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The Global Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women's Careers

By Allison Bach

School of Professional Studies, Clark University

Capstone Research Thesis

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on women's careers on a global scale in the past year. It begins by focusing on the many pre-existing barriers that existed in realizing gender equality in the workplace prior to the pandemic, such as inadequate access to proper childcare, uneven participation in household labor between the genders, and pay inequality. The paper then continues to examine the impact that the pandemic has had on women's careers across a variety of industries, countries, and specific groups. It was hypothesized that the COVID-19 crisis had created worse effects for women's careers in the United States than it did in other countries. Research found that there was no stronger link between the adverse effects of the pandemic on women's careers in the United States than there was in other countries. The global scope of the pandemic has meant that women's careers as a whole have suffering almost universally throughout the past year. In spite of this, the careers of some groups of women have been harmed more than others, as there is a correlation between the number of oppressed groups a woman belongs to and the likelihood that she has been laid off or received a pay reduction. This research is important because it demonstrates the worldwide scope of the coronavirus's effects on women's careers, as it has not only stagnated feminists' progress towards gender equality, but it has in many cases reversed it.

Keywords: feminism, gender equality, COVID-19, pandemic, wage gap, intersectionality, women in STEM, unemployment, unpaid labor

Introduction

In March of 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus forced the world to go into a quarantine-style lockdown that was unlike anything that most people had ever experienced. As a result, many people lost their jobs, the economy was upended, and nearly everyone experienced severe interruptions to the daily routine they had grown accustomed to. During this time, “Experts reported a decline in mental health among Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fear of contracting the virus was a main cause. Contributing factors included a disruption in daily routines, fear of job loss, and general insecurity about the future” (Kennedy, 2021).

For many families, the pandemic also meant that parents' jobs switched to occurring remotely over video chat, while children and teenagers had to experience “remote” online schooling. In addition to other problems, this created a childcare crisis, where many parents needed to supervise their children during the day at the same time as they were attempting to work from home. In most cases, the responsibilities of childcare, cooking, household chores, and other forms of “unpaid labor” end up falling primarily onto women. According to a study about the pandemic's impact on women and families, “While women were already doing most of the world's unpaid care work prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, emerging research suggests that the crisis and its subsequent shutdown response have resulted in a dramatic increase in this burden” (Power, 2020, p. 67).

This disproportionate burden of unpaid care means that many women have to choose between their job and looking after their families. Upon further examination, however, it becomes clear that childcare access is not the only problem affecting women's careers during the pandemic. According to a study from the McKinsey Global Institute about gender equality in the

era of COVID-19, for example, “By our calculation, women’s jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to this crisis than men’s jobs. Women make up 39 percent of global employment but account for 54 percent of overall job losses” (Madgavkar et al, 2020). There are multiple manners in which women’s employment is being affected more negatively than men’s, creating what Canadian economist Armine Yalnizyan calls a “‘she-cession,’ a potentially decades-long era of slow growth in which everyone will lose, but women will lose the most” (Landsberg, 2020).

In order to predict and mitigate some of this damage, it is important to examine the studies and articles that have already been produced by a multitude of economists, journalists, and researchers. This paper includes a wide scope of resources, ranging from multi-national surveys to autobiographical articles from female employees about the impact of the pandemic on their own lives and careers. The topic of this research exemplifies the feminist idea of how the personal is political; although every woman’s experience is different, a multitude of larger factors at play may affect her individual journey during the pandemic.

This research is further corroborated by the impact that past pandemics have had on women and their careers: “During the West African Ebola outbreak of 2014–16, for example, quarantines closed markets for food and other items. This destroyed the livelihoods of traders in Sierra Leone and Liberia, 85% of whom were women” (Wenham et al, 2020, p. 195). By identifying and examining trends that have occurred throughout multiple disease outbreaks, as well as the preventative measures that can avert future crises, we can aim to minimize pandemics’ damage to women’s livelihoods and create a more equitable future going forward.

