

The Impact of Covid-19 on Women

by Michael Curtis



In spite of discrimination, blatant and subtle sexism, sexual harassment, and some self-imposed barriers, women in recent years have become more prominent in all aspects of political and economic life. In contemporary life there are impressive examples, among them Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany since 2005, Christine Lagarde, president and first woman to head the European Central Bank, and former head of the IMF, Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of U.S. House of Representatives 2007-2011 and from 2019, Kamala Harris, Senator from California and vice-president elect, first African-American woman and the first South Asian woman to hold that position, and seventeen year old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, challenging world leaders on the issue of climate change.

Noticeably, a larger number of women will be members of the U.S. Congress, and a number, including Janet Yellen and Michele Flournoy are likely to be members of the incoming administration. Among women abroad are Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala of Nigeria who has become the declared director of the WTO, though the U.S. favors her rival candidate, South Korea's Yoo Myung-hee, and Jacinda Ardern, prime minister of New Zealand since 2017. In Sweden 46% of members of parliament are women.

Similar changes have occurred in economic matters where women are breaking new ground with the increase in female executives, such as heading a major Wall Street bank. Jane Fraser is the CEO of Citigroup, Mary Barra is CEO of General Motors, Marianne Lake is CEO of Consumer Lending at JPMorgan Chase, Sheryl Sandberg is chief operating officer of Facebook and the first woman to serve on its board of directors. The percentage of women at the highest level of management in banking in the U.S. has increased. They have a long way to go but the percentage of women at the highest levels of management has increased, in top operational roles, in spite of unequal pay and sexual harassment.

Yet the glass ceiling has still restrained advancement for women, and disparities remain. There are many reasons: one is that women are more likely than men to choose public sector careers, which tend to pay less than private sector employment. Women tend to work fewer hours especially once they have children. Moreover, women are likely to spend more time with an invalid child or parent, this reducing their opportunities for earnings and increasing work absences. In the business world, men dominate senior trading roles, and women tend to have junior posts. For example, currently, women have 98% of the lower paid administrative posts of the investment banking units of Bank of America in the UK.

Some of existing inequality between men and women results from behavioral differences.

A study of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority showed that male train and bus operators work more overtime hours than female colleagues who also may never take overtime. It is a question of choice of priorities. Men wanted the extra cash from overtime, while women preferred more time off.

Discrimination and implicit cultural norms have blocked women's progress, and problems still remain, regarding unequal pay, health care, harassment, sexual violence, though these issues draw more attention partly because of the Me Too movement, and in 2020 the Black Lives Movement because of women of color. The reality, as the World Economic Forum estimates, is that the average woman's annual income is \$11,500 compared to \$21,500 for men. The gender pay gap in the U.S. is 18.5%, and on average women are promoted at a lower rate than men especially at the entry level.

Nevertheless, conditions for women has been improving in recent years until Covid-19 which has caused such dramatic loss of human life, deep economic recession, and social disruption, and challenge to public health systems. Thousands of the global workforce are at risk of losing their employment. The pandemic has set back the gains of women in recent years, causing setbacks for women in incomes and careers, and showing gender inequities across the U.S. In the months February to September 2020, about 900,000 fewer women are in the work force compared with loss by men of 300,000.

A central problem for women arises from the fact that they are more concerned than men with care giving and a care taking role. First, let it be said that men in the current age have become more involved in family activity, coaching games, housework, and making meals, but the bulk of activity still depends on women: the career of men are not as affected as are those of women. Caregiving and femininity have been historically linked. To some extent the issue has been dealt with by welfare programs that support working families and promote parental leave, and support gender equality.

However, the fact is that more than half of the general practitioners in the national health service are women. More than one third of working women in two parent households exclusively provide child care after school and day care close or were dismissed because of Covid-19 and school closings. Balancing work and family has become complicated. Working mothers have always been inconvenienced by their double job: career on one hand and children and household on the other.

An extra burden has been added because of the disproportionate effect of the virus on African-American and Latino Americans women.

The essential problem is that women play a large part in sectors hurt by the impact of the pandemic.

Though the full impact of the pandemic remains to be seen, and the problem is likely to remain for some time, it is clear that the impact of Covid-19 has had a disproportionate impact on women, has exacerbated problems for women in almost every sphere of life, from health to the economy, security, social protection, by virtues of their sex. They are more likely than men to have lost their job or had to leave it, and had an increase in burden of housework. They are also disproportionately more exposed to the virus as nurses, key workers, and cleaners.

The global gender gap, with different calculations in countries, long familiar, has been increased. Generally, more people have increased the amount of time spent on unpaid domestic work and childcare since the pandemic began, but women spend more time on this than do men. One estimate is that women spend three times as long on this kind of unpaid labor, which has increased with children out of school because of lockdown, and more care needed for elderly people. A UN report in November 2020 found that at a peak this year 1.7 billion children were affected by school disclosures, and that 224 million remain out of school. It is predominantly women who are carrying the burden of care, some even sacrificing

their career.

Economically, women have been more affected by cuts and layoffs, as companies reduce their workforce to survive the pandemic crisis, especially in the services industries such as the services sector, retail, hospitality, and tourism. Women are more likely than men to work in low paying jobs.

The economic decline has meant that a larger number of women have left the work force. In the U.S. The number of women aged 25 to 54 participating in the work force fell from 77% in January to 74% in May. Four times as many women, 865,000, as men, 216,000, had left the U.S. labor force in September 2020. Moreover, female business owners fear they may not survive the crisis because of lack of access to funds. Also, the retirement plans of women may have to be changed.

One reality is that more men than women are dying from the Covid-19 virus. Of 55 countries providing data on the issue, 48 show proportionally higher male than female deaths. In the U.S. in June 2020, 57% of deaths caused by the virus have been men, though there disparities by class and race. It is still unclear why this is the case, but it can be attributed to various biological, behavioral, nicotine dependence and psychosocial factors, among them obesity, hypertension, diabetes, and alcohol consumption.

However, violence against women is an international problem. The Covid-19 virus has intensified this in, but not limited to, the domestic scene. The problem has been growing, partly because of precautions to prevent the spread of the virus such as lockdowns, social distancing, and restrictions on movement, and partly because of the isolation of women due to employment, stress, and economic hardship.

Economic life will not recover until the virus has been controlled. Women will continue to face problems of career and financial security. Their lives are changing in the face of

the virus and the economic and social stress it has caused. Society should prevent the gains made by women in recent decades from being rolled back.