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## The Impact of COVID-19 for Mid-career Women Seeking Leadership Positions in the Workplace

Emily Marczak  
emily.marczak@maine.edu

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# The Impact of COVID-19 for Mid-career Women Seeking Leadership Positions in the Workplace

## Abstract

This research explores ways women in their mid-career seeking leadership roles are being affected in the workplace by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is targeted to organizations and leaders committed to gender equity in their workplaces particularly as they are developing new policies in response to COVID-19. Additionally, this research benefits women generally by providing tools for navigating the system and seeking the potential positive outcomes in the workplace. This phenomenological study analyzes qualitative data through interviews. It also includes extensive research of peer reviewed journal articles referencing historical aspects of gender-based biases in the workplace, as well as current studies on how COVID-19 has impacted the workplace.

## Introduction

Since the end of 2019, the world has been experiencing major shifts from one of the largest health and economic crises in recent history. COVID-19 has and will continue to result in changes to the workplace for everyone, yet it puts women in an increasingly vulnerable position. Historical discrimination will likely be magnified by this crisis. Understanding bias and discrimination past and present is key to understanding gender equity in the workplace, and in turn creating diverse, healthy and effective organizations. National Public Radio (NPR) reported Labor Department statistics that state, “Just in September, 865,000 women over 20 dropped out of the American workforce compared with 216,000 men in the same age group” (Schneider et al. 2020, para. 4).

## Research Questions

Central Question: What actions and policies could positively and negatively affect advancement into leadership roles for women mid-career in a post COVID-19 workplace?

- Subquestion #1: How do women explain their experiences in the workplace since the introduction to COVID-19?
- Subquestion #2: Are there types of gender discrimination and/or bias women have experienced since the introduction of COVID-19?
- Subquestion #3: How do women expect COVID-19 to effect their personal and professional lives in the future?

## Methodology

- Phenomenological research design
- Nine 1:1 Interviews completed from February thru March 2021
- Researcher utilized coding to identify themes
- Researcher examined bias that could impact steps within data collection and analysis.

Age	Ethnicity	Years in the Workplace	Relationship Status	Organization Type	Children	Location
35	White	15	In a long term relationship (Male)	For profit	0	Los Angeles, CA
36	White	14	Married (Male)	For profit	2	Maine
39	Asian	13	Married (Male)	Higher Ed	4	Virginia
42	Latina	20	Married (Male)	Higher Ed	2	New York City
39	African American	16	Married (Male)	Nonprofit	4	Maine
36	White	15	Married (Female)	Nonprofit	2	Maine
41	White	20	Married (Male)	Nonprofit	2	Maine
34	White	9	Married (Male)	Nonprofit	1 & Pregnant	Maine
43	Asian	20	Married (Male)	State Agency	1	New York City

Figure 1. Participant Demographics

Fitzsimmons et al. found barriers within women’s traditional path for advancement noting that in mid-career there are work structures that are inflexible, where breaks in employment can make it difficult to return to lines roles, flexible work arrangements are resented and seen as less credible, there is often hard a lack of support from partners and/or inappropriate childcare.

Figure 2. Fitzsimmons Model

“I do think that part of it is that people are reevaluating their lives and seeing the 9-5 workday, wondering how they did it before. I wonder how I did it. How did I commute two hours, work all day and then take care of my kid. How did that feel full? I feel full now”.

Figure 3. Participant # 9

“It did debunk the attitude that we couldn’t be as effective working from home, but I actually think productivity went up...it has proved that this is an effective way of working”.

Figure 4. Participant # 2

## Results

- Some organizations had benefits and policies that went beyond the safety of working from home. These organizations recognized the challenges employees were facing and focused on paid time off (PTO), reduced work schedules, flexibility work hours, and increased access to mental health treatment to alleviate some of the stress. Many of the employees with these benefits came out of the first 4-5 months of the pandemic motivated, with less stress, with high levels of productivity.
- Participants discussed that the issues of bias were more around being a parent than gender. There were however subtle, conscious or unconscious acts of bias that were brought up which aligned with traditional social norms. Additionally, some of the non-white participants commented that racial bias exceeded gender bias.
- Many of the participants struggled with weighing a position’s level of flexibility with the opportunity to advance or increase salary.
- Perceptions around productivity and remote work have been debunked through forced innovation and in many case remote work has become a priority for some participants as they advance within their career.
- Policies that create equal access and participation to flexibility and leave benefits, allows women to shift the femininity bias around the belief that women lack commitment in their work particularly in their mid-career.
- Most of the women ultimately found an increase of quality time in their personal lives through the increased level of flexibility, remote work, and not commuting.

## Conclusions

COVID-19 has caused us to pull back the curtain to see new possibilities in how the workplace can be redesigned. The women in this study, have been fortunate to all be able to maintain employment during this time. However, many are at the crossroads that have them weighing flexibility vs. advancement and/or salary increases. The idea of going back to the way it was before, is not possible from an organizational perspective, but also a quality of life perspective. How then can work communities and cultures be redesigned with trust to give access to increased flexibility, while also raising social capital and mentors to men and women, parents and non-parents alike. Additionally, the research indicates that the path to advancement favors men at many points. Redesigning this path, not to give women lower or different expectations, but to understand where inequity lies and create change. Shifts from what we have learned during this crisis, can lead to happier, healthier (mentally and physically), employees who are more productive, motivated, experiencing more diversity and representation in their workplace, and increased longevity with organizations.

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### References

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