

Pandemic risks wiping out hard-won gains by women in STEM

May 22 2020, by Yolande Hutchinson



UNSW Dean of Science Professor Emma Johnston. Credit: University of New South Wales

UNSW Dean of Science leads report that finds women's advancement in the STEM workforce are at risk due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

UNSW Dean of Science Professor Emma Johnston is the lead author of a research report which has found that hard won gains for women's advancement in the STEM workforce are now at risk of a major setback due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even before the pandemic hit, women were under-represented in STEM. Early evidence from during the shutdown suggests women in the STEM sector have suffered even greater job losses than men.

The report also points to women carrying a greater share of responsibilities for caring and distance learning duties during isolation.

Australia's scientific and technical services industry recorded job losses of 5.6% from mid-March to mid-April 2020, with [jobs](#) down 6.3% for women compared with 4.8% for men in this field.

The findings are in a research report requested by the Minister for Industry, Science and Technology, the Hon Karen Andrews MP, published today.

The report was produced by the [Rapid Research Information Forum](#), a group of 35 research sector led organizations. The forum is chaired by Australia's Chief Scientist, Dr. Alan Finkel, and its operations are led by the Australian Academy of Science.

Lead author Professor Emma Johnston AO FTSE, Dean of Science at UNSW Sydney, said the peer-reviewed report confirms an urgent need for STEM employers to closely monitor and mitigate the gender impact of the pandemic on jobs and careers—or the hard work over many years to recruit and retain more women in STEM could be undone.

"The challenges are likely to be most acute for women in STEM with children under 12," Professor Johnston said.

"The combination of juggling working from home while supervising distance learning for children has made women's well documented 'double burden' even greater again."

Science & Technology Australia (STA) and Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering (ATSE) collaboratively led the women in STEM RRIF report.

ATSE Chief Executive Officer, Kylie Walker said diversity in the workforce is integral to higher quality and more resilient STEM research and application.

"The diverse perspectives that women bring to the STEM sector enable and drive better outcomes for scientific and technology-based industries," Ms Walker said.

Science & Technology Australia CEO Misha Schubert said job insecurity was even more of a risk for women than men in the STEM workforce.

"With casual and short-term contract jobs likely to be the first to go, women are at particular risk—with [women](#) in STEM one and a half times more likely to be in insecure jobs," she said.

The co-authors agreed the report was a reminder to STEM employers about the need for them to be vigilant on gender equity or they risk losing their hard-won gains.

The report synthesizes the available evidence base on this matter, has been informed by experts and has been peer reviewed. Details of the report's contributors can be found in the report's appendix.

More information: The impact of COVID-19 on women in the STEM

workforce: www.science.org.au/covid19/women-stem-workforce

Provided by University of New South Wales

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