

the disproportionate impact of the
COVID-19 pandemic on women



women transforming
the workplace.



As the world deals with COVID-19, many uncertainties remain. The current crisis has drawn attention to a pressing issue: gender inequality. It has swiftly become clear that the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities between men and women in significant ways. COVID-19 has increased the pressure on women around the world, creating new challenges for them.

With our longstanding commitment to promoting the advancement of women in the workplace, particularly through our Women Transforming the Workplace program, it was important to us to assess the situation and consider solutions to relieve the pressure women are experiencing. We also discuss approaches businesses can use to prioritize diversity and inclusion in the aftermath of COVID-19.

higher unemployment rates for women

More women are receiving dismissals and temporary layoffs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic than ever before with “traditional” economic crises. Indeed, the most affected sectors during this pandemic (catering, social work, and cashiering) are traditionally female-dominated. In Canada, 20% of women have lost their jobs versus 13% of men. According to Statistics Canada, among 25- to 54-year-olds, the job loss rate for women (5%) has been twice as high as for men since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Several factors explain this situation:

[Women occupy only 31% of senior management positions in North America](#). As a result, they are more numerous in non-leadership positions that are more at risk of being abolished, since unfortunately they are sometimes wrongly considered [non-essential to the proper functioning of businesses in times of instability](#).

In addition, certain professions with a high representation of women are particularly affected by the crisis, such as flight attendants, cooks, food servers, and maintenance workers in the travel and hotel sector.

Women also hold more precarious positions, such as part-time jobs that are easily eliminated in times of crisis such as this one.

Finally, men tend to hold jobs that allow them to work remotely, while women tend to hold jobs that offer less flexibility in this respect. For instance, women’s jobs are traditionally more service-oriented.

women essential to front-line services

According to Statistics Canada, women represent the vast majority of workers in the healthcare and social services sectors (82.4% in 2015). 92.2% of Canada's nursing staff is female. Consequently, women not only find themselves on the front lines fighting against COVID-19 but are also more at risk of contracting the virus themselves and bringing it home to their loved ones.

Women are the main employees of other essential services, such as grocery stores, filling roles that are not traditionally recognized as necessary by the population and that tend to receive wages below the cost of living.

Therefore, women are working harder, for longer periods, in jobs that put them at risk, for lower pay than their male counterparts.

combining work and home life

The pandemic has forced companies to adapt to teleworking and women now have the opportunity to work from home on a large scale. But what should be a benefit is proving to be an added burden for them. Indeed, [as mentioned in our study about unconscious biases](#), women are primarily responsible for household tasks even though their participation in the workforce continues to increase. With schools and daycare centres closed in Canada for an indefinite period of time, managing both work and children presents real and persisting challenges.

In addition to the physical stresses brought on by the current pandemic, the mental workload is even heavier. Women already take on 2.6 times more unpaid childcare responsibilities and household tasks than their heterosexual partners.

The situation can be even more difficult for single mothers who can't rely on a spouse to share childcare tasks during the day.

Pregnant women laid off during the pandemic [may lose out on maternity benefits, depending on when they lost their jobs](#).

long-term consequences for companies

Due to the fact that a higher percentage of women are facing job volatility during the COVID-19 crisis, there will be a decrease in gender diversity within companies.

We are headed toward of a “new normal,” in which companies have a role to play in facilitating the prosperity and job security of women. By taking the time now to ensure that these current impacts on women lead to positive long-term changes, organizations will strengthen themselves in a number of ways:

- long-term financial health
- customer loyalty
- staff retention
- employee engagement
- workplace health and safety
- capacity to innovate

how to prioritize diversity and inclusion in the face of COVID-19

- Analyze workforce composition when making layoff and hiring decisions.
- Offer alternatives to layoffs, such as reducing the work week for all employees.
- Implement measures to help optimize work–life balance in the current context, [like suggesting flexible work hours](#).
- Recognize the true value of women’s contribution in this unprecedented situation, including essential occupations such as healthcare professions and also those that are not as highly regarded.
- Pay special attention to the hiring of women when the crisis has passed and the labour market picks up.
- [Set up inclusive recruitment processes, such as blind resumé screening](#).
- Take extra care to ensure a [safe return to work](#), particularly for vulnerable employees such as pregnant women, new mothers, and low-income workers.

With this “new normal” in place, the workforce may strongly evolve. Businesses should take this opportunity to review all their policies and procedures, and especially the fundamentals for full inclusion.

references

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about the program

The Women Transforming the Workplace program aims to facilitate an ongoing conversation about how we can empower women in our organizations and promote their unique abilities and innovative contributions to today's workplaces. Through nationwide surveys, a podcast series, think tanks, and whitepapers focused on providing actionable insights, we dive into the challenges of an ever-demanding, paradigm-shifting, technology-driven world of work. We reflect on opportunities women can seize to reinvent and transform their workplaces based on their own unique, collaborative, and resourceful perspectives.

For more content about women in the workplace, visit: randstad.ca/women

about Randstad

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