

# Women's careers in the time of coronavirus

June 22 2020, by Michelle Mielly, Lena Kurban Rouhana

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Over the course of 2020, COVID-19 has been transforming the world in ways that we cannot yet fully fathom. Family work-life balance was already [increasingly challenged](#) with [occupational burn-out](#) and over-reliance on digital devices. A growing focus on "wellness" as the panacea to all of this work intensification has led critics like Carl Cederström and André Spicer to underscore the ways in which such a ["wellness syndrome"](#) commands more work—and guilt—out of already-overworked individuals. That's why the slowdown imposed by the pandemic has been in some ways [welcomed by working parents](#).

We are just now beginning to reckon with what the pandemic has meant to families and careers. Three decades after Arlie Hochschild documented the working mothers' ["second shift"](#), the pandemic has further amplified preexisting [gender gaps](#), and much of the burden is still [being borne by women](#).

Beyond struggling to maintain the family's physical and [mental health](#) during lockdown, there is also the struggle of holding down a job. Epidemics spell trouble for all of us, but [women](#) can often be hit in ways that have nothing to do with the disease itself: In 2005 the UN Women's commission reported the [disastrous effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic](#) for women's and girl's rights in developing nations. Socio-historical studies have illuminated a [gendered "duty to care" ethos](#) that fell squarely on women's shoulders during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic. This period of history is no different: commentators note that we are again witnessing the [silent erosion of women's rights](#) as gendered roles are reinforced by the pandemic.

## The "second shift" of working mothers

Men are increasingly sharing a greater portion of unpaid labor in the "second shift", but women still [carry the heavier load](#) of domestic responsibilities and receiving significantly more [household-demand interruptions](#) in their already-limited working hours.

Although flexible work has functioned well for many during COVID-19, it has negatively affected many women's career goals and productivity levels. A telling example: academic journal submissions are up by 25% in comparison to a non COVID-19 context, yet most of the articles are [submitted by men](#). Along these lines, [a recent presentation of our research](#) on flexible work and careers and ongoing data collection shows that indeed there is a gendered effect when it comes to who benefits most from [flexible work](#), and it's not women.

What does this situation tell us about the socially constructed nature of gender roles, the power dynamics of career and gender, and the pandemic's redistribution of unpaid labor? Among others, it tells us about societal expectations and pressures to conform. Whereas men are encouraged to [enhance productivity with flexible working](#) and reap the rewards for such, women are expected to adopt a flexible working arrangement to increase their unpaid labor capacity—more family and home responsibilities. This means putting the rewards of the paid job on the sidelines to care for others, and possibly [jeopardizing their careers](#).

## Leadership and gender

Research indicates that the notion of a ["think leader, think male" stereotype](#) remains predominant among both men and women and unconsciously influences women's opinions of themselves as leaders. Historically, the majority of leadership opportunities have been withheld

from [half of its population](#) or remained just beyond reach. The number of women board members in listed European companies has [risen from 12% in 2010 to 23% in 2016](#). However, despite the increase in female leaders, [women in organizational leadership roles still remain a minority](#) and scholars agree that there remain [many obstacles](#) to women's leadership access. These include the deep-rooted perceptions of women constructed by [social and cultural taboos](#), conscious or unconscious organizational barriers, and the inadequacy of women's social networking.

Today, despite increased levels of educational and professional attainment, [fewer women make it to leadership positions](#) in comparison to men at the same level. Women are more likely to be placed in leadership [positions that are risky](#) or in organizations that are undergoing crisis. First of all, women face less competition from men when it comes to taking on such risky roles. Secondly, stereotypically feminine qualities such as emotional sensitivity, morale building capability, and collaborative leadership style may be most sought after during crisis periods, and finally, non-traditional leaders such as women have often been recruited to reassure stakeholders in dangerous or risky environments.

There is a silver lining to this perspective, however. What we are seeing now is that women's typical "adjusting" style focused on meeting others' needs may be just what a pandemic world needs most. History has shown how successful women leaders can be in steering countries through challenging times. Today's women leaders constitute less than 7% of worldwide leaders, and yet have stood out as role-model leaders in the face of crisis in countries like New Zealand, Taiwan, Germany and Finland where women are in charge. Their clarity and compassion, as well as their [participatory, democratic leadership styles](#) have helped them manage [public health](#) and public attitudes toward lockdown and stay-at-home orders, for example.

Perhaps the [gender-role straightjacket](#) has not enabled men leaders to take a more personable approach to managing the crisis. One can only wonder how many of today's male leaders would admit, as New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern recently did, that she ["did a little dance"](#) when she learned that the country had no new cases of COVID-19.

## Imagine a world

It seems like a good time to rethink and re-imagine the world with more women leaders. This can only happen if changes are made in our households and cultures. COVID-19 has generated great economic, health, and psychological distress in our communities, but it simultaneously showed us that without the women—mothers, wives, colleagues, doctors, nurses... – all working on the front lines, the world would have become even more unbearable.

The constant pull between work and life cannot be resolved by organizations and HR directives alone. To achieve gender equity and work-life integration, we have to reflect on the deterministic importance of gender in families and communities first. Women's traditional roles need to be challenged, transformed and modernized. It is only with men's help—and understanding of their great influence on the outcomes—that women can focus on the paid labor and become [less busy and more productive](#).

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