now part of our infrastructure. Having good childcare in place enables working parents to get to work and to be productive in the same way that efficient transport links and fast broadband do. The government has shown flexibility in relation to childcare funding and entitlements during the pandemic but there will still be parts of the sector that will struggle to reopen and to stay in business. Opening up our childcare sector to levelling-up funding would send a real signal about the central place of childcare in our economy. In any event, our nurseries and early years organisations employ significant numbers of female workers who need to keep their jobs.

The rise of “working from home” has been trumpeted as being good for women workers. The danger is that, as lockdown eases and some employees are encouraged to return to work, some women will find it impossible to go back, particularly due to caring responsibilities, which have increased due to the lockdown. These women will then not

be present in the office as redundancy programmes start or, eventually, promotions commence. Employers should be clear that they will never consider “working from home” to be an easy option and that those doing it will receive equal treatment with their office-based colleagues.

Finally, we know there are some sectors where more women are employed which will take longer to recover. There may be some types of businesses in those sectors that never return to business as normal. Our future economic growth will depend on embracing digital and technological opportunities. Many women will excel in these fields if they are given the training and encouragement. Schemes such as TechUK’s Returners Programme or #Techmums are already doing great work and could be given even greater priority and visibility in any government stimulus programmes.

Women have been at the frontline in tackling coronavirus. The government can now put women front and centre of our national economic recovery – levelling up applies to women in our economy and our workplaces.



Covid is the biggest crisis for women in memory. Philanthropists must respond



**Sarah Haacke
Byrd**
Executive Director,
Women Moving
Millions

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the systemic inequalities women face every day in countries around the world, threatening their safety, health, and opportunity. The data is sobering. While women held 39 per cent of the world's jobs before the pandemic struck, they represent 54 per cent of its losses, making women's jobs almost twice as insecure as men's. Alongside this rising economic insecurity, women have shouldered the increased responsibilities of caregiving. They have experienced an unprecedented surge in violence, in some countries up to 300 per cent. Combined, these reversals mean we are currently living through the biggest crisis for women in our collective memory.

To date, government and private sector responses and recovery efforts have failed to address the disproportionate burden the crisis has had on women. The philanthropic sector has largely followed suit. If we continue in this direction, we will allow even the modest progress towards gender equality globally to be permanently undone.

“We are currently living through the biggest crisis for women in our collective memory.”

A year ago, writing in the *Financial Times*, Arundhati Roy presciently argued for a recovery that will “break with the past and imagine [our] world anew.” The current crisis has shone a bright light on the failure of our existing systems and those who are most impacted by those failures. Building back better will require new thinking, approaches, and voices. Governments, the private sector, and philanthropists must join forces to reimagine a world that recognises the dignity of all human beings – a world in which one person's security isn't based on another's vulnerability.

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There has never been such a clear and urgent call to action for the philanthropic sector. It must play a critical role in this reimagining and, in turn, reimagine its own approach. Despite research demonstrating that investing in women is the most effective social change strategy, the sector continues to under-finance the movements women lead. Today less than 2 per cent of philanthropic dollars, or \$7 billion out of \$432 billion in the United States, goes to women and girls. A gender-responsive recovery will require more money to flow to the organisations and leaders who are on the frontlines of the movement. Imagine what could be accomplished with double, triple, or 10 times these resources.

As we have seen in recent social movements like #MeToo, Time’s Up, and Black Lives Matter, women are stepping up to lead in big and bold ways, challenging the longstanding power structures in societies around the world. While the headlines capture the extraordinary contributions of philanthropists like Melinda Gates, MacKenzie Scott, and Laurene Powell Jobs, a growing number of women philanthropists are changing the landscape out of the media spotlight. As leaders of feminist funds and members of organisations like Women Moving Millions, which I am privileged to lead, women are driving the conversation on how philanthropy needs to shift power to support women’s post-pandemic recovery. At the centre of this discussion is how to build a new vision for how funds are distributed and to whom.

With women currently controlling \$72 trillion, a greater amount of wealth than ever before, women philanthropists have a tremendous opportunity to harness this new power to ensure that women’s needs are at the centre of the recovery efforts. They can mobilise their extensive networks to ensure that decision-making tables are set inclusively. They can make long-term, transformative investments in movement-building strategies, infrastructure, and leadership. Through the sheer size of the growing resources at their disposal, they

can disrupt the movement's dependency on the large institutional funders who have been so resistant to fund women by pooling their resources and creating new investment vehicles to fund the movement for equality.

“Building back better is going to take a movement, and a movement is going to take the support of women philanthropists”

It is easy to think of movements as spontaneous eruptions of activism that change hearts and minds in a moment. But those seemingly spontaneous eruptions are actually the product of an extraordinary effort by those who've worked tirelessly for years or even decades to assemble the core elements of movements: building constituencies, garnering support for policy frameworks, lobbying, developing research and leadership pipelines, and shaping public consciousness.

Building back better is going to take a movement, and a movement is going to take the support of women philanthropists. We must lend our voice to the conversations in which recovery is planned. We need to help finance the priorities on which it will be based. We need to stick to those priorities relentlessly until we reach our goal of a gender-equal world.