Background

When it comes to gender inequality that is currently occurring in the workforce, most of the problems that women have faced in the past year have not begun during the Coronavirus pandemic. According to a study on gender inequality from the McKinsey Global Institute, “Even before the coronavirus, our 15 indicators showed that tangible progress toward gender parity had been uneven and that large gender gaps remained across the world. Now, without intervention to address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women, there’s a risk that progress could go into reverse” (Madgavkar et al, 2020). Worldwide, women are facing a choice between their careers and their families, with the extreme high cost of early childcare oftentimes making the decision for them.

The cost and availability of early childcare is an issue that affects parents across the globe. In the United Kingdom, for example, “Prior to Covid-19 parents were already struggling to access childcare, due to prohibitive costs and a lack of supply. Only around half of councils in England and Wales had enough childcare places for working parents last year, a report by charity Coram Family and Childcare revealed” (The Telegraph Online, 2020). Similar daycare shortages exist in many locations in the U.S.; “In recent years, the number of licensed in-home child care providers has declined about 20%. According to the Center for American Progress, half the U.S. population lives in areas lacking enough providers, with low-income families and communities of color disproportionately affected” (Wise & Wakeam, 2019). This means that oftentimes, families living in less resourced areas may have no choice but to keep their children home with a parent or other relative, as there is no other qualified place for them to go.

Data about gender differences specifically in the STEM field in America is particularly revealing as to the extent to which a historically male-dominated sector is oftentimes incompatible with working motherhood. A 2019 study that was conducted in the U.S. found that

“4–7 years after birth or adoption of their first child, a striking proportion (43%) of new mothers leave full-time STEM employment (as opposed to 23% of new fathers). In addition, a significant proportion of new parents in this group—38% of new fathers and an impressive 71% of new mothers—cited the reason for departing from STEM jobs as “family related” when compared with respondents that have no children” (Guatimosim, 2020, p. 469).

STEM is an area in which women are already known to be a severely underrepresented group, which makes the flight of young mothers from the sector particularly alarming. This also further discourages younger women and girls from entering STEM careers, as they (oftentimes correctly) perceive such a career path to be incompatible with their longer-term goals to start a family and have children.

In addition, gendered issues that stem from a lack of adequate early childcare exist even in nations that might typically be thought of as more “progressive” or “leftist” than the United States. Michele Landsberg, a feminist activist and scholar based in Canada, stated in a 2020 article that:

“In the September Throne Speech, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau cited the report from Canada's Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW), which marks its 50th anniversary this year. As he noted, its most resounding recommendation for women's equality was universal, government-funded child care. He pledged to create such a

national system now. That promise is welcome but also something promised by a long line of PMs before him. I know, because I've written about the child care crisis throughout my years as a Canadian journalist, not to mention as a mother who could have used it in 1970, the first time it was proposed" (Landsberg, 2020).

Landsberg's experience demonstrates firsthand how even many left-leaning countries have been slow to implement universal childcare; as she puts it, "Anniversaries give us a chance to mark how far we've come--or haven't" (Landsberg, 2020).

In addition, the fact that Canada does not have universal childcare means that when children are spending time at home, their mothers are oftentimes the primary caregivers and homemakers. A study comparing gender roles in Canadian households pre-pandemic to those during the pandemic found that "Despite increased participation in the paid labor force over several decades, mothers are still primarily responsible for performing domestic work and managing family life (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006; Doucet 2015; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2020). Although changes in maternal employment have coincided with fathers doing more housework and childcare, Canadian mothers spend about 30 percent more time on housework and 40 percent more time on childcare than fathers" (Shafer et. al, 2020, p. 525).

This difference in household labor between mothers and fathers is due in part to the fact that "In many families, men's careers are privileged over their partners', placing more of the burden of domestic work squarely on women. Compared to mothers, fathers often work more hours per week, for more pay" (Shafer et. al, 2020, pg. 526). This means that the prioritization of men's careers is oftentimes an economic practicality for many families, demonstrating the far-reaching consequences of issues such as the wage gap. It is important to be aware of the fact that

gender inequality is not always intentional or malicious; it oftentimes stems from a lack of structures to support working mothers. Many women are stretched too thin to devote time to both their family and a full-time job or are aware of the fact that they take in less total pay than their male counterparts. In the United Kingdom, for example, “Even before coronavirus women's pensions were much smaller than men's. The average woman retires with just a fifth of the pension wealth as the average man. . . Prior to Covid-19, the Fawcett Society, a women's charity, calculated that it would take 60 years for women to reach pay parity with men” (The Telegraph Online. 2020).

