

Gender Parity in The Workplace: How COVID-19 Has Affected Women

Steven H. Appelbaum and Shirin Emadi-Mahabadi

ABSTRACT

Women especially have been faced with immense challenges because of this impossible global crisis; many are being forced to choose between family responsibilities and their career. Now more than ever, as we look towards a post-pandemic future, organizations must continue to strive towards inclusive workplaces. The implementation of employee upskilling programs will be one key action to attract talent and ensure sustained future prosperity. Profitability and growth depend on inclusivity; the companies that realize this will see the short and long-term advantages. Others will fall behind and leave the door open for those progressive enough to claim market share. Now that we are more than a year into the pandemic, arguably one of the largest global crises in a century, it is important to explore and explain how women have been affected, and what this could mean for the future of their place in leadership.

Keywords: COVID-19, gender, gender parity, leadership, post pandemic.

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Steven H. Appelbaum, *
Ph.D., Professor of Management, John
Molson School of Business, Concordia
University, Montreal, Canada.

(e-mail: steven.appelbaum@concordia.ca)

Shirin Emadi-Mahabadi
MBA, John Molson School of Business,
Concordia University, Montreal, Canada.

(e-mail: shirin-emadi@hotmail.com)

**Corresponding Author*

I. INTRODUCTION

The conversation around gender equality in leadership positions has become a huge focus for many large organizations over the last few decades. More specifically, there has been wide exploration of the leadership traits of women in comparison to men given the extensive history of male domination in management roles (Bruckmüller, & Branscombe, 2010; Eagly, 2007; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002; Heilman, 2001). There has been a historical bias within organizations, wherein the role of management has been associated with men (Bruckmüller, & Branscombe, 2010). However, studies have demonstrated that women possess characteristics that allow them to be more transformational leaders and more effective at navigating change with their teams (Bruckmüller, & Branscombe, 2010; Ryan & Haslam, 2009). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were many instances where women in leadership roles successfully overcame situations with insurmountable obstacles, further demonstrating their transformational leadership traits. One example of this is Emma Walmsley, CEO of the pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline since 2017 who has led a global restructuring initiative to save the company \$500 Million a year by 2021 (Forbes, 2020). Now that we are over a year into the pandemic, arguably one of the largest global crises in a century, it is important to explore how women have been affected, and what this could mean for the future of their place in leadership.

II. THE GLASS CEILING & THE GLASS CLIFF: THE ONLY WAY IS DOWN

Diversity refers to different genders, races, cultural backgrounds, education, experience, sexual orientation, and ethical values that characterise those around us (Kaur, 2020). This article will focus on gender equality in leadership roles before, during, and the way forward after the COVID-19 pandemic, however it is important to note that inclusion is the acknowledgement of diversity, and the efforts required to foster an environment of belonging (Kaur, 2020). Therefore, demonstrating a drive for a more diverse workforce and gender-equal leadership does not necessarily mean that inclusion is being achieved (Brimhall, 2020). This distinction is important because the struggle for equality in leadership roles remains, even during a time where organizations are putting huge emphasis on the importance of diversity and inclusion.

Continuous lack of gender inclusion in leadership is explored in numerous studies, the most notable have shown that two occurrences played a role in hindering women: “the glass ceiling” and the “glass cliff” (Bruckmüller, & Branscombe, 2010; Ryan & Haslam, 2005; Stroh, Langlands, & Simpson, 2004). While these two unwritten rules present female leaders with opportunities, they also explain certain challenges faced by women. The “glass ceiling”, a term used to refer to invisible barriers impeding career advancement, applies to minorities and females in both the business and political world (Bruckmüller, & Branscombe, 2010). Early reports have shown that the negative economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, more specifically unemployment, have adversely affected women and minorities (Catalyst, 2020).

This demonstrates that the glass ceiling has not yet been smashed, and the pandemic may have had the effect of strengthening the barrier.