Learning the lessons of Covid, in order to teach them



Paula A. Johnson
President of
Wellesley College

As we approach recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, those of us who are educating the next generation of scientists, physicians, public health experts, and policymakers should be asking ourselves serious questions about what to teach them, in light of what we have learned.

When the Covid-19 pandemic first began its frightening spread in the United States late in the winter of 2020, some of our leaders saw the new coronavirus as “the great equaliser,” in that all of humanity seemed equally susceptible to it.¹

They were mistaken. We now know that men are more likely to die of Covid than women. The old are more likely to die than the young. Black and Hispanic people are twice as likely to die as White people,² and at younger ages.³ And our early failure as a country to stratify the data by race and ethnicity,⁴ in addition to gender and age, held us back in understanding and fighting the virus in the first months of the pandemic.

“Some of our leaders saw the new coronavirus as ‘the great equaliser’... they were mistaken”

We need to help our students do better. So, how do we get them to understand that the fault lines in our societies – the structural injustices – often determine health outcomes?

In the case of Covid in the US, the key factors seem to be that Black and Hispanic people are more likely to have underlying health conditions, such as coronary artery disease, hypertension, and diabetes, that worsen the course of the infection.⁵ They are more likely to work in service or care industry jobs that involve a lot of exposure to the virus. They also lost jobs at much higher rates during the

pandemic – particularly women⁶ – leaving a population that was already less likely to have health insurance vulnerable to the loss of employer-based coverage.

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 discounted”

They also are more likely to receive inadequate care because of bias. In clinical settings, women and people of colour regularly find that their symptoms are discounted. Rana Zoe Mungin, a 30-year-old Black schoolteacher in Brooklyn and one of Wellesley College’s most inspiring young alumnae, was twice turned away from the hospital without a Covid test in March of 2020, even though she had the standard symptoms of Covid.⁷ She was instead treated for asthma and told she might be having a panic attack. The third time she came to the hospital, she was put on a ventilator and died a few weeks later. In December, another Black woman – Dr Susan Moore, a physician – posted a video on social media from her hospital bed, explaining she had to beg for the treatment she knew she needed, from a White doctor who dismissed her pain.⁸ Covid killed her, too.

Who you are informs what you see. In the United States, where infant mortality rates are more than twice as high for Black babies as for White babies,⁹ a large study of Florida births found that when the doctor of record for Black newborns was also Black, the difference between the mortality rates for Black and White newborns was cut in half.¹⁰ So, how can we create a pipeline to bring more diverse voices to the table in science and medicine, in service of much better outcomes?

While race is a social distinction, sex, on the other hand, is biological and men and women experience diseases differently. In the case of Covid, men are more likely to die, but the preliminary evidence suggests that women may be more prone to “long Covid”¹¹ and may experience more severe side effects after the Covid vaccines.¹²

Incredibly enough, until the 1990s, women were routinely excluded from medical research trials, and even today, the

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“Women and women
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results may not be disaggregated by gender – or reproductive status. As a pregnant resident of Yale New Haven Hospital recently pointed out, the routine exclusion of pregnant women from clinical trials may have been expedient in getting Covid vaccines authorised quickly, but it left pregnant women at sea when it came to deciding whether to be vaccinated.¹³ In 2001, I founded the Connors Centre for Women’s Health and Gender Biology at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, which I led for 15 years, in order to change a medical and science culture that views men’s biology and experiences as normal and women’s as often irrelevant.

Again, who you often steers the questions you ask – so all of us in higher education need to think deeply about recruiting more women to the field of biomedicine.

On the research side, women and women of colour were absolutely key to the development of Covid vaccines, including Dr Kizzmekia Corbett of the National Institute of Health’s Vaccine Research Centre, who helped to forward



the speedy development of the Moderna vaccine;¹⁴ Dr Özlem Türeci, who led the development of the Pfizer vaccine as Chief Medical Officer of BioNTech;¹⁵ and Dr Katalin Karikó, who conducted the foundational research for the modified messenger RNA on which both these vaccines are based.¹⁶

Clearly, a crisis like Covid-19 demonstrates the need to employ the full talent pool. However, academic leaders have to go beyond asking how to draw women into biomedicine, and to start asking how to keep them there, because the performance of our institutions during this pandemic has not been great.

A recent National Academies report¹⁷ focused on the impact of Covid-19 on the careers of women in academic sciences, engineering and medicine and catalogued struggles that range from the sudden expansion of women faculty members' unequal "second shift" responsibilities as schools and childcare centres closed, to the extreme burnout being experienced by those on the frontlines of health care – women who are generally younger,¹⁸ less well paid, asked to work harder, and given less support than their male counterparts.

“Academia is... long overdue for a cultural revolution, one in which women are given equal respect”

In a country with relatively paltry public spending on early childhood education and care,¹⁹ our institutions need to take the long view and find ways to support the career progression of our women graduate and medical students, postdocs, and junior faculty. Academia is also long overdue for a cultural revolution, one in which women are given equal respect. In 2018, I was co-chair of a National Academies committee that reported on the sexual harassment of women in academic science, engineering, and medicine.²⁰ We found that academic workplaces are second only to the military in rates of sexual harassment.

