

The Gender Dynamic – The Impact of COVID 19 on the Workplace and Beyond

Introduction

In March 2020, COVID 19 had become a pandemic which had rapidly spread around the world and changed our lives as we know it. One of the areas where this change so boldly showed itself was in the workplace – a space traditionally occupied by men as forming a majority of the workforce and of senior positions. This is a stereotype which women have for years tirelessly worked to eradicate, and an area where women have tried to find inclusion and occupy space in a meaningful manner.

More than a year later, the effects of COVID 19 has resulted not only in significant job losses and business closures and but it has also had a disproportionate effect on the working life of a woman and has left somewhat of a “shadow pandemic” in its wake.

Within the African continent, “women and girls have largely borne the brunt of the pandemic, as the virus has exacerbated already existing gender inequalities, laying bare serious fault lines in safety, physical and mental health, education, domestic responsibilities and employment opportunities. Though death rates from COVID19 in Africa and have been surprisingly low, the virus has massively disrupted women’s lives as decades of progress towards women’s rights and gender equality in Africa has begun to unravel... Because of prevailing social norms, African women and girls traditionally shoulder the majority of family care responsibilities, including child care, domestic chores and caring for the weak, the sick and the frail in their families and society more broadly... though job and wage losses have been widespread under COVID related economic restrictions, women and girls remain the most vulnerable. Under lockdown measures and without safety nets, informal workers have had to

face the tough decision of to break the lockdown (rules), risking both their health and legal repercussions, or go without income.”¹

“The COVID19 pandemic has shed light on the large gender gaps in the quality of employment, especially for the many women working in feminized sectors and occupations, and in the informal economy. Even before the pandemic, jobs with a high concentration of women were characterised by low wages, long working hours, limited opportunities for career advancement and exposure to occupational health and safety risks as well as violence and harassment. When the pandemic hit, these trends put women workers a greater risk of being laid off, seeing a significant contraction of their working hours and/or experiencing a further deterioration in their working conditions. Migrant workers, ethnic and racial minorities, older persons and those with disabilities and living with HIV and AIDS have also seen the quality of their jobs dampened.”²

“In Africa, the pandemic has exacerbated the poor working conditions of informal economy workers, who have continued to work during the COVID19 outbreak, putting themselves and their families at risk. In this context, when gender intersects with other personal characteristics, such as ethnicity, nationality, age, disability or HIV status, there is a risk that gender disparities will widen further.”³

The purpose of this paper is aimed at critically analysing the gendered effect that COVID19 has had on the labour market and considers the types of responses required from stakeholders in order to redress these effects – sooner rather than later if we are seeking to mitigate against long term impact.

¹ Invisible lives, missing voices: Putting women and girls at the centre of post Covid19 recovery and reconstruction, Parsitau, DS, 28 January 2021

² Building Forward Fairer: Women’s rights to work at the core of the COVID19 recovery, ILO, July 2021

³ Building Forward Fairer: Women’s rights to work at the core of the COVID19 recovery, ILO, July 2021

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), *“the COVID19 pandemic is worsening gender inequality in Africa, causing millions of women great physical, mental and economic distress... although fewer women in Africa are contracting COVID19 (when compared to men), the pandemic is exacerbating the gender divide...Unpaid care and domestic work, almost always done by women, has increased with school closures and stay at home orders, as have several risks ... the work that many African women rely on for their livelihoods, for example, in areas such as personal care and in the informal sector, came to a standstill for several months in many countries to the lockdowns.”*⁴

As part of this paper, several surveys were conducted with women who hold full time positions across various sectors and levels of employment in South Africa. This sought to assess the types of challenges generally faced by women in the workplace, how the COVID 19 pandemic has impacted women in the workplace, the various challenges experienced in the workplace as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic and its knock on effects.

The Workplace and Pre-existing Inequalities

Women are already faced with pre-existing inequalities in the workplace; as a gender, when compared to their male counterparts – women earn less, have fewer savings and are represented disproportionately in the informal economy; more often than not, women lead single parent households and face circumstances that cause them to drop out of the labour market. The COVID19 pandemic has increased these disproportionalities and accelerated these issues.