A study by Ryan *et al.* explored the relationship of female leadership during times of hardship and found that female leaders are less frequently provided with the opportunity to prove their managerial skills in normal working conditions given the existing cultural belief in organizations that men are more successful in management roles (Ryan *et al.*, 2011, pp 470-484). They discussed that when an organization is performing well, male leaders are favourable simply because there are more male leaders than female, and an organization is more likely to continue hiring male leaders and not potentially disrupt the success of the company (Ryan *et al.*, 2011, pp 470-484). On the other hand, female leaders are associated with crisis because they will be hired when performance starts to decline under a male leader's direction. This phenomenon has been termed the "glass cliff" (Ryan & Haslam, 2005).

Women accept such risky roles because they are aware of the existing culture that will delay them from leading a potentially successful company (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010; Ferris, Jagannathan, & Pritchard, 2003). Female leaders continue to take on the task and overcome challenging opportunities, preventing the once inevitable but always present risk of tumbling down the glass cliff. This finding has been supplemented further by research that women are more likely to be called into positions of leadership in times of crisis whereas men lead in prosperous times (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010, Ryan *et al.*, 2011). When discussing the attributes of female leaders in times of crisis, Ryan & Haslam proposed that women are selected for leadership during difficult times because of their drive to help those who struggle the most and offer them opportunities, their ability to weigh out risk more logically than men, and their ability to cope with failure more rationally than men (Ryan *et al.*, 2011, pp 470-484). One conclusion that can be drawn from this is that women are more inclusive leaders. The ability to cope with failure can be attributed to the reality that women are overall presented with less opportunities in their careers than men, so they are accustomed to managing their expectations more reasonably. The study also explores female personality traits such as intuition, sympathy and understanding, and they link these traits to transformational leadership, all of which is preferable during times of crisis (Ryan *et al.*, 2011, pp 470-484).

Comparably, a 2019 report by McKinsey entitled "When Women Lead, Workplaces Should Listen" explored the leadership traits that would be most useful for overcoming future hardships and concluded that there are five that are most important, and more often applied by women (McKinsey, 2019). The traits are inspiration, participative decision making, setting expectations and rewards, people development, and role modeling (McKinsey, 2019). These traits are preferable during times of crisis because success depends on the ability to channel the group's efforts to overcome the hardship as one, without competing with others. In other words, during times of crisis teamwork and an inspirational leader are necessary to focus on the obstacle; a leader with a big ego and too much pride could jeopardize success for personal gain.

This occurrence is reflected in a 2017 article from The Conversation outlining the struggles faced by Canadian women in politics, and they largely attributed the challenges to the glass cliff and the gender identities surrounding women (Sampert & Trimble, 2017). The article suggested that women slip down the glass cliff because of the use of negative characteristics of gender identity, where often the media will portray these politicians as princesses or emotional, or even that they are only interested in fancy photo shoots. This takes away from her abilities and often these women have accepted roles leading political parties during times when the parties are on the verge of collapse already (Sampert & Trimble, 2017). This article focuses on Canadian politicians; however, the same reality is felt by leaders globally.

The effects of the glass ceiling and the glass cliff skew the perception of the abilities of a woman over their male counterparts because when a woman is offered the opportunity and accepts the role of leading a failing company and it does then fail, the conclusion may be drawn that a woman is not as effective a leader as a man. The result of this skewed perception is that it will prevent women from being offered the opportunity to lead during times of tranquility. This is how the glass ceiling eventually causes a woman to fall off the glass cliff.

These theories have been recognized in the immense effort to reach gender equality in leadership positions. However, the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has had negative effects on women and minorities. A study by McKinsey suggested that efforts towards gender equality lacked the required level of progress even before the pandemic, and that gender gaps existed globally. The statistics surrounding gender equality in the workplace and in society suggest that from 2014-2019 progress has remained "relatively flat", and that "Gender equality in work continues to lag behind gender equality in society, with a Gender Parity Score of 0.52 versus 0.67, respectively" (McKinsey, 2020). Currently, women participate in the labor force only two-thirds as much as men, and this number has remained stable during the abovementioned period (McKinsey, 2020). Given this, McKinsey suggested that the push towards gender equity needs to be even stronger post-pandemic because otherwise all the existing progress could be lost, and it could be detrimental to the world economy (McKinsey, 2020).

III. THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN IN WORKPLACES

The forced lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic have caused some industries such as food service, customer sales and service roles, as well as less-skilled office support roles, to suffer immensely (McKinsey, 2020). Some of these industries have been impacted because automation has seen accelerated advances as companies have seized the crisis as an opportunity to make the already planned shift (McKinsey, 2020). As a result, many lower income jobs have been lost, and women, ethnic minorities, younger workers, part time employees and members of the LGBTQ+ community have been disproportionately affected (Catalyst 2020). In fact, a January 2021 article by Fortune states that women accounted for 100% of the 140 000 jobs lost in December in the US (Aspan, 2021). Prior to the pandemic, McKinsey evaluated

the long-term effects that automation would have on women in comparison to men, and at that time the conclusion was that both women and men would be affected almost equally, women slightly more so (McKinsey, 2018).

The above mentioned 2018 report lengthily outlined women in lower-skilled, lower paid roles would feel the impact of automation most. They found that women in Canada, UK, USA, and Japan occupy less jobs in the professional and scientific industries, and that “between 40 million and 160 million women globally may need to transition between occupations by 2030, often into higher-skilled roles” (McKinsey, 2018). Automation would impact both women and men, however the transition would be harder for women given the long-established barriers (referring to caring for their family) that prevent career shifts and developing new skills (McKinsey, 2018). The report went on to explore the advantages of remote work, especially for women. Women are still typically responsible for their double roles as paid workers in the workplace and unpaid workers at home (McKinsey, 2018).

The same report also advised that if women were prevented from taking the necessary steps to evolve their career given their additional obstacles to what men face, there would be an intensifying wage gap between genders (McKinsey, 2018). Another layer to consider is that automation would affect men’s jobs too and therefore diminish wages for everyone (McKinsey, 2018). This would mean a reality with overall lower wages and a larger wage gap; even more women may leave the work force because the cost of childcare may become too high (McKinsey, 2018). This reality was considered before the pandemic and now with the immense job loss suffered by women during COVID-19, it could mean that the recent crisis may have erased decades of work towards gender equality in the workplace.

A report by RBC outlines the widespread losses felt by Canadian women during the pandemic, explaining that 12 times as many women as men have had to take time off work to care for their children, which could hinder their ability to get back into the workplace and live up to their full career potential (RBC, 2021). They went even further and assessed the effects of the pandemic among visible minority women and found that job loss rates have been even higher than the overall rate for women of 9.7% (RBC, 2021).

McKinsey created a new study in 2020, outlining the amended assumptions of the impacts that automation will have on women, given the COVID-19 pandemic. The alarming results revealed 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” (McKinsey, 2020). A complimentary report released a few months later also suggested that women have been much more impacted by the pandemic given their roles as family caregivers, as they have had to leave jobs to care for children at home, lost jobs due to being distracted by children at home while working remotely, and in some cases, they have kept their jobs but had the added burden of being the sole breadwinner if their spouse lost a job during the pandemic (McKinsey, 2020). Those who kept their jobs and worked remotely in some instances were extremely distracted due to having their entire families in their home all year, and simply were not able to be as present, perform as

well, and so did not provide their usual quality of work (McKinsey, 2020). This will also hinder women’s potential to progress in their careers after the pandemic as this one year could tarnish their “brand”. Before the pandemic it was determined that women are typically considered “less mobile and flexible” than men because of their additional responsibility of unpaid care work (McKinsey, 2018). On average before COVID-19, women spent about 700 billion more hours a year in unpaid work compared to men (McKinsey, 2018).

McKinsey research from 2021 found that women’s jobs are now predicted to be twice more vulnerable than men’s to the economic fallout of the pandemic (McKinsey, 2021). It was proposed that if no action is taken to mitigate job loss for women, global GDP in 2030 will be \$1 trillion lower than if the pandemic affected both women and men equally. The proposal is to invest now in education, family planning, health initiatives to achieve gender equality improvements by 2030 (McKinsey, 2021). The report also highlights the importance of “digital inclusion” referring to remote work and allowing women and minorities to have access to the same technology for teleworking, as well as evening out the unpaid care expectations that fall on women; these actions would add \$13 trillion to global GDP (McKinsey, 2021).