Much of the research that has been done pre-COVID about the differing roles of men and women's labor is also reliant on self-identification of inequality in household duties, which means that the amount of actual work being done by each parent is not necessarily being measured. According to a study that was performed on the gender dynamics of dual-earning couples with young children, “Research on uneven division of family labor is quite mixed in terms of marital quality and the relationship seems to be moderated by perceptions of fairness, such that marital quality decreases for the person doing more labor if he or she feels it is unfair” (Shockley, 2021, pg. 17). Oftentimes, women end up being the ones to take on the brunt of remembering when tasks need to be done, a term which feminists have coined “invisible labor”. This means that oftentimes, even when fathers believe themselves to be performing an equal amount of household work to that of their female partners, women end up putting in emotional labor that results in them taking on a bigger part of the burden.

The gendered difference in household labor participation is particularly pronounced in countries like South Korea, where “only half of Korean women aged 15 or older participate in the labor force, long hours of work reveal a substantial gendered division of paid work and

household work. . . [and] Korean men aged 15 to 64 spend only 49 minutes per day in unpaid work (household and care work)” (Lim et al, 2020). This also occurs in spite of the fact that “young Korean women as well as men are one of the most educated populations in the world (OECD, 2018; Park, 2007). Despite rapid expansion of higher education among both women and men, a large share of Korean women still leave the labor force after marriage and childbirth, resulting in the continued M-shaped pattern of age and labor force participation” (Lim et al, 2020).

While countries like South Korea represent the most extreme cases of this phenomenon, it is clear that worldwide, women are the ones taking on the brunt of unpaid household labor. The McKinsey study summarizes how “Women are on the front lines here; they do an average of 75 percent of the world’s total unpaid-care work, including childcare, caring for the elderly, cooking, and cleaning. In some regions, such as South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), women’s share of unpaid-care work is as high as 80 to 90 percent” (Madgavkar et al, 2020). As a result, the pandemic has created a crisis that toppled what was an already delicate setup for many households across the world, deepening the structural inequalities that exist between women and men.

Hypothesis

The original hypothesis of this paper is that the United States is suffering more than other countries when it comes to the exacerbation of problems related to gender inequality during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was proven through the research to be incorrect, as all the countries that were examined were found to have problems related to their ability to support women's careers during this crisis. Some groups of women have undeniably suffered more than others during COVID-19. Issues such as pay inequality, increased household burdens, and disproportionate layoffs/ reduction of hours have been a widespread issue for women as a whole across the globe, however, from a wide variety of backgrounds and industries.

Methods

The study method that was carried out for this research was a secondary literature review from a variety of newspapers and academic journals. The main sources were research studies, as well as some autobiographical articles from women whose careers have been affected by the pandemic. The sample that was included in this research is a wide range of women, as research from specific countries and industries all pointed towards the same trends and patterns. The main research database that I utilized was the online discovery digital commons through Clark University's Goddard Library. In addition, I frequently consulted the McKinsey Global Institute's study *COVID-19 and gender equality: Countering the regressive effects*, as this provided a comprehensive overview of the many issues that have been affecting women during the pandemic.

This research is somewhat limited in that it presumes a binary approach to gender, which is viewed by feminist and pro-LGBT scholars as an increasingly limited framework for such a

complex topic. In addition, it focuses mainly on two-parent, heterosexual households in the discussion of family relationships and household labor. The reason for this is the fact that this research is somewhat limited in scope, while also tackling a very broad view of the issues that it discusses. It is important to note, however, that LGBT and/ or single parent households are likely struggling with many of the same problems mentioned here (but are not focused on as much in this paper for the sake of succinctness).

Findings

Women's careers are suffering disproportionately worldwide during the pandemic in comparison to men's. In Canada, for example, "Women now make up nearly half the country's labour force, but have suffered much more than half of COVID-related job losses" (Landsberg, 2020). In many cases, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only stagnated progress towards achieving gender equality in the workplace, but it has also caused this process to regress. In the United Kingdom, women were not on track to earn equal pay to men for another 60 years prior to COVID. Now that the pandemic has hit, however, "the crisis and subsequent economic fallout could delay this by three decades, meaning women may continue earning less until the year 2110" (The Telegraph Online, 2020). This also disrupts the notion that progress towards pay equality progresses in a linear manner through time, demonstrating how without specific actionable steps to close the wage gap, men will continue to out-earn women.