⁴ www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/COVID-pandemic-worsening-gender-divide-in-Africa, Schlein L, March 2021

Generally women tend to face more challenges and barriers in the workplace than their male counterparts. This includes dealing with issues such as under representation at various levels within the workplace, various forms of discrimination, sexual harassment and related issues, pay disparity, difficulties separating work from home, achieving a work life balance and juggling their jobs along with other roles such as being a mother, caregiver or being the caretaker of a household. Variables such as ethnicity, religion, culture and even the beliefs of society as a whole have for a long time set the tone of women occupying full time roles in the workplace as well as the expectation of the roles that they occupy outside of their working environment. These expectations and the responsibilities that go along with them have generally been regarded as being different for men and women.

According to Deloitte, a global survey has shown that 7 out of 10 women who have experienced a negative impact due to the COVID 19 pandemic believe that their career progression will slow down.⁵

Emma Codd, Global Inclusion Leader for Deloitte stated that *“it may be years before we comprehend the full ramifications of COVID-19 on our society and places of work. But one thing is for sure: while we are still learning to navigate the pandemic, we have each had to adapt our daily lives to respond to it ... we are at an inflection point. With no end to the pandemic currently in sight, it is vital for organizations to step up to meet this moment and its specific challenges, or we risk facing a major setback in our pursuit of reaching gender parity across the global workforce.”*⁶

Women in the workplace have not only suffered disproportionately as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic, but the PWC Women in Work Index has also shown that

⁵ Deloitte Global, Understanding the pandemic's impact on working women, 2020

⁶ Deloitte Global, Understanding the pandemic's impact on working women, 2020

women are exiting the labour market faster than their male counterparts. The cumulative effect of this is that progress which has previously been made in respect of workplace equality (amongst other things) will inevitably be reversed.⁷

“Gender equality and women’s empowerment is a prime focus in the South African workforce, yet the gender gap is still immense. Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) estimates that in 2019 the mid-year population was at 58.78 million with approximately 51% (approximately 30 million) of the population being female.”⁸

The National Development Plan 2030 (NDP), which is a long term initiative aimed at eliminating poverty and reduce inequality in South Africa by 2030, identified in 2019 (before even taking into account the effects of COVID19), *“women as the most affected by inequality, poverty and unemployment...”⁹*

According to an article published in 2009 *“on a local and global scale, the gender and pay gap is arguably the biggest barrier between women and career progression. Research by Accenture (in 2019) found that in South Africa, for every R1 a woman earns, a man earns R1.91, equalling a 91% difference in pay.”¹⁰*

All of these challenges have been severely exacerbated by the effects of the COVID 19 pandemic. Work life balance has become an increasingly difficult ideal to achieve for many women, especially considering the effects of working from home, where your home has now become your office. Add into this cycle the social disconnect created by not being able to be physically present with your colleagues at any given time, the uncertainty of when your work day truly ends given that you cannot “leave” your office and venture off to the sanctuary of your home (or vice versa), the fact that

⁷ “Shecession” – COVID19 reversing gains made for women in workforce, March 2021

⁸ Women disrupting the South African workplace, 2009

⁹ Women disrupting the South African workplace, 2009

¹⁰ Women disrupting the South African workplace, 2009

women do nearly thrice as much unpaid work as men, as well as the added difficulties of children now often attending school virtually or where children under school going age are physically present at home for what is considered to be the entire work day.

It is therefore not difficult to appreciate that in a time of COVID, women have had to endure tremendous challenges and immense difficulties, and that the progress made by women in the workplace in recent years is at risk of being reversed and undone as a result.

The Impact of COVID 19 on Women in the Workplace

*“Over a year and a half into the COVID19 pandemic, gender equality in the world of work has worsened. Women suffered disproportionate job and income losses, including because of their over representation in the hardest-hit sectors, and many continue to work on the front line, sustaining care systems, economies and societies, while often also doing the majority of unpaid care work. All these factors underscore the need for a gender-responsive recovery to respond to the commitment of building forward fairer”.*¹¹

COVID19 has not impacted men and women in the workplace equally - although the concept of a gender divide does not come across as the immediate concern when one hears the words “pandemic” or “COVID19” there is substantially enough information available to show that the pandemic and the resultant economic crisis that we have found ourselves in, has had a varying impact on genders.

On 08 March 2021 (nearly a year after COVID19 first reared its head), we celebrated International Womens Day, in relation to which Anastacia Tshesane, Transformation,

¹¹ Building Forward Fairer: Women’s rights to work at the core of the COVID19 recovery, ILO, July 2021

Diversity and Inclusion Leader for PwC Southern Africa, said: *“International Women’s Day 2021 is an opportunity for us to consider and reflect on how women in the workplace have been affected by the economic conditions and changes brought on by Covid 19. The pace of progress towards gender equality across the African continent was slow to begin with and Covid 19 threatens to reverse the important gains that have been made in the last decade. It is clear that negative impacts of the pandemic are disproportionately being felt by women and that the full impact of the pandemic on women in work is still to be realised. It is imperative, however, that governments, businesses and other stakeholders take steps to address this.”*¹²

A UN study revealed that globally 58% of women are informally employed and that in the first month of the pandemic (on average), informal workers lost 60% of their income.¹³ A large number of women in the informal sector also faced complete unemployment – let us consider domestic workers as an example. In many countries domestic work remains unregulated and when the pandemic first hit, these were the people who arguably suffered most from an employment perspective.

According to the UN Women Insights report which was compiled earlier this year, women are losing their livelihoods quicker due to the fact that they are exposed to economic sectors which have been hit harder by the pandemic.¹⁴

“The COVID19 pandemic is clearly aggravating economic inequalities faced by women. A new study suggests that the COVID19 pandemic will have a disproportionate negative effect on women and their employment opportunities. The effects of this shock are likely to outlast the actual pandemic... Specifically, an

¹² “Shecession” – COVID19 reversing gains made for women in workforce, March 2021

¹³ From Insights to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID19, UN Women, 2020

¹⁴ From Insights to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID19, UN Women, 2020

estimated 740 million women around the world work in the informal economy. In developing economies informal work makes up 70 percent of women' employment, and informal jobs are the first to disappear in times of economic uncertainty. New research shows that the sectors that have been most affected by the COVID19 crisis so far are those with high levels of women workers, including the restaurant and hospitality business, as well as the travel sector."¹⁵

Antra Bhatt, Statistics Specialist and co- author of the report "From Insights to Action" explains that "*the resurgence of extreme poverty as a result of the pandemic has revealed women's precarious economic security ... women typically earn less and hold less secure jobs than men. With plummeting economic activity, women are particularly vulnerable to layoffs and loss of livelihoods.*"¹⁶

Add to this the challenge of being a working mother, of being a single working female parent leading a household, being a female employee in a senior position, or being a working female from a marginalised group and we are faced with a real challenge on our hands in terms of maintaining the progress that has been made by women in the workplace in recent years.

At the same time, other sectors such as travel, retail, childcare, education, and other services which are closely linked to the enabling full time work, have also suffered. This only compounds the already negative impact on women in the workplace and renders the situation debilitating to say the least.

So what this translates to and what we're experiencing across various sectors is that there is a disproportionate effect on genders – more women are losing their jobs,

¹⁵ The Shadow Pandemic: How the COVID19 crisis is exacerbating gender inequality, Milford M and Anderson G, April 2020

¹⁶ From Insights to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID19, UN Women, 2020

more women are faced with a decrease in earnings, more women are faced with an overall decrease in paid working time, inevitably resulting in the widening of an already existing gender divide.

In an article by UN Women, it was reported that pre-COVID19, women spent 4.1 hours per day doing unpaid work, while men spent 1.7 hours per day doing unpaid work. Basically, women are doing nearly thrice as much work as men in terms of unpaid labour.¹⁷ COVID19 has seen that number increase greatly when one considers that schools and day care facilities have been forced to close, assistance from external sources, such as friends, colleagues, family, availability and reliance on child minders, domestic workers, nurses, caregivers, etc have been diminished by COVID19. Before COVID19, women were disproportionately faced with additional responsibilities and the effect of the pandemic has resulted in this being more disproportionate than ever.

Anastacia Tshesane, Transformation, Diversity and Inclusion Leader for PWC Southern Africa aptly stated in a recent article that *“it is clear that the negative impacts of the pandemic are disproportionately being felt by women and that the full impact of the pandemic on women in work is still to be realised. It is imperative, however that governments, businesses and other stakeholders take steps to address this.”*¹⁸

Mckinsey estimates that the impact of COVID19 could set women back half a decade. *“Before this year (2021), Women in the Workplace research had consistently found that women and men leave their companies at comparable rates. However, due to the challenges created by the COVID19 crisis, as many as two*

¹⁷ From Insights to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID19, UN Women, 2020

¹⁸ “Shecession” – COVID19 reversing gains made for women in workforce, March 2021

million women are considering leaving the workforce. If these women feel forced to leave the workplace, we'll end up with far fewer women in leadership – and far fewer women on track to become future leaders. All the progress we have seen over the past (six years) could be erased.”¹⁹