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“If Covid-19 has demonstrated anything, it is the impossibility of dealing well with a great crisis without a multiplicity of perspectives”
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Ultimately, I hope that the self-evaluation that has been provoked in higher education by the pandemic does not go by the wayside when it is over. If Covid-19 has demonstrated anything, it is the impossibility of dealing well with a great crisis without a multiplicity of perspectives, and a sensitivity to differences. So, we should encourage our students, too, to ask better questions of themselves.

When they look at the grand challenges in public health and medicine, do they consider how social inequalities influence them? Are they exploring the ways that economic disadvantage and health disparities go hand in hand? Are they thinking about justice and fairness, as well as the science?

These lenses are utterly essential, if they are going to find their way to real solutions.

Covid-19 in the Global South: how women are leading the charge to combat heightened inequalities



Alice Sverdlik
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Across the Global South, the pandemic has led to a profoundly gender-inequitable combination of declining paid work with increased caring burdens and limited childcare.¹ Women are overrepresented in precarious informal jobs and often work in hard-hit sectors, such as hospitality and domestic work, while men in the informal economy have been better able to recover after Covid-related lockdowns.² Furthermore, women have overwhelmingly shouldered the rising care burdens throughout Covid-19.³

Such care duties are especially challenging to fulfil when facing dire shortfalls in water, sanitation, and energy, which again disproportionately affect women and girls. Low-income residents often rely on unclean energy sources for cooking and lighting that contribute to respiratory illness, as well as heightening women's difficulties when caring for the sick.⁴ Similarly, women and girls are especially burdened by inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).⁵ Not only do WASH deficits result in gendered time poverty and stymie women's efforts to maintain hygiene during the pandemic, it is also difficult to socially distance when queuing for water, particularly in dense settlements.⁶ Women and girls may even risk gender-based violence as they walk to access WASH and energy, including in refugee camps, informal settlements, and other insecure settings.⁷

“Across the Global South, the pandemic has led to a profoundly gender-inequitable combination of declining paid work with increased caring burdens and limited childcare”

Covid-19's gendered impacts can differ markedly based on local contexts, policy interventions, and intersectional disadvantages.⁸ But these effects remain hidden due to the lack of disaggregated data – for example, on age,

sex, ethnicity, disability, migration status, and other socioeconomic factors – that may combine to heighten inequalities in the Global South.⁹

Women-led, grassroots responses in urban areas

Community-based organisations have generated a plethora of creative, collective responses to alleviate the pandemic's health and economic impacts. Many women-led grassroots groups helped to fill gaps by improving handwashing facilities and delivering water to elderly or disabled residents, such as in Freetown's informal settlements.¹⁰ To address rising hunger, women-led community kitchens proliferated in Lima and many other Latin American cities.¹¹ Community radio, TV, and social media have all helped to raise awareness and combat misinformation on Covid-19.¹²

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“Community-based organisations have generated a plethora of creative, collective responses to alleviate the pandemic's health and economic impacts”
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Even when governments have sought to address Covid's impacts, community-led organisations can complement these initiatives and better reach vulnerable groups. Drawing upon their well-established social networks, women's organisations in Mumbai's informal settlements shared information widely and developed strategies to enable social distancing at local markets.¹³ In Kerala, India, a women's network called Kudumbashree worked with local governments to create over

1,000 community kitchens across Kerala, as well as special kitchens serving migrant workers.¹⁴ Women's cooperatives in Nepal partnered with local governments to distribute emergency relief, and funds managed by these cooperatives also helped to provide livelihood loans.¹⁵

Grassroots organisations have opposed exclusionary official responses during Covid, such as crackdowns on protests and informal markets, while also pushing for improved service delivery. Many civil society organisations in Zimbabwe, including women's organisations, mobilised against state corruption during the pandemic and protested even in the face of violent repression.¹⁶ The Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe created a Covid Response Working Group



focused on tackling domestic violence, insecure livelihoods, and food insecurity; it also sought to expand access to sexual and reproductive health services.¹⁷

As the pandemic's health burdens escalated in Brazil, women in Rio's favelas have continued delivering cooked food to vulnerable residents.¹⁸ Other bottom-up initiatives in Latin America have developed community quarantines, helped install public water-taps, and advocated for more inclusive government interventions.¹⁹

Refugee-led groups have also made several contributions to help reach marginalised households and enhance awareness of displaced people's needs.²⁰ For instance, refugee-led organisations in Kenya and Uganda translated information about the pandemic into native languages, lobbied Covid taskforces to include refugees in food distribution and raised awareness about the challenges facing women and girls.²¹

Towards an inclusive, long-term recovery

Many initiatives are still nascent and require further support, but may provide the foundation for an inclusive, gender-equitable recovery. For instance, grassroots organisations have repurposed local spaces and influenced official strategies with the potential to foster lasting transformations.