Gendered Career Differences Among Parents

Beyond the systemic and individual disadvantages that have occurred for women as a whole during the pandemic, there is considerable evidence demonstrating that the careers of mothers have been suffering during the past year in comparison with fathers. According to Pedro

Barata, the head of an employment research institute at Ryerson University in Canada, “studies of dual-income heterosexual families. . . have found when both men and women work outside the home, the bulk of child care and household labour still falls to women. The pandemic has exacerbated these inequities, he says” (CQ-Roll Call, Inc., 2020). This demonstrates the perfect example of how a pre-existing issue of gender inequality, such as men and women’s household labor participation, has been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, a thinktank based in London, “Mothers are 47pc more likely than fathers to have lost or quit their job since the lockdown began. . . Around 16pc of mothers are no longer in work as a result of the pandemic, compared to 11pc of fathers” (The Telegraph Online, 2020). In addition, other research in the U.K. found that: “One in four new or soon-to-be mothers claim to have faced discrimination at work during lockdown, such as being singled out for redundancy or furlough, according to the Trades Union Congress, a federation of unions. . . They also reported being forced to take sick leave when they were not unwell, having to take unpaid leave or start their maternity leave early, as well as being unable to go to work because their employer failed to make their workplace safe for them” (The Telegraph Online, 2020).

These many scenarios of gendered discrimination in the United Kingdom also demonstrate the way in which legal measures are not always sufficient in preventing gender-based discriminatory practices. In the U.K., “All of these actions are illegal. If workplaces cannot be made safe for pregnant women and new mothers, employers must suspend them on full pay” (The Telegraph Online, 2020). In spite of this fact, it is clear that discrimination is still occurring at a widespread level, indicating that there is a need for further intervention if workplace equity is to be realized.

Differences across Multiple Industries

Women's careers are also still suffering as a result of their decision to have children, in spite of the many protections that have been implemented to prevent this from happening. In the STEM field, for example, there is already a history of many women feeling forced to leave their positions as a result of motherhood being incompatible with the necessary long hours. During the pandemic, this trend has continued: "In the case of Brazil, a study performed with 15,000 women in science (graduate students, post-docs and PIs) showed that the pandemic is hitting mostly the scientific productivity of mothers of children under 12 years old" (Guatimosim, 2020).

This statistic is unsurprising due to the aforementioned issue of women taking on a disproportionate amount of household labor, which has been exacerbated further during the pandemic. The McKinsey study "found that the share of women in unpaid-care work has a high and negative correlation with female labor-force participation rates and a moderately negative correlation with women's chances of participating in professional and technical jobs or of assuming leadership positions" (Madgavkar et al, 2020). The pandemic has also "disproportionately increased the time women spend on family responsibilities—by an estimated 30 percent in India, according to one survey, and by 1.5 to 2.0 hours in the United States" (Madgavkar et al, 2020).

With the COVID-19 crisis forcing more women to be the primary caretakers of their children or elderly relatives during the pandemic, it is unsurprising that their careers would suffer as a result. In addition, women's jobs have been all-around more vulnerable than men's due to the fact that they are more highly represented in sectors that have been affected by the pandemic. According to the McKinsey study, "women and men tend to cluster in different occupations in

both mature and emerging economies. This, in turn, shapes the gender implications of the pandemic: our analysis shows that female jobs are 19 percent more at risk than male ones simply because women are disproportionately represented in sectors negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis” (Madgavkar et al, 2020). This demonstrates the variety of ways in which women’s careers are in jeopardy as a result of the pandemic, as it causes a ripple effect with a variety of scenarios that generally affect women more than men.