Beyond the COVID19 Pandemic

“While the COVID19 virus left millions of African women and children without jobs, food and healthcare, the truth of the matter is that this has been a pre-existing condition long before the pandemic. Creating all-inclusive social policy and cushioning vulnerable families during and after the crisis would go a long way in protecting vulnerable women and families. At the same time, investing in women in small and large businesses will better secure the financial and economic health of families and economies.”²⁰

“The COVID19 pandemic has led to 89 percent of the world’s student population being out of school or university, inflicting most children, especially girls, with a massive learning loss. While the move to online learning has become the new normal for many children, poor educational infrastructure, especially around internet access and electricity, has caused disadvantaged learners from rural, poor and vulnerable backgrounds to lose access to (all) learning. Once again, though, educational inequality for girls is sadly another pre-existing condition that requires urgent attention – the pandemic has only exacerbated it. Policymakers must invest in inclusive and equitable education as well as educational infrastructure for all, but especially for vulnerable girls in rural and poor environments. Available evidence

¹⁹ Women in the Workplace 2020, McKinsey and Company, September 2020

²⁰ Invisible lives, missing voices: Putting women and girls at the centre of post Covid19 recovery and reconstruction, Parsitau, DS, 28 January 2021

suggests that girls' education in rural areas not only empowers girls by creating opportunities for them but that it also has ripple effects on all outcomes and spheres of life."²¹

In recent years, there is no doubt that we have made inroads where diversity and equality in the workplace are concerned. However, if there is no intervention from government, employers and other business stakeholders, then it is likely that these efforts will be reversed.

Women have made strides in recent preceding decades, entering a labour market in which they were largely under represented. Under representation specifically is something that we (as a gender) still see in certain sectors and industries today. However the effects of the COVID19 pandemic are so devastating that it threatens to undo the progress which has been made by women in at least the last 30 years.²² According to the IMF "*well designed policies to foster recovery can mitigate the negative effects of the crisis on women and prevent further setbacks for gender equality. What is good for women is ultimately good for addressing income inequality, economic growth and resilience.*"²³

Mckinsey reported that, "*in the USA, one in every four women in senior level positions – more than two million of them – are now thinking about dialling back their job responsibilities (reducing work hours, moving to a part time role, or switching to a less demanding role), taking a leave of absence, or leaving the workforce altogether.*"²⁴

²¹ Invisible lives, missing voices: Putting women and girls at the centre of post Covid19 recovery and reconstruction, Parsitau, DS, 28 January 2021

²² The COVID19 Gender Gap, IMF, July 2020

²³ The COVID19 Gender Gap, IMF, July 2020

²⁴ Women in the Workplace 2020, Mckinsey and Company, September 2020

Whilst the impact of COVID19 paints a rather bleak picture, a response on both an immediate and on-going basis is key in curbing the effects that COVID19 has had on women in the workplace.

Consider for example, the implementation of remote work. Remote work has been one of the greatest reformations in the workplace that we have seen in years and it was absolutely necessary. COVID19 has also accelerated the shift to remote working, which is likely to stay. With remote work there has been a shift in mind set, as employees now have the flexibility to choose how and where they will live and work. Work from home has allowed people to “semigrate” – relocate to geographical areas that provide better service, infrastructure and allow for the opportunity to create better lifestyles – which would otherwise not be possible.

It is imperative that recovery efforts are made by stakeholders; the effects of COVID19 will have a long lasting impact if there aren't measures and efforts put in place now to curb that impact. Economic insecurity now will in all likelihood lead to future impacts on savings and pension funds. For the poorer and more vulnerable communities of women, the impact will likely be more severe.

According to Accenture South Africa *“the challenge COVID19 poses to gender equality is extensive. It is therefore important that leaders turn this test into an opportunity – an opportunity to reset the economy by planning a recovery based on the principle of inclusiveness, and acknowledging that the full and equitable participation of women in economic activity is critical to a faster socio-economic recovery.”*²⁵

²⁵ COVID19 is impacting on gender equality and eroding hard-won progress, Accenture, March 2021

A Gendered Response

Ntombi Mhangwani, Experience Architect at Accenture Interactive Africa stated in a recent article *“We need to act now... it is important that we adopt gender-responsive budgeting informed by gender impact assessments to ensure that pandemic recovery measures foster a gender inclusive workforce. We need to ensure equal representation of women at all levels of decision-making platforms, and develop as well as fund action plans to stimulate women’s participation in entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystems by supporting the start-up, scale-up and sustainability of women-owned businesses, particularly in ecommerce and the digital economy.”*²⁶

Stakeholders, which include government and employers (in both the public and private sectors), must ultimately step up. If we don’t see advances being made on a global level, then ultimately the gains made by women in recent years will begin to be undone and regress. We must take bold steps now to address the gender divide that has been widened by COVID19.

In this respect the IMF has stated that *“it is crucial that policymakers adopt measures to limit the scaring effects of the pandemic on women. This could entail a focus on extending income support to the vulnerable, preserving employment linkages, providing incentives to balance work and family care responsibilities, improving access to health care and family planning, and expanding support for small businesses and the self-employed. Elimination of legal barriers against women’s economic empowerment is also a priority... Over the longer term, policies can be designed to tackle gender inequality by creating conditions and incentives for women to work ... particularly effective are gender-responsive fiscal policies, such as*

²⁶ COVID19 is impacting on gender equality and eroding hard-won progress, Accenture, March 2021

investing in education and infrastructure, subsidising childcare, and offering parental leave. These policies are not only crucial to lift constraints on women's economic empowerment, they are necessary to promote an inclusive post-COVID19 recovery.

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Consideration ought to be given to initiatives such as unemployment benefits for the most poor and vulnerable communities of women – those who are the sole breadwinners, leading single parent households, women from marginalised racial and ethnic groups, (amongst others) which will provide assistance of a more immediate nature. On a global scale, we need to see investment initiatives, support of female entrepreneurs and female owned businesses, or potentially even policies enacted with the intention of providing economic relief measures in an effort to support female owned businesses. There needs to be a greater emphasis on equal pay for work of equal value – not only what has been enacted in legislation, but how this is practically given effect to by employers.²⁸

In other countries we have seen various initiatives in response to the COVID19 pandemic. In Austria, Italy, Portugal and Slovenia we have seen the introduction of partially paid leave for parents of children below a certain age. In France, we have seen sick leave being expanded to include circumstances where parents of children (of school going age) are impacted due to the closure of schools. Other initiatives also include efforts made in Latin American countries to increase the participation of women in the workforce and to this end the formation of a Coalition of Action for the Economic Empowerment of Women (in conjunction with government).²⁹

²⁷ The COVID19 Gender Gap, IMF July 2020

²⁸ COVID19 and its economic toll on women: the story behind the numbers, UN Women, September 2020

²⁹ The COVID19 Gender Gap, IMF, July 2020

Employers, and corporates particularly, need to recognise the inequalities that exist between their male and female employees and put in place measures to remedy these inequalities. This includes measures such as the adoption of flexible working arrangements and/or remote work, addressing causes of stress and burnout, mental health and wellbeing issues related to the COVID19 pandemic.

“There is an urgent need to secure and safeguard these gains (made towards gender equality) not just by enacting innovative policies but also by taking steps to address the economic and social effects of COVID19, with the twin goals of quickly recovering what was lost and rebuilding better with renewed agency for women. There is a need to invest in Africa’s mental health infrastructure to support women, families and the public from adverse stress and mental health challenges that have further been exacerbated by the pandemic... COVID19 provides African policymakers, governments and all other stakeholders with opportunities to effect systemic changes that could protect women from bearing the heaviest brunt of shocks like these in the future. The COVID19 pandemic also provides African governments opportunities to launch a broad, all inclusive approach to policymaking and rebuild in a caring, humane and sustainable manner.”³⁰

“As a greater proportion of women’s employment has been lost due to the COVID19 pandemic, extraordinary policy efforts are needed to ensure that women return to the labour market with decent work opportunities. If priority is not given to this goal, there is a risk that women will be left behind in the recovery efforts, further exacerbating existing gender inequalities in terms of access to and quality of employment. Gender equality considerations need to be an intrinsic component of the design,

³⁰ Invisible lives, missing voices: Putting women and girls at the centre of post Covid19 recovery and reconstruction, Parsitau, DS, 28 January 2021

development, implementation and results of all programmes and strategies, policies, laws and regulations implemented as a response to a recovery from COVID19.”³¹

Businesses and large corporates need to make themselves future fit in order to sustain their workforce and progress into the future and this includes investing in mitigating against the gendered impact of COVID19; ultimately we need to see a greater emphasis being placed on gender responsive policies which are transformative in order create an equal and inclusive society for the future.

³¹ Building Forward Fairer: Women’s rights to work at the core of the COVID19 recovery