

COVID-19's Exposé on Women's Employment

The year is 2020, and the world is ablaze.

SARS-CoV-2, colloquially called COVID-19, is sweeping its way across countries: wrecking economies, homes and the lives of millions. Politicians, corporates, and families both rich and poor are wondering with every passing month: When will it all stop?

As we settle into the new year, the pandemic has become the centrepiece of every conversation, replacing the oft-asked questions about the weather and one's well-being. Despite COVID-19 being a part of our daily buzz and chatter, it is important to ask ourselves periodically what impact it has made in all spheres of life. Looking at this impact on a more macro-economic level, it is essential to examine how the virus has affected employment, analysing how it has affected different income groups.

It's no secret that women have been fighting for equality in the workplace for a long time, and until the onset of the pandemic, real progress was being made towards gender parity. However, the wave of the virus wiped away many of these changes, once again leaving women behind in the race for equality—whether through choosing to leave the workforce or forced through layoffs.

Women were shown to be [1.3 times more likely to leave the workforce than men in 2020](#), with this disproportionately affecting working mothers and women of colour particularly. Women's jobs were found to be twice as vulnerable to COVID-19 as compared to men's jobs. As lockdowns were enforced, schools and daycares were shut down, more mothers left the workforce to care for their children as their male spouses continued on as the primary breadwinners.

On average, it was the woman among the two heterosexual partners that ended up having to leave their jobs or getting laid off. If we really take a microscope to this, the internal bias of employers is perhaps choosing the

female employee to be laid off stems from the structured gender norms that we still hold tightly today. The world still views women and working mothers as the primary caregivers, adding extra pressure to leave their occupations to take care of their children. Many companies implemented policies in their layoffs due to the pandemic to ensure that there was at least one breadwinner in the family, and in many cases, it was the women who were laid off instead of their male counterparts.

In developing countries, those once employed in blue-collar jobs began to migrate back home to their native towns and villages, taking over the jobs that the women often held as their spouses worked abroad or in the cities. In countries [like India](#), one could see trains and buses chock-full of labourers and other workers returning home before their workplaces shut down, taking up jobs in their hometowns that the women once held in farms and rural factories.

One can hope that as the world meanders its way back to some sense of normalcy, new rules in the workplace can restore some of the progress we lost in the pandemic. More flexible work schedules, hybrid work environments, paternity leaves and so on all give opportunities to tear through gender norms and allow both parents the chance to find and maintain their jobs. Continuing the work towards parity through investments in education, family planning and maternal health in this time will only benefit the world economies in the long run, creating more jobs and economic opportunities for all genders.

While economies will definitely take their time to process the loss in output and employment in the coming years, the spirit and purpose of equity and equal opportunity must not be lost—no matter what the ‘new normal’ turns out to be.

Shambavi Balasubramanian