Kenya's slum-dweller federation has mapped community isolation areas and contributed to government guidelines on isolation.²² In Dhaka, residents are now cultivating hundreds of small-scale fruit and vegetable gardens (often in vacant lots), helping to reduce food insecurity and generate new sources of income.²³

To meet the needs of people with disabilities, community organisations in Indonesia and Sierra Leone's informal settlements built accessible sanitation facilities; distributed Covid information in several formats; and delivered supplies to disabled residents.²⁴ Significantly, these groups only recently prioritised the needs of people with disabilities – Covid provided an opportunity to create such novel alliances.

Digital communications strategies are creating links between activist movements and supporting alternative modes of organisation, with potential to tackle multiple inequalities. In Mexico, a “feminist trading platform” has used social media to facilitate the exchange of goods and services while also fostering women's solidarity.²⁵ For instance, therapists can provide consultations in exchange for clothes, food or other items. Meanwhile, in Brazil, a Human Rights Observatory was launched in April 2020 with participation from feminist organisations, LGBT+, black, and other social movements to collect information and combat Covid-related rights violations.²⁶ In turn, such network-building activities may strengthen longer-term struggles for gender equality and social justice.

“Emerging initiatives may help to revalue women's central role in the informal economy and also address their precarious working condition”

Emerging initiatives may help to revalue women's central role in the informal economy and also address their precarious working conditions. During lockdowns in the Dominican Republic, unions of domestic workers convinced

the Ministry of Labour to provide them with social benefits.²⁷ In South Africa, informal food vendors were declared as “essential” during Covid.²⁸ Soon after India’s lockdown was initiated, the city of Ahmedabad partnered with informal vegetable vendors in the Self-Employed Women’s Organisation (SEWA) to deliver fresh produce using e-rickshaws, which successfully reached low-income customers. In Ghana, food traders known as “market queens” helped clean markets so that sales could continue during partial lockdowns – local officials have built trust and successfully facilitated dialogues with these workers.²⁹

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 “To address Covid’s array of challenges, it will be essential to recognise women’s agency, build upon emerging alliances, and challenge multiple forms of disadvantage”

To address Covid’s array of challenges, it will be essential to recognise women’s agency, build upon emerging alliances, and challenge multiple forms of disadvantage. Key priorities for a feminist recovery include efforts to a) enhance access to food, WASH, and universal healthcare; b) combat violence against women; and c) tackle deep-seated social and economic

inequalities.³⁰ Policymakers also urgently require more detailed data – on age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity and more – to support a recovery that can simultaneously address intersecting inequalities and advance gender justice.³¹

Covid has shown we need to do away with hyper-masculine styles of leadership



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"It takes courage and strength to be empathetic, and I'm very proudly an empathetic and compassionate leader. I am trying to chart a different path, and that will attract criticism but I can only be true to myself and the form of leadership I believe in"

– Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand

It has been over a year since the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Covid-19 a pandemic, resulting in irrevocable global change and profound challenges for political leaders, local and national. Some, due to their inadequate responses, have failed while those who successfully flattened the curve have scaled newfound heights of popularity. At the beginning of the pandemic, it appeared that countries led by women were frontrunners in their response to Covid-19, inspiring widespread media speculation that women are better leaders during a crisis. One year on, does this still ring true?

As I've noted previously,² the compassionate, decisive and community-focused leadership style demonstrated by leaders like New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen and Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg, has been well-received and has largely resulted in effective Covid-19 management. In contrast, the hyper-masculine "strongman" style of leadership epitomised by leaders like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and Boris Johnson has been widely condemned. Does this comparison stand the test of time? According to the Lowy Institute's Covid Performance Index³ (CPI), which compared 98 countries' responses to Covid-19 in the 36 weeks following their 100th case, New Zealand performed the best. Taiwan was ranked third and Norway 18th, one of the highest-scoring European countries.

Last year, I highlighted the general praise that German Chancellor Angela Merkel received for her scientific, evidence-informed pandemic response and that Danish

Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen earned with her clear and effective communication. However, while Denmark continues to fare relatively well (23rd on the CPI), Germany has fallen to the middle of the pack (55th), with the 10th highest number of cases in the world after a rapid increase during the winter.⁴ Remarkably, however, the death rate in Germany (89/100,000) remains lower than the European average (115/100,000).⁵

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 “The Covid machismo of Trump and Bolsonaro and the privileged elite masculinity of Johnson has resulted in woeful policy responses”

How did the “strongman” leadership style of Trump, Bolsonaro and Johnson fare? The Covid machismo of Trump and Bolsonaro and the privileged elite masculinity of Johnson has resulted in woeful policy responses and, particularly for the former, the continuous undermining of health and science experts, with disastrous outcomes.⁶ According to the CPI, the UK ranked 66th, the US came

in at 94 and Brazil performed the worst (98th),⁷ and all three countries are in the top five for the total number of cases and deaths. A desire to out-muscle the virus was clearest in the attitudes toward mask-wearing that each leader publicly displayed. While Johnson donned a mask in the early months of the pandemic after contracting the



virus, Bolsonaro and Trump have notoriously disparaged them. Bolsonaro made headlines for being court-ordered to wear a mask,⁸ for using homophobic slurs to mock the wearing of masks by staffers⁹ and, more recently and after the Brazilian death toll passed 250,000, for claiming that masks supposedly cause headaches, lack of concentration and unhappiness.¹⁰ Trump consistently politicised masks as a partisan and hyper-masculine issue, illustrating how “health behaviours can demonstrate masculine ideals that serve to reinforce the systematic subordination of women or ‘weak’ men and preserve hierarchies of authority”.¹¹ It is not surprising, then, that all three leaders contracted the virus. In fact, out of the 14 heads of state and government who caught Covid-19 in 2020, only one was a woman.¹²