While women are losing jobs and leaving jobs during the pandemic to care for children, some are being offered leadership roles during this difficult time and are expected to overcome an impossible hurdle, also known as the glass cliff. This will also affect their long-term career prospects, the same as job loss could. However, the main concern for women at this time is that most who have lost their jobs worked in low-skilled service jobs for modest pay and run the risk of losing out on any future opportunities because they have been out of work (RBC, 2021). These are the same demographic of women that McKinsey warned in 2018 may be most impacted, and the ones who they confirmed to be most impacted by automation now (McKinsey, 2020).

To have a gender balance in strong candidates for leadership positions within an organization, talent must be built and nurtured for opportunities to be provided to them. Not every individual will have the privilege of graduating from a prestigious business school and immediately offered a high-paying, high potential of career advancement job. Therefore, those starting their career in the lower-paid, lower-skilled roles offer the potential of eventually becoming leaders. The McKinsey report released before the COVID-19 pandemic presented some concerning findings around the impacts of losing women in the long-term talent pool.

There has been a greater impact on women because the need for unpaid care has increased drastically- children and elderly parents- and this responsibility has mostly fallen on women (McKinsey, 2020). The consequence of taking on this additional burden is that women’s unemployment is increasing quicker than in an average year, and this is even considering the different sectors in which men and women work (McKinsey, 2020). The same report goes on to explain that this additional family responsibility quantifies 1.5 to 2 hours of work per week for women (McKinsey, 2020). A larger share of women allocating more unpaid time to caring for their families will negatively impact labor-force participation rates and may also negatively impact their

ability to assume leadership positions (McKinsey, 2020).

A 2020 article from Forbes stated that the pandemic has impacted women to the point of regressing back to inequalities such as being the primary carers for children and having the expectation of managing the household given widespread job loss (Forbes, 2020). The article then explores how this will affect the future of equality, proposing that the pandemic is an opportunity to excel in our efforts for equity, and suggesting that the only way to achieve this is to have more women as leaders (Forbes, 2020).

IV. WOMEN AS INCLUSIVE LEADERS

Comparing a report by Deloitte in 2016 that outlines the traits of an inclusive leader, with the desirable leadership traits suggested in the 2019 McKinsey report “When Women Lead, Workplaces Should Listen”, there is an overlap between a number of these qualities, suggesting that women are more inclusive leaders (Deloitte, 2016; McKinsey, 2019). Both reports highlight collaboration, mentorship, and intellect as key traits that women possess as leaders, and that are necessary of inclusive leaders (Deloitte, 2016; McKinsey, 2019). This is important to highlight during a time when women are leaving the workplace at record rates, the pipeline for future female leaders is at risk, and a time when future success is depending on an organization’s ability to be more inclusive (McKinsey, 2020; McKinsey, 2020; McKinsey, 2021; Catalyst, 2020).

Another element to consider post COVID-19 is the presence of battling priorities for organizations. The recent calls to action for inclusion and diversity following the death of George Floyd in 2020 and the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement have been beneficial to gender equality too, however given the economic outlook after the pandemic, the question of whether companies will continue to invest as much in helping women get back to work remains. The best way of putting a focus on inclusion and diversity initiatives is to continue the push towards gender equality in leadership positions because women are more inclusive leaders (McKinsey, 2019). Organizations may be inclined to look at short term ways of boosting profitability once vaccination rollout is more complete, however with the effects of the already expected widening wage gap and loss of women in the workforce, dropping the ball on equality initiatives will be further detrimental. After the 2008 financial crisis, many organizations stopped investing in initiatives that were deemed not crucial to profitability, such as inclusion (McKinsey, 2020). The changing, post pandemic world requires inclusive leaders because of a growing social justice mindset. Organizations have an opportunity to invest in their talent pipeline and also provide employees struggling most with the fallout from the pandemic (such as women) the chance to work remotely until they can get back on their feet. Allowing remote work may also provide the opportunity to implement upskilling programs, which will attract talent into lower paid lower skilled jobs and empower employees to further their knowledge to enhance the overall company culture in the long term (McKinsey, 2020). It is crucial that action be taken on these initiatives in tandem with the mitigation of any economic fallout because this is the only

way that the economic fallout will be diminished.

