

Contemplating gender, work and leadership within the current COVID-19 pandemic

2020 has been a momentous year for everyone worldwide with the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in Wuhan in December 2019. By March 2020, most of the world was on lockdown, and there continues to be much uncertainty for the future. The COVID-19 pandemic is having a substantial impact on all aspects of our lives. It threatens health and well-being which is, and should remain, the primary concern across the globe. At the same time, it makes our jobs vulnerable and changes how and where we work, how we get educated and how we care for our families and the elderly and how we socialise.

In the world of work, the pandemic crisis has changed many traditional practices and provided various challenges for people managing their work and home lives. Businesses and organisations are creating their own responses to the condition, and we are witnessing changes in organisational processes as a consequence. While almost all of us have been negatively affected by the pandemic, a study by [McKinsey \(2020\)](#) shows that women's job loss rates because of COVID-19 are about 1.8 times higher than those of men globally.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 and lockdown, organisations have been forced to make some radical changes in their working arrangements in an attempt to survive. We have witnessed more homeworking for many, and while this can be advantageous under "normal" times/circumstances, being enforced on people during the lockdown has some alternative consequences. In 2019, before lockdown, it was estimated that, on average, 5.4% of employed people (aged between 15 and 64) in the EU usually worked from home, while 9% said they sometimes worked at home. Slightly more of these workers were women ([European Commission, 2020](#)). As a result of government-mandated lockdowns, four in ten workers in the EU started working from home ([International Labour Organization, 2020](#)).

Women, the young and the poor have been worst affected by the COVID-19 crisis and enforced homeworking ([Partington, 2020](#); [IMF, 2020](#)). Homeworking was sudden and has been accompanied by other issues such as inadequate space and office equipment to work at home (and the associated health and safety issues), caring for others and home schooling, as well as the general worry and anxiety over the impacts of COVID-19 on ourselves and our loved ones. Other workers have had to carry on going to work – our essential workers – many of whom are women and in precarious low paid occupations. Their circumstances have been different, enduring more risk of contracting the disease and trying to protect their families at home. Those who could not carry out their jobs remotely face the highest risk of becoming unemployed but there are important differences across countries and workers.

Much media coverage has depicted a middle class view of coping and surviving the lockdown, but many people's living arrangements have not been so conducive to being comfortable in lockdown, with overcrowding being an issue, no outdoor space to relax in and living in multiple occupancy accommodation. At the other end of the scale is the people living alone, single parent households and those shielding – these have brought their own challenges of loneliness and isolation as well as undertaking work, home schooling and caring for their own well-being. Moreover, there has been a rise in domestic violence reported so some families are living in the trepidation of violence ([Davies, 2020](#); [Mohan, 2020](#)). So, what has been the impact on working and living under these circumstances and what are the gender dimensions in operation?



Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, many organisations have adjusted their performance evaluation criteria for employees, and there is a need for managers to consider the differential effects of the crisis on women and men when it comes to performance evaluation. Within academia for example, many universities have granted tenure-track faculty members a one-year extension to their tenure clock. But does this exacerbate the existing gender gap in research productivity if men end up using the extra time to get more research done, whereas women end up splitting the extra time between housework and research? It has been reported that women academics have been particularly affected by the coronavirus lockdowns. Importantly, their publishing has dropped since the pandemic shutdown schools (Matthews, 2020), and this could have longer-term disastrous impacts on their careers.

Various questions are being asked about the future of working practices. There is speculation of closing main offices and organisations relying on hubs instead – what are the implications here? Will working practices become more flexible or will homeworking become part of the “new normal”? What happens to business travel – will virtual meetings become the norm? Will new occupational categories materialise? What happens to the displaced labour? What happens to practices in specific HRM contexts? How will organisations manage employees? What are the implications for the health and well-being of workers? Who are those who are most vulnerable to these changing working practices?

The organisation as we know it has provided various opportunities for networking. If we are working more remotely how will this networking occur? Do we run the risk of clandestine virtual groups unveiling themselves to the exclusion of various others? How will organisations provide a balance between homeworking and going into the office to enable employees to meet, mix and socialise?

Job loss and redundancies are a threat to certain occupations and industries, and most often, these are where women and other minority groups work. Will this see women and other minorities pushed further back into the home territory or into the “black economy” thus furthering their majority status in the domestic sphere and/or minority status in the economy?

As organisations seek opportunities to transform their design and direction to the “new normal”, we argue this must be undertaken in parallel with considerations to eradicate persistent, systemic inequalities and to promote equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI). This, we maintain, will help to strengthen community and good relations between staff and clients with different backgrounds and characteristics and to maximise productivity and impact.

COVID-19 is known to have disproportionately affected people from different equality groups with different circumstances, and this is highlighted in the papers and thought pieces that are included in this special issue. It is highly likely that, if not contested, response and recovery plans will have a similarly disproportionate effect on members of organisations. Without intervention, these disproportionate impacts could further manifest as disadvantage, discrimination or structural inequalities, meaning that people who share a protected characteristic will be negatively affected and experience worse outcomes. Therefore, we argue that organisations must consider the impact of plans, decisions and activities on the people they serve. We would argue that an Equality Impact Assessment is undertaken when considering new practices of working lives to help create a culture of inclusion, fairness, transparency and respect for diversity. Each decision or action should be assessed for its impact – negative or positive – on people with a range of characteristics. Consideration should be given to whether this could likely result in a differential impact for people sharing a particular characteristic, and, if so, could this result in disadvantage, discrimination, harassment, victimisation or any other conduct prohibited by equality legislation.

Special issue

The collection of papers and thought pieces in this special issue reveal the potential impacts that the coronavirus has had on people worldwide. As editors of the issue, we put out a call for shorter “thought pieces” from the gender in management community. We wanted to report the potential gendered effects of lockdown quickly, to provide a snapshot of thoughts and insights so that debates could be started and future research directions and agendas be established. Time restraints have meant that little primary research has been available as yet, hence the call for “thought pieces”. However, we include two “regular” type papers where preliminary research has been undertaken and some initial findings presented.

In total, we present 13 papers in this special issue. It is interesting to see how authors approached the topic area. A few authors have chosen to focus on the leadership aspects of the pandemic (e.g. Blake-Beard, Shapiro and Ingols; Priola and Pecis; Panayiotou). As with Panayiotou, Mavin and Yusupova share their personal reflections as academics. Several have contemplated some general issues related to workers during lockdown (e.g. Carli; Powell; Mallett, Marks and Skountridaki). Others have taken a specific field/aspect/area to consider (e.g. Simpson and Morgan; Grandy, Cukier and Gagnon; Anderson and Kelliher; Swan). Bhumika and Savani and Feng share the results of their primary research with employees during the lockdown.

The first three papers in this special issue focus on how various country leaders worldwide have handled the pandemic and point to the opportunities for more research to be undertaken on leadership styles (Blake-Beard, Shapiro and Ingols; Priola and Pecis; Panayiotou). Blake-Beard, Shapiro and Ingols critique the overreliance on masculine behaviours exhibited by political leaders during COVID-19 and argue that androgynous or feminine leadership styles/patterns are generally overshadowed by traditional masculine styles – but has the recent observations brought to the fore whether this is the best way forward for organisations of the future? Priola and Pecis present the case of the “missing women” leaders in the Italian context and argue that countries that have excluded women from leadership roles in response to the pandemic have had a higher number of deaths. Panayiotou argues that lessons can be learnt from the varying behaviours of leaders in those countries who have handled the crisis by employing “ethics of care”, empathy, solidarity and compassion as opposed to leaders whose “toxic masculinity” resulted in a “disastrous handling of the pandemic”. She calls for future research on how might more feminist modes of leadership be incorporated into the organisations of the future.

The rest of the papers examine the gendered implications of the pandemic. Mavin and Yusupova reflect on their own experiences as women academics during COVID-19 in the UK, as Business school director and research associate, respectively, and argue that its gendered implications have pushed the progress made so far towards gender equality in leadership positions, back to the 1950s. They call for future research on how the current pandemic brings major challenges to women managers, leaders and academics who in addition to work, they are have taken on the larger share of care and schooling for their families which re-embeds patriarchy. Powell and Carli contemplate whether for dual income households the lockdown reinforces the further gendering of the home or whether it provides the opportunity for men to become more involved in childcare. For the latter to happen, we argue, there must be a shift in attitudes to working arrangements and challenging the “ideal worker” model of working. The viewpoints from the papers reveal that gendered practices, especially those related to childcare and domestic duties, have intensified during lockdown (e.g. Grandy, Cukier and Gagnon), and there is a real threat and concern that gender roles may be reinforced (e.g. Simpson and Morgan; Mallett, Marks and Skountridaki; Priola and Pecis).

The question of gendered virtual teams and whether men (Powell) overpower women is pertinent if virtual teams become more of the “new normal”, as there will be fewer opportunities for people to be visible in organisations and so virtual team “bullying” and domination by some might become more prevalent as some people vie for attention and visibility. Without good chairing skills, this might mean that women and other minority groups are left out of various debates and made invisible in the conversations.

Several of the papers rightly point to the intersectionality of issues (e.g. Simpson and Morgan; Grandy, Cukier and Gagnon, Swan). Not only is gender a factor but also issues of class, race, ethnicity, immigration, disability, sexuality, age, transgenderism or even occupation can intersect with gender to exacerbate and reinforce social and economic inequalities. Simpson and Morgan focus on the “gendering” of contamination to bring to light discrimination and disadvantage in the way class, ethnicity or occupation has an effect. Other structural forces could further reinforce existing gender inequalities. For example, Grandy, Cukier and Gagnon point out that financial institutions continue to administer government programmes and apply processes and approaches that have been found to be biased against women. They also argue that embedded structural inequities preserve, protect and reinforce the privilege of the dominant centre (read men). This means there is a danger that women will be further marginalised. Swan explores intersectionality via examining food work, giving us a different perspective on the issues.

Anderson and Kelliher in their paper call for research to distinguish between homeworking which is used as choice by employees to manage their work and home roles and enforced homeworking which was a result of the pandemic. What are the benefits and challenges which this enforced homeworking imposes on organisations and employees? How does it affect productivity, job satisfaction and well-being? How does homeworking actually impact on the work-home interface and does this differ for different groups of people? Can work-home balance be truly achieved? Does it merely underscore stereotypical gender roles or can there be veritable opportunities for work-home integration? What are the impacts of homeworking on stress and well-being of employees?

The two empirical papers in this special issue suggest several interesting avenues for future research (Bhumika; Savani and Feng). Bhumika’s primary research found that women in India were more likely than men to feel more emotional exhaustion because of the personal life interference in work when working at home. However, the relationship between work interference with personal life and emotional exhaustion did not differ by gender. Trying to create or maintain a boundary between work and personal life was difficult, especially as people fear for the future of their jobs. Women experienced the added difficulty of undertaking the household chores (which men do not generally participate in), and this led to their emotional exhaustion. Bhumika found participative leadership could help reduce the work interference with personal life, which mitigated emotional exhaustion to some extent. There are several areas where this work can be extended. For example, it would be interesting to compare the reactions of different nations to this research. India is a nation where men are not expected to be involved in domestic work and under normal circumstances domestic work is contracted out to others. Thus, the double bind on Indian working women has been intense during lockdown. How might this contrast with other countries where it is more acceptable for or expected of men to participate in the household and caring duties? What is the effect on domestic workers if people start working at home more regularly? Do their patterns of work change and how might this affect their lives?

Savani and Feng’s research took place with US full-time employees from dual career households. They found that while there were no gender differences prior to the COVID-19 pandemic of self-rated work productivity and job satisfaction, during the lockdown women

reported lower work productivity and job satisfaction than men. They warn of the negative effects of organisational policies such as homeworking on women's perceived productivity and job satisfaction, in addition to any further lockdowns that might occur. Further research into the creation of policies and how these will be introduced, safeguarding from negative impacts on some categories of workers needs to be undertaken to ensure that EDI is being observed and adhered to. Savani and Feng also call for further research into the effects of homeworking on the amount of household work carried out. Who is likely to carry this burden of work? They argue that it is likely to fall on women. What about heterosexual households where women are the primary earners? Will men take up the additional domestic duties or will it still fall on the women themselves, thus perpetuating the gendered division of labour as well as impacting negatively on women's work outcomes and career sustainability?

We are very grateful to these groups of scholars who wrote their thought pieces while dealing with unprecedented circumstances: under lockdown, getting swiftly accustomed to new ways of working and teaching while looking after their families and home schooling their children and worried about their loved ones. We expect there will be a lot of research being undertaken on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on people, the organisation of work and social lives. We hope this special issue will spark new debates for much needed research in the area of gender in management and leadership issues.

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