“Trump’s dominating masculine necropolitics... resulted in the highest case tally and death toll in the world”

The extent to which Trump lacked any effective Covid-19 policies, combined with his particularly dangerous form of toxic masculinity, has been described as “dominating masculine necropolitics”.¹³ Dominating masculinity involves “exercising power and control over people and events”, while necropolitics can be defined as “the use of social and political power to determine who may live and who may die, and who is disposable and expendable”.¹⁴ Trump’s dominating masculine necropolitics – his desire for control and adherence to his authority combined with a “racist, classist and ageist contempt for human life” as well as a ridicule of medical expertise – resulted in the highest case tally and death toll in the world, disproportionately affecting Indigenous and Black Americans.¹⁵

It is evident that the hyper-masculine “strongman” style of leadership is particularly ineffective during a health crisis. However, when it comes to the successes of women-led countries, do these results purely reflect gender? Recent

studies have suggested that the connection between women leaders and a better pandemic response is a “spurious correlation” as it comes down to culture and egalitarianism.¹⁶ Egalitarian countries fare better during crises and they are also, coincidentally, more likely to elect women.¹⁷ Yet other research, comparing women-led countries with neighbouring men-led countries, nevertheless found that the former had better Covid-19 outcomes, locked down their countries earlier and had a more decisive and effective communication style.¹⁸

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 “Assuming that a leader is innately better because of her gender is reductive and places unrealistically high expectations that can expose women to a backlash if they do not measure up”

Assuming that a leader is innately better because of her gender is reductive and places unrealistically high expectations that can expose women to a backlash if they do not measure up. These differences are less about gender and more about socialisation – in other words, the style of leadership that women tend to adopt. Women have been socialised, and are expected, to be nurturing, caring and compassionate. They therefore tend to display a more empathetic and “interpersonally oriented” style of leadership. In normal times, leadership traits have been heavily associated, if not defined, by stereotypically “masculine” ideals: “rational, management-oriented, male, technocratic, quantitative, cost-driven, hierarchical, short-term, pragmatic and materialistic”.¹⁹ Yet in times of crisis – and

especially crises of public health – stereotypically “feminine” leadership qualities are preferred.²⁰ It remains to be seen whether this appreciation will continue after the immediate health crisis and into the recovery stages, when attention will turn towards the economy, a highly masculinised arena. It is therefore imperative that we continue to value these more compassionate leadership styles in the Covid-19 recovery, rather than throwing them off the proverbial “glass cliff” and restoring traditional gender norms.²¹

While women may not necessarily be inherently better leaders, it is evident that we need to do away with hyper-masculine and dominating styles of leadership and instead

“The pandemic has heightened already existing inequalities which... risk setting back hard-earned gains in gender equality by at least 25 years”

embrace those that are compassionate, collaborative, and resilient. The pandemic has heightened already existing inequalities which, without gender-responsive government intervention, risk setting back hard-earned gains in gender equality by at least 25 years.²² An effective Covid-19 recovery therefore depends on diverse voices in all areas of decision-making and leadership so that, rather than return to the status quo, we can move towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

Work in the pandemic and beyond

Work after Covid: lessons from lockdown for resilience and recovery



Zoe Young
Director of Half
the Sky and
Co-Investigator
on Work After
Lockdown

Prior to the pandemic, working from home was simply one of many flexible working options made available by progressive organisations seeking to promote work-life balance. Typically, it was an option used by women in combination with other adjustments to working hours, to reconcile maternal responsibilities with paid work.¹ Informal use of working from home on a Friday by many became characteristic of British office culture to ease into a weekend. It was far less common in the UK to work from home all the time: only 3 per cent of employed people worked in this way.² One year into the UK's pandemic response, and working from home is a business continuity lifeline. Around 30 per cent of employed people across the four nations were doing their jobs from their homes during the first pandemic peak.

Will it stay or will it go? Will people want to continue to work in this way when Covid-19 restrictions ease? Who will benefit and who might lose out? And what are the implications for women's employment and labour market opportunities arising from continuation, cessation, or adoption of the much discussed "hybrid" location model? These are the very good questions that will be answered by the Work After Lockdown project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.³

"Around 30 per cent of employed people across the four nations were doing their jobs from their homes during the first pandemic peak"

The lasting impacts of crisis-driven home-working can only be assessed with time. But, as people and organisations across the UK navigate a third period of national lockdown, our research offers important learnings from the first about

motivating employees and sustaining performance vital for resilience, recovery and growth.⁴

Working from home works, provided the conditions are right

The shift from office to home was rapid in March 2020, and for some organisations it was comprehensive, with 100 per cent of the retained workforce suddenly “out of the office”. Productivity was good. By self-report measures, almost nine in 10 employees we asked felt they had got at least as much, if not more, work done at home as in the office. Good news for organisations and impressive under testing circumstances. But at what cost comes high productivity? Maintaining it during successive weeks and months of the pandemic takes its toll, with employees’ responses on mental health and wellbeing on our survey ranking relatively low – at 47 out of 100 – measured against the World Health Organisation global standard.⁵ Wellbeing is an area where employers need to act.