It is equally important to highlight how female leaders have demonstrated their ability to lead under immense pressure throughout the pandemic. There have been dozens of women successfully leading countries and large organizations through this global crisis, arguably the most uncertain time of the last century.

V. THE WOMEN WHO LED US THROUGH COVID-19

Throughout 2020 and 2021, global leaders have been faced with the impossible task of balancing the well-being of their people and the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders in organizations as well as political leaders have faced the same crisis: how to ensure the safety of their people while keeping the growth of their economies on an upward or at least flat trend. The first few months of the pandemic proved to be the most critical decision time for health and wellbeing. Some leaders fared better than others and those who took proactive measures to mitigate impacts fared much better than those who stood back and hoped for the problem to solve itself. A great example of this is Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand. An article by Suze Wilson discusses that the main reason Ardern has seen so much success in controlling the COVID-19 outbreak in New Zealand is due to her effective and consistent communication throughout (Wilson, 2020). She argues that Ardern “is giving most Western politicians a masterclass in crisis leadership” (Wilson, 2020).

Another theory is that the nations that have fared best during the pandemic are led by women not because the leader is a woman, but because the nation was progressive enough to elect a woman as a leader (Croteau & Champoux-Paille, 2020). Therefore, it is important to consider that the nations that have fared the best possess the qualities that are typically associated with women (Croteau & Champoux-Paille, 2020). The main trait to consider is collaboration. Women are typically considered more collaborative than men because their ego is not an obstacle (McKinsey, 2019). Therefore, nations that possess this trait as a group would fare better in a global crisis because they would be more inclined to collaborate to find a solution and listen to those who are the experts instead of blindly following the “leader”.

A 2019 report by McKinsey that analyzed the benefits of bias training suggested that when women consider their own leadership traits and experiences, they can recognize the realities of their overall workplace culture (McKinsey, 2019). If a company is receptive to bias training, the report suggests that these sessions can help gauge how well the organization promotes effective leadership traits and can offer an understanding into where the company flourishes, as well as where it fails to foster an inclusive environment (McKinsey, 2019). Overall, companies can use this training not only to enhance the skills of the participants but also to improve the overall workplace culture (McKinsey, 2019). This can be tied back to the theory that the leaders who have seen the most success throughout the pandemic have found success not only because they are women, but also because the country that elected them appreciates the leadership characteristics of a woman and is therefore more progressive and open-minded,

compared to nations like the United States with Donald Trump leading based on how much he was inflating his ego that day. The country was already more receptive to collaboration and so the people will listen to their leader, who in turn is making decisions based on science and fact rather than trying to win another election.

By fostering an environment of mutual respect regardless of race and gender of the leader, and if the leader demonstrates transformational traits, everyone involved benefits. Employees will feel more valued and so will work harder for the benefit of the team. This will improve the overall culture of the workplace and allow for equal opportunities. This phenomenon is what we are seeing in the countries with female leaders during the pandemic.

VI. INCLUSION IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Women have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, however these impacts could be improved by allowing women to work remotely, as mentioned in the 2018 report by McKinsey. Given the social expectations remaining around the role of women, and the additional work they have as family caregivers, teleworking is advantageous in that women can avoid commuting to work, save time, and be at home if ever there is a family situation that urgently demands their attention. Instead of having to take time off work to stay home with a sick child, or for a snow day, they can potentially benefit from the flexibility of remote work.

The pandemic has pushed many companies to provide their employees the ability to work from home or any viable remote setting. Everyone has been confined to their own homes, they have been prevented from enjoying the full extent of life's pleasures, and it has put a magnifying glass on family life. Statistics Canada reports that "at the beginning of 2021, 32% of Canadian employees aged 15 to 69 worked most of their hours from home, compared with only 4% in 2016" (StatsCan, 2021). Some employees have been stranded in other countