

Disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on women in the workplace

 By Johan Botes

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Women are unable to escape disparate treatment in the workplace, with even the current global pandemic causing greater upheaval for them compared to their male counterparts. The long-term effects of the pandemic could have a much more significant impact than is readily apparent, with severe implications for gender equality that must be urgently addressed. There is some hope, however, in that, as was evident after World War II, elements of the global labour force could be forever changed for the better by Covid-19.



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The 2008 financial crisis saw more men losing jobs than women. According to research by Coskun and Dalgic (2020), this was attributed to, among other things, men being more represented in industries traditionally affected by such typical downturns – manufacturing, transport and construction, for example. Women, on the other hand, feature more prominently in industries less prone to cyclical downturns, including government, healthcare and education. The current pandemic, however, has had a greater impact on service-orientated roles and businesses, such as the restaurant, catering, tourism and hospitality sectors. These sectors generally employ a larger portion of female workers, resulting in an unequal impact on women when employers implement cost-cutting measures.

During 2017-2018, 28% of male workers were employed in jobs regarded as highly capable of remote working or working from home (WFH), with only 22% of female workers employed in such roles. Thus, men have been more able to adapt to the current changed work environment than women. With female workers having lower employment in WFH roles, they are more at risk of redundancy or adverse employment consequences during the current crisis – the opposite of what was experienced in 2008.

Impact of school closures

Childcare needs are also skewing the impact of Covid-19 on female employees. Doepke and Tertilt (2020) report that there are around 15 million single mothers in the United States, accounting for around 70% of all single parent households (17% of all households). When one considers the picture in relation to single parents with school-going children, the difference is

even starker. Some 21% of children under 18 live with their mother only, compared to 4% who live with their father. The impact of school and day-care closures on single mother employees is thus disproportionate when compared with single father workers.

Children of single mothers are also more at risk of living in poverty during the period of school closures than those of single fathers. This is exacerbated by further pandemic limitations on alternative arrangements for childcare, such as not being able to rely on grandparents. Single men and women are also the groups that work remotely for the least number of days per year (15 and 19 days respectively, compared to 30 and 41 days for married men and married women). Single parents, the bulk of whom are female, are thus more adversely affected by school closures. The impact is similar when considering self-employed women. Research by UK-based charity Pregnant then Screwed shows that 74% of self-employed mothers suffered reduced earnings as a result of the lack of access to childcare during this crisis.

Megan Frederickson at the University of Toronto recently found that the number of women who made submissions for scientific and academic papers dropped during March–April 2020 compared to 2019, reinforcing the view that female employees on various levels were disproportionately more affected by the various disruptions caused by Covid-19. Australia is experiencing a drop in the number of female candidates ahead of local elections, with observers attributing this to economic insecurity and greater home life demands during the pandemic. The International Labour Organisation recently added its voice to the discussion, warning that Covid-19 could erode gains made in workplace gender equality and that women are at heightened risk of job losses.

Positive consequences

There are some glimmers of hope that the pandemic may have positive consequences for women empowerment in the workplace. As more businesses are forced to adopt telecommuting for a wider number of roles, it is likely that some of those changes will endure post Covid-19. With more roles seen as flexible, more workers will opt to WFH. According to the study by Doeke and Tertilt (2020), fathers employed in roles that have telecommuting flexibility spend almost two hours per week more on childcare and household duties than those whose jobs are not flexible. Mothers who work thus stand to benefit from the father being able to work flexibly and picking up a greater share of the child-caring duties.

When considering the dramatic impact that World War II had on changes in labour force participation, we are hopeful that the current pandemic may result in a similar change of social norms. Eight decades ago, women entered factories and other workplaces to replace men who were going off to war. Female participation in the workplace persisted after the end of the war. Additional societal changes resulted where boys grew up in households where their mother worked. They noticed a more equal sharing of household duties and labour market participation between men and women, and such men were more likely to marry women who also worked. Turning to the current crisis, researchers suggest that men are picking up a larger share of childcare responsibilities and that some of this will persist post-pandemic.

Protecting gender equality

Employers seeking to play a meaningful part in protecting gains made for gender equality in the workplace could take steps

to ensure that roles occupied by female employees receive the required flexibility to telecommute, where possible. Progressive employers are already implementing equal parental leave provisions, irrespective of the gender of the parent. By allowing their partners to take time off to share the childcare duties, female employees should benefit from not only the shared workload, but also from being able to take up employment in roles where flexible working is not possible. Creating a malleable platform for women to equally participate in all sectors of the economy will reduce the disproportionate impact of the next crisis on those sectors of the economy with significant female workforce participation.

ABOUT JOHAN BOTES

Johan Botes is Head of the Employment Practice for Baker McKenzie in Johannesburg. He has a Master's Degree in Labour Law, and regularly appears in the CCMA, Bargaining Councils, Labour Court and High Court. Contact Johan: Tel: +27 (0) 11 911 4400, mobile: +27 (0) 82 418 0157, switchboard: +27 (0) 11 911 4300, fax: +27 (0) 11 784 2855
Johan.Botes@bakermckenzie.com

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