Women are in the middle, again

There is little doubt from our research that working from home is most productive for people with access to adequate desk space, technology, privacy, and uninterrupted time.

Access to these vital components of effective working from home was not universal, and it was parents and carers who felt a time squeeze most acutely.

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 “Parents and carers [were] less likely to work from home under conditions conducive to high productivity [and] were also more vulnerable to anxiety, stress and burnout.”

Women make up the majority of this group and were uncomfortably yet familiarly positioned in the middle of a collision of caring and crisis.

For women with very young and school-age children at home all the time, working time was broken time – often fragmented and frequently interrupted. We found that not only were parents and carers less likely to work from home under conditions conducive to high productivity, they were also more vulnerable to anxiety, stress and burnout. It is clear from our research and that of many others,

that maintaining work performance through successive lockdowns and school closures has come at high cost to women's cognitive, emotional and financial resources.

Poor workforce health and wellbeing threatens business continuity. Wellbeing – physical, mental and emotional health – should be prioritised for organisational stability and performance. Continued reliance on individuals “coping” is not a sustainable strategy to maintain and improve productivity. Instead, employers must focus on interventions and practical adjustments to workloads and working practices that remove burdens and ease intensity.

“Continued reliance on individuals ‘coping’ is not a sustainable strategy to maintain and improve productivity”

The pivotal role of line managers

Line managers played a pivotal role in sustaining employee performance during lockdown. Many embraced the challenges and made immense efforts supporting their colleagues practically and emotionally. On the downside, working from home has also exposed managers who lack empathy, have little insight into diverse workforce needs, and possess limited interpersonal skills.

Line managers are on the frontline of organisational responses to change in their translation of corporate messaging and policies into practical ways of working for their teams, and yet only a minority received any guidance on how to coordinate the different working patterns necessitated by lockdown. Organisational stability and future growth will be assisted by reviewing managers' suitability for the task, and by developing training curricula that strengthen the new people management competencies that are demanded by workforce diversity and the future shape of work.

Working from home after lockdown?

Despite the challenges, there have been some individual gains from home-working – for example, in the cost and the time saved by not commuting. But social contact has

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 “Seven in 10
 employees wish to
 continue working
 from home
 when pandemic
 restrictions are
 lifted”

been greatly missed by many and could fuel an immediate surge back to the office when confidence returns. That said, seven in 10 employees wish to continue working from home when pandemic restrictions are lifted either some of the time or for specific work tasks, under what has been termed a “hybrid” model. Our survey findings mirror national data from the Understanding Society Covid-19 Study, where 75 per cent of employees across a broad range of industries want some working from home once things return to normal.

Time to re-engage with flexible working

It is clear from our research that being able to adjust the time and timing of work has proved as, if not more, significant as the place of work in retaining parents and carers in employment through the pandemic. Few will want to reverse



the situation and give up the task and schedule autonomy that has sustained them under lockdown. This situation requires employers to re-engage with flexible working. Seriously. With intent to discover ways of working that will not only retain and sustain, but also boost individual and team performance. Shaping a more equitable future of work requires an intentional strategy to test and to learn about how flexibility works in different roles and teams, and for people in different circumstances, because one model is unlikely to suit all in the future of work after lockdown.

Inclusive design should be at the heart of the hybrid workplace



Rob Cookson
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Across sectors and geographies, in the last 12 months we have seen waves of announcements from companies and organisations rolling out new programmes around remote work and flexible working practices. The trend towards more flexible work was alive and well pre-Covid, but there is no question that this trend has dramatically accelerated as companies have experienced the pros and cons of this way of working over past year.

While companies' motivations for new approaches to work may vary – for example, talent acquisition, cost, or employee satisfaction – there is no question that remote and flexible working are going to be more prevalent than they have ever been and are here to stay post-pandemic. In a survey of 60,000 employees undertaken by Corenet Global and Cushman and Wakefield in 2020, employee expectations of being able to undertake hybrid work (part in office, part remote) increased from 29 per cent pre-Covid to 81 per cent post pandemic. In JLL's Reimaging Human Experience research, 72 per cent of survey respondents want to continue working from home at least two days a week.

“There isn't one solution that fits all, but what is essential is to create an inclusive environment for remote and flexible workers to be successful in”

My first port of call when asked to write this essay was to consult with the female and male leaders in my team leadership to get their perspective, and those of the women in their teams. What is clear from their responses is there is huge variance to the challenges women face working remotely or flexibly and there are a variety of factors at play – geography, family situation, living situation, socio-economic situation, caring responsibilities and character traits – that enable some to be more successful than others in

a hybrid environment. There isn't one solution that fits all, but what is essential is to create an inclusive environment for remote and flexible workers to be successful in.

In May 2020, Facebook announced a long-term commitment to remote working, and so, over time, we will see more of our employees working away from the office compared with pre-Covid.

Personally, I'm excited about the increased development of remote and flexible work models, as they afford huge potential to access new diverse talent pools. This allows more flexibility for talent that might otherwise leave the workforce and generally provides more opportunity and flexibility around where to live and how best to work.

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“Hybrid working
presents the
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full-time and those
not”
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The ability to work in an office may be associated with some level of privilege, favouring employees with sufficient financial stability and/or childcare support (if relevant) to live near or travel the distance to reach the office. So, as remote and flexible work become more prevalent, there is the potential for this privilege gap to widen.

For the reasons above, we will likely see that employees taking advantage of flexible and remote working opportunities are more diverse than the baseline population.

According to the academics Mark Mortensen and Martine Haas, hybrid working presents the potential for a power imbalance between those working in the office full-time and those not – both in terms of access to information and resources (hybridity positioning) and the different abilities of hybrid workers to deal with working remotely (hybridity competence).

This power imbalance is borne out in research, undertaken pre-pandemic, into companies with large portions of flexible

or remote workers, which showed that being in the office is connected to career growth.

Managed well, remote and flexible work programmes will have a significant positive impact on growing and diversifying the workforce and afford improved work-life integration for many. But we have to avoid a situation where privileged, less diverse people are in the office, and, as a result, are receiving better support to advance their careers and are more likely to be promoted into leadership positions.

“We have to avoid a situation where privileged, less diverse people are in the office, and, as a result, are receiving better support to advance their careers ”

“Managed well” is key. As the home environment becomes increasingly blended with the work environment, this has the potential for very different outcomes for different groups of people. It will therefore be essential to put diversity and inclusion at the heart of any remote or flexible work programme.

To create as level a playing field as possible, we need to work on two fronts. We need to make a remote workers’ home-working environment as “match fit” as possible for work they do, and we need to ensure that the workplace and company culture adapts so that remote and flexible workers aren’t disadvantaged but rather are at the centre of the office experience.

Covid forced remote work on us suddenly, and many didn’t and don’t have optimal home-working environments. Company support is vital. Like many other companies, at Facebook we provide a home office set-up allowance to remote workers and an annual allowance for items like high-speed internet bandwidth.

As far as feasible, a remote or flexible worker should have access to the same standard of office furniture, technology



and office equipment as the in-office worker, to enable the remote work experience to be as frictionless as possible and to support productive, creative and innovative work. Guidance on important wellbeing opportunities like optimal ergonomic set-up, best plants for indoor air quality (and therefore productivity) and optimal home office layout for video conferencing will also be key.

For many remote workers, access to a “third space” where work can be undertaken efficiently will be advantageous for times when the home office working environment is challenged or a change of scenery required.

In-office environments will need to be rethought so they are efficient for flexible and remote workers “dropping in” – when they visit the office, they should be set up to be as successful as their in-office counterparts. In-office environments need to ensure that office services, such as getting your laptop fixed and other admin-type services like a help desk, are equally accessible to remote workers.

Offices supporting hybrid teams will need to provide ease of connectivity to flexible and remote workers who aren't in the office – for example, easily accessible video conferencing-enabled meeting spaces. Remote workers will also need equal footing in every meeting, so we need to redesign our approach to meetings and how we represent remote workers in the meeting environment to make sure they have the same opportunity to participate as the people in the room. This applies to all team interactions, from in-office team huddles to post-meeting debriefs – it will be vital to consider who else should be participating that might not be physically present.

“We need to redesign... how we represent remote workers in the meeting environment to make sure they have the same opportunity to participate as the people in the room”

Successful physical environments are essential, but for remote and flexible workers to be seen, heard and valued, processes, policies and leader behaviours need to be aligned and in support. It will be essential to build leadership skills in managing remote teams inclusively – something we have and continue to invest heavily in at Facebook.

In managing and getting the best out of remote and flexible workers, leaders will need to develop inclusive leadership traits including showing care, empathy and understanding, and will have to create that environment in wider teams. Leaders will need to communicate well and share context, develop human connection and build community and team culture in hybrid teams. Being available and generous with time will be especially important for leaders. Among others, these are traits and behaviours that effective leaders at Facebook are expected to possess and develop. In my view, these traits will be required increasingly in the future as remote and hybrid work becomes more prevalent– which further reinforces why it is essential that we create a level playing field between remote and in-office workers and the environments in which they work.

What would a gender-equal approach to remote working look like?



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Overnight, millions of employees across the world shifted to mandatory “teleworking”, or remote work, to reduce the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, while allowing businesses and organisations to remain afloat.¹

Covid-19 has given teleworking a tremendous impetus everywhere – and it may be here to stay once the pandemic subsides. As such, it is important that policymakers understand how to ensure decent and productive working conditions for all those who telework. Particularly, how to ensure that women and, more generally, workers with family responsibilities, benefit equally in terms of career progression, health outcomes and work-life balance.