Intersectional Impacts of the Pandemic

Another factor that is important to consider in this conversation is how the careers of certain subsets of women are more affected by the pandemic than others. Feminist scholarship about the intersectionality of oppression applies heavily to the pandemic. People of color in the United States have suffered disproportionately in comparison to their white counterparts during the COVID-19 crisis. Women of color are thus suffering from the “double jeopardy” of belonging to two oppressed groups, making them one of the most economically vulnerable populations during this crisis. According to researchers at Penn State University, ““Our analysis of claims data show that Black and Hispanic women face the highest levels of unemployment, even compared to their male counterparts. Overall, these differences by race and sex likely are due to several factors, including differences in education levels, occupation, the economic sector in which they work, cultural norms, and whether their jobs can be done remotely”” (Indian EGov Newswire, 2020).

When looking beyond Western nations, the effects of the pandemic have oftentimes been even more devastating on the careers of women. A study in South Africa, for example, found that “While women comprised less than half of the employed in February, they experienced two-

thirds of the net job losses between February and April, with the most vulnerable groups affected more. Among those who remained in employment, there was a larger fall in working hours among women than men” (Casale & Posel, 2021). The data from South Africa also seems to show that the lower the economic category, the greater this discrepancy becomes: “An alarming statistic is that almost half of all employed women (47%) in the lowest tercile reported losing their job, compared to just over a third (36%) of employed men in the poorest tercile” (Casale & Posel, 2021). It becomes clear after reading the research that the greater the number of oppressed groups a woman belongs to, the more likely she is to have her employment affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

Public Violence & the Case Study of Mexico & Columbia

Furthermore, the oppression of women during the COVID-19 crisis is even more complicated in countries where there are higher rates of public violence against both men and women. According to a study about the effect of the pandemic on women's rights in Mexico and Columbia, for example, “in Mexico 66% of women 15-years-old and older state that they have faced at least one act of violence throughout their lives. Surprisingly, the majority of this violence happens in the community or public spheres” (Valencia Londoño, 2021). This has meant that “contrary to expectations, in the two countries of the case study, the statistics [of violence against women] show a considerable decrease during the period of confinement, which can be explained by the decreased exposure of women to the high-risk environments like public spaces” (Valencia Londoño, 2021). The study then goes on to point out that in addition, “public spaces are places of fundamental importance in the daily lives of women, particularly young women, and confining women to the private sphere on a permanent basis would be another violence against them” (Valencia Londoño, 2021).

The case study of Mexico and Columbia demonstrates how even in situations where the pandemic may have improved circumstances of gendered oppression, this does not necessarily mean that staying at home is a viable long-term solution. In addition, Mexico and Columbia are both experiencing the same increased rates of women's exodus from the workplace as many of the others mentioned. Columbia in particular has seen women's employment fall at nearly double the rate of men's during the past year: "In July 2019, the difference in the underemployment of men and women was 5%, with women more likely to be underemployed. The pandemic has exacerbated this difference, and in July 2020, female underemployment was 10% high than male underemployment" (Valencia Londoño, 2021).

Similarly, in Mexico, an "alarming jump in underemployment is the result of the reduced workday in the public and private sectors derived from the health emergency, in the majority of cases accompanied by a salary reduction, which had a larger impact on the female population" (Valencia Londoño, 2021). Women's decrease in pay and hours has negatively affected their careers on a global scale. In countries where women were already experiencing high rates of gendered violence and lower rates of participation in the workforce, such as Mexico and Columbia, the situation is particularly grave.

Effects of the Pandemic on Women's Career Progression

While the COVID-19 crisis has forced many women out of the workforce, it is also important to look at the impact that it has had on the many women who have been continuing to work during the past year. Mentorship and networking programs can have a huge impact on the diversity and internal promotions of many companies, and when such programs are not prioritized, women's careers may suffer. The sentiment that these programs are suffering as a

result of the pandemic comes from both HR leaders and female employees themselves, as they seem to all be united in the awareness that circumstances are not ideal for furthering the progress of women's careers.

Lattice, a business management platform, performed a study of 500 HR managers in March of 2021. This study found that “While 68% of respondents said they do have female mentorship programs in place at their companies, 84% of those with programs feel that mentor relationships have been more difficult to maintain since the pandemic began, with more meetings taking place virtually. . . [and] 45% admitted that they think women with children are treated differently at their company” (PR Newswire, 2021). These numbers are fairly significant given the large sample size of the study, and they seem to demonstrate that the pandemic has caused the majority of companies to de-prioritize their female employees' careers. While online Zoom meetings are an unfortunate widespread reality of working during the pandemic, this study demonstrates how they may be harmful in ways that go beyond workplace productivity rates or awkward communication.

