**How the Covid 19 crisie is threatening Gender Diversity at Workplace**

Under the highly challenging circumstances due to [the COVID-19 pandemic](https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/coronavirus-leading-through-the-crisis), many employees are struggling to maintain their jobs. There are many who feel like they’re “always on the job” now as the boundaries between work and home have been blurred. Burnout is a real issue as they’re worried about their family’s health and finances. The events of 2020 have turned the workplaces upside down.

Particularly, the women have been very badly impacted. Many women, were laid off during this crisis, which has ruined their careers and jeopardized their financial security. The pandemic has intensified the challenges that women always faced. Working mothers have always worked a “double shift”—a full day at work, which was followed by hours spent in caring for children and doing the household chores. In addition to it, the supports that made this possible which includes school and childcare facilities have also been upended now. Women has always faced more barriers in advancement of their careers than most of the other employees.

As a result of these dynamics, more than one in four women are contemplating what many would have considered unthinkable just six months ago i.e. downshifting their careers or leaving the workforce completely. This is an emergency situation all over the corporate world. Companies risk losing women in leadership and future women leaders which can unwind the years of painstaking progress towards gender diversity.

This crisis also provides us with an opportunity. If the companies take significant steps in building a more flexible and empathetic workplace which has already started to happen, then they can retain the women employees who have been affected. Companies already have a culture in place, where women have an equal opportunity to achieve their potential in the long term.

Many companies have taken some important steps to support women employees during the COVID-19 crisis. Almost all the companies are providing tools and resources to help the most employees work remotely. They are sharing valuable information with all the employees, including updates on the business’s financial situation and details about paid leave policies. Many companies have also expanded their services towards the mental health of the employees, such as counselling and enrichment programs and providing training to help the managers support their employees in improving their mental health and well-being.

In addition to the mental health, companies are also focussing to reduce the financial anxiety of the employees. They are bringing in policies and programs in order to ease employees’ financial stress. More than half have increased the number of paid leave, which is an important option for employees who need time off but can’t afford to miss a paycheck—and about a third have added or expanded stipends to offset the costs of working from home. Sadly, for the companies which are struggling financially or rethinking their business, it may not be possible to reassure their employees on this front.

**Companies are at a risk of losing women in leadership**

Senior level women are under the same pressure to perform right now as senior level men. Some women are often pressurised to improve their performance standards than men and they may be more likely to take the blame for failure when the stakes are high. So now, the senior level women have to face more criticism and harsher judgement. Senior level women are also nearly twice as likely as women overall to be the only woman in the room at work. [That comes with its own challenges](https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/gender-equality/one-is-the-loneliest-number): women who are “Onlys” are more likely to feel the pressure to work more than women who work with other women and they experience a lot of aggressions, including the need to provide additional evidence of their competence.

Not surprisingly, senior level women are significantly more likely than men at the same level to feel the burn out, under the pressure to work more, as they have to be always on. They are 1.5 times more likely than senior level men to think about leaving the workforce because of the huge workload and extreme pressure. Almost for about three in four feeling so, burnout is the main reason.

But, companies can’t afford to lose women leaders. The possibility of losing so many senior level women is alarming for various reasons.

The financial consequences can be significant. [Research shows](https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters) that company profits and share performance can be almost 50 percent higher when women are at the top. Apart from that, senior level women have a vast and powerful impact on a company’s culture. They are more likely than the senior level men to embrace employee friendly policies and programs and to champion racial and gender diversity. More than 50 percent of the senior level women say they consistently take a public stand for gender and racial equity at work, compared to about 40 percent of senior level men. So, if women leaders leave the workforce, women at all levels could lose their most powerful allies.

**How companies can better support women**

Women were already having a worse experience in the workplace than most other employees. Now they’re facing the challenges which are more protracted. To better support women, companies need to take action in these critical areas.

1. **Address the challenges of women head on**

Companies need to address the distinct challenges of women, who face obstacles rooted in both racism and sexism. The first step lies in making a public and explicit commitment to advancing and supporting women. This commitment should be clearly communicated to all the employees, along with a detailed explanation of why it’s important. Most employees don’t realize that women have a markedly worse experience at work. Women face more systemic barriers, receive lesser support from managers and experience an acute discrimination. If employees understand this, they will be more likely to champion the women in their organization.

The companies should adopt an approach which meet their diversity efforts, in order to effectively turn their commitment into action. When companies set goals and track outcomes by gender and race combined, they can more clearly see how women are progressing. For example, if the companies evaluate access to formal mentorship, sponsorship and management training this way, women are more likely to get equal access to these critical opportunities.

2**. Foster a culture that values and supports women**

The companies need to have a culture in which women and other traditionally marginalized employee feel the belonging. There are two important parts of this

* Making it clear to all the employees that disrespectful behaviour towards women won’t be tolerated.
* Taking some proactive steps to make sure that women feel valued and cared all the time.

Many companies have some specific guidelines for conduct which clearly mentions all that is not acceptable and it’s a good first step. But it’s also equally important to articulate what positive, inclusive behaviour is like and show examples of it in practice. Employees will be better equipped to do their part, if they receive antiracism and allyship training which will give them a more complete understanding of how to combat discrimination against women and show up their support for women as allies.

**The way forward**

The choices which the companies make will shape the workplace for women in the decades to come—for better or for worse.

Organizations are advised not to take a “one size fit all” approach when it comes to employee practices and policies.Let’s address the elephant in the room rather than looking away.The challenges faced by the companies right now are very serious. Almost 2 million women are considering to leave the workforce. Women are dealing with additional challenges which includes long standing issues of bias and getting less support from managers and co-workers.

There are two paths ahead now. If the companies recognize the scale of these problems and do all they can to address them, they can help their employees get through this difficult time and reinvent the way they work so that it’s more flexible and sustainable for everyone. If not, the consequences can badly hurt the women, business and the economy as a whole. It requires a lot of creativity, long term thinking, strong leadership and a genuine focus on the values of women, in order to retain them in their organizations amidst the challenges of COVID-19.