Teleworking offers plenty of advantages, including time and money savings in terms of commuting; greater flexibility and autonomy in the organisation of work and the scheduling of private life; and potentially greater opportunities to update and upgrade skills. Teleworking is also typically depicted as an ally of working parents, especially mothers, and a means to advance gender equality in employment.² But is this true?

Even before the pandemic, some of the downsides of teleworking were the long hours of work, insufficient rest breaks and tensions between work and private life. Women, while appreciating the possibility of working from home, were more likely than their male peers to also report that they felt isolated.³

The differentiated gender impacts of teleworking

This situation seems to have deteriorated with the pandemic. If not adequately managed, the blurring of physical and organisational boundaries between work and home – especially when telework is performed on a continued basis – can have a negative impact on an individual’s mental and physical health and intensify work-family tensions.

Social isolation and the increase in domestic chores and home-schooling imposed by the lockdown, added a further strain on families. It is not surprising, therefore, that one in five workers who were teleworking and living with children under 12 within the EU reported problems in concentrating on their job all or most of the time.⁴ Among these workers, women shoulder the brunt of this additional pressure.

“One in five workers who were teleworking and living with children under 12 within the EU reported problems in concentrating on their job all or most of the time”

A few studies assessing the impact of teleworking on workers' health outcomes during the early phases of the pandemic report that mothers experience higher psychological distress compared with women without children and with all men. Mothers, especially single mothers, may find it harder to meet tight deadlines or attend meetings at hours when they have to feed young kids or



help them in home-schooling. As a result, they may work until very late to meet such deadlines, while worrying about dismissal, with the risk of developing sleep disorders, anxiety and, eventually, burnout.⁵ The risk of dismissal is higher for mothers of young children holding temporary contracts.

However, more senior women professionals are also not spared similar challenges. In a McKinsey and LeanIn survey of North American female employees, one in four women, including senior-level women, said they were thinking about reducing or leaving paid work due to the pandemic, citing company inflexibility, caring responsibilities and stress as causes.⁶ Another factor is protecting the time and energy of the partner who earns a higher pay in the couple.⁷

Towards transformational and gender equal teleworking

It is clear that the pandemic has not challenged the skewed distribution of unpaid care work towards women. Even before the Covid-19 outbreak, women carried out more than three-quarters of the total daily time spent in unpaid care work across the world.⁸ Since the beginning of the pandemic, 28 per cent of women have reported an increase in the intensity of their domestic work relative to 16 per cent of men.⁹

.....
“As long as the uneven distribution of unpaid care work at home is not resolved, women will continue to be seen and treated as ‘secondary’ earners”
.....

As long as the uneven distribution of unpaid care work at home is not resolved, women will continue to be seen and treated as “secondary” earners by their partners, employers and co-workers. Teleworking is an important means to help mothers, and parents more generally, to juggle work and family, but

it will not be truly transformative unless there is a deliberate decision to promote flexible working with gender equality.

So, what to do?

.....

“The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the pre-existing childcare crisis”

.....

If people who telework are to concentrate on their work without constant interruptions to attend to family demands or housework, then access to affordable, reliable and high-quality childcare and elderly care is essential. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the pre-existing childcare crisis, adding urgency to the case for further investments in the care sector to also improve the safety and working conditions of care workers, the majority of whom are women. During the pandemic, vouchers to obtain babysitting or domestic work services to help families cope with the additional care-related demands have been introduced as temporary relief measures in a number of countries.¹⁰

Maternity, paternity and parental leave need to be designed in ways that challenge the view that looking after the house and family is a “woman’s job”. At present, in most countries, it is mainly women who take up such leave.

The right incentives need to be built into these laws, such as making parental leave non-transferable, to increase men’s uptake. It is encouraging that during the pandemic many countries have broadened, temporarily, the circumstances under which paid parental leave is granted or have introduced unpaid leave for childcare as part of job retention schemes.¹¹

The right of employees to disconnect from their work and to not answer emails outside of normal working hours (or to at least not be rewarded for doing so), needs to be recognised. This is another important means to prevent anxiety and burnout, allow for work-life balance and encourage family co-responsibility.¹²

Within organisations, it means specifying normal working hours and periods of rest and availability, which are broader than typical working times. The use of “core working hours”, which focus on the number of hours worked, rather than when they are worked, is another means to grant parents, particularly mothers, heightened flexibility. If you still need to be on call for a typical “9 to 5”, the benefits of working remotely are significantly reduced. In parallel,

each employee also needs to adopt his or her own boundary management strategy, and training can help in this regard.

Managers should be assisted in overseeing a dispersed workforce and shift away from “management by control” to “management by results”. Setting more realistic expectations; re-evaluating performance criteria – for instance, not criticising employees for working outside of core hours; communicating clearly about duties and tasks; regularly assessing employees’ workloads; providing technical or logistical support as required; and facilitating co-worker networking, are all key dimensions of managing by results.¹³

Finally, teleworking – whether voluntary or compulsory – should never undermine employees’ career advancements or training opportunities.

The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Labour Organisation.

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