In addition, a study in Canada about the effects of the pandemic specifically in academia found that the overall wellness of women who have been working in higher ed has decreased during the pandemic. After getting results from nearly 700 faculty members, they found that “Substantially fewer women felt supported for their health and wellness from their university. Women and racialized faculty reported higher levels of stress and social isolation, and lower well-being. . . These data emphasize a disproportionate toll on women and racialized people. Women and racialized people experienced a higher proportion of negative impacts on health, social well-being, research activity and loss of productivity” (MIL-OSI Global, 2021). The fact that women (as well as racial minorities) in academia have been overall taking greater hits to

their productivity demonstrates that they are likely the ones who are taking on additional burdens in other areas of their lives, particularly in comparison to (white) men.

The data that is available also seems to indicate that women agree with the notion that the pandemic has created additional career barriers for them. A study from Deloitte, a multi-national consulting firm, found that “nearly 82% of the women in the survey said that their lives have been negatively disrupted by the pandemic. And nearly 70% of the women were concerned that these disruptions would impact their career progression” (Dave, 2020). Now that COVID-19 vaccines are becoming more widely available for most members of the general public in the United States, this may help to alleviate some of the negative effects that many women experienced in their career trajectory. It is unclear, however, whether this will be enough to reverse some of the undeniable damage that has occurred since 2020, as maintaining the status quo is not the same as progress.

Limitations of Available Information

Part of what makes the impacts of the pandemic on women's careers somewhat difficult to track is the fact that many organizations are not willing to admit openly that their female employees are being treated differently than their male ones. A perfect example of this can be seen in the United Kingdom's tracking of the gender pay gap this year. The U.K. normally requires employers to disclose “their gender pay gap -- the difference between average male and female earnings” annually, but chose to exempt them last March “in light of the Covid-19 crisis” (The Telegraph Online, 2020). Using the data from firms that did choose to disclose this information, the government found that the gap had already increased from 12p on the pound to 13p on the pound (The Telegraph Online, 2020). This demonstrates the extent to which the

pandemic has already set back progress towards pay equality in the U.K., so far as it has been revealed. Without access to the full data from other organizations, however, the full extent of the damage may not be clear for several more years.

In addition, many of the same factors that cause women to be paid less overall than men also make their employment more difficult to track. Timothy Kelsey, a researcher at Penn State University, has been critical of much of the research that has been performed by economists for this exact reason: "To gauge the impact of COVID-related unemployment, the economists analyzed unemployment claims submitted to the Pennsylvania Department of Labor from February to October of this year. . . Kelsey pointed out that researchers looked only at those workers who are eligible to file claims for unemployment compensation, which excludes workers in the "gig" economy, self-employed individuals and independent contractors, such as drivers for ride-hailing services" (Indian EGov Newswire, 2020). Kelsey's criticism here is apt, and it demonstrates the gaps that exist in using traditional sources like unemployment filing to measure career progression in the 21st century job market. Even in Canada, for instance, "more than half of female workers (56 percent, compared to 13.1 percent of men) are engaged in jobs involving what the Canadian Women's Foundation calls the Five C's: caring, clerical, catering, cashiering and cleaning. This not only puts them at high risk of contracting COVID-19 but also of losing their livelihoods entirely" (Landsberg, 2020).

In the case of female workers who are not formally or contractually employed, this means that their jobs are not being "counted" towards those that have been lost or eliminated during the pandemic. In many cases, there is also simply not enough research being performed on a widespread scale to determine what the full extent of damage is from this disease. According to an article from the London School of Economics, "Only a minority of governments collect and

share basic, disaggregated sex and gender data on cases of infectious disease and the socio-economic impacts of the response to outbreaks. Analysis remains high level, often conducted after the fact and with incomplete information” (Wenham, 2020). Nevertheless, the research that has been performed indicates that much needs to be done in order to support women’s career paths worldwide, as they are being disproportionately affected across the board in comparison with men’s.

Discussion

Women’s careers have taken a critical hit during the COVID-19 pandemic, as has been demonstrated by the research in this paper. There are a variety of interventions that may help to reverse some of this damage. Infrastructure that properly supports women and their careers can help to create a more just and equitable future, for both men and women. An investment in such practices would also pay for itself multiple times over; according to the McKinsey study, “the cost of making sufficient investments in five areas (education, family planning, maternal mortality, digital inclusion, and unpaid care work) could amount to \$1.5 trillion to \$2.0 trillion. . . Yet we found that the economic benefits of narrowing gender gaps are six to eight times higher than the social spending required” (Madgavkar et al, 2020).

This means that investing in women and diversity initiatives not only makes moral and ethical sense, but also financial and economic sense for both countries and individual businesses: “For example, those in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 25 percent more likely to have above-average profitability than companies in the fourth quartile” (Madgavkar et al, 2020). Places that choose not to invest in such initiatives are putting themselves at a disadvantage, as they are then losing out on the multiple business benefits that

come from increased diversity and inclusion. When it comes to one of the most concrete and attainable measures that would help women's career progression globally, it is clear that childcare is one of the biggest obstacles for many women who choose to start a family. The McKinsey study states that "Interventions to tackle this problem include better recognition of unpaid work, reducing the amount of unpaid work, and rebalancing it between men and women" (Madgavkar et al, 2020).

One larger-scale initiative that would help with this is universal early childcare, a measure which has already been implemented in several countries. In Australia, for example, "the government announced [last spring] that childcare would become free for families. It was billed as a rescue package, following mass withdrawals from daycare services around the country from families who had been thrown into financial uncertainty and needed to cut costs, or who were concerned about safety" (The Guardian, 2020). Many families have benefitted from this arrangement, as it has allowed both parents in two-parent households to continue working. For Australians, "the crisis has highlighted that the care of children is a responsibility for the whole of society" (The Guardian, 2020). Higher emphasis on early childhood education also benefits the children themselves, while allowing many women to remain employed who would otherwise be unable to work.

Conclusion

The original thesis of this research paper was that women in the United States were suffering disproportionately during the pandemic in comparison to other countries. This was proven through the research to be incorrect, as women across a variety of nations and industries have been suffering to keep their careers afloat in the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has exacerbated problems such as lack of access to adequate childcare, differences in distribution of household labor between the genders, and job losses/pay inequality. While some countries such as Australia have implemented universal childcare to help with these problems, it is clear that further intervention is needed to counter the negative effects of the pandemic on women's careers. The research did find a correlation between the number of other oppressed groups that a woman belongs to and the likelihood of her experiencing negative career impacts during this time.

The research covered in this paper is important because it demonstrates how easily events like the pandemic can create setbacks for civil liberties and activists' progress towards equality. In addition, it demonstrates why policies like universal childcare and other supports for working women are not only a good idea, but vitally necessary if we are to ever to achieve gender equality in the workplace. Until men and women take on an equal amount of unpaid labor in the household, issues like childcare will continue to be seen as a "women's" problem. Our society has a responsibility to ensure that we are doing everything we are able to support women's careers and inclusion in leadership initiatives. Inclusion of more women in high-level business positions would also help to ensure that their interests are being represented from the top-down, as more inclusive policies allow greater numbers of women to work while having children.

This research was limited in that it only examined pre-existing studies and surveys that had been commissioned by other groups. This means that the full extent of the pandemic's damage to women's careers may not be fully apparent here, as many stakeholders are unwilling to invest time and resources into studying a topic that could damage their own reputation. In addition, it focused mainly on heterosexual and two-parent households, as well as working within a binary definition of gender that focuses on men and women as separate and distinct categories.

Future research should continue to focus on determining methods that can help to support women's careers in a variety of settings and conditions. In addition, such research should focus on the financial and economic benefits of businesses and governments adopting pro-women policies. It would also be beneficial to further examine the impact that the COVID-19 crisis had on more non- "traditional" households, such as LGBT and single-parent families with children. Now that COVID-19 vaccines are becoming more widely available and many places are starting to re-open, only time will tell how long it will be until the negative effects of the pandemic on women's careers are undone. One can only hope that some of the more ugly truths revealed by this crisis will be used to inform future policies that will benefit women, as well as society as a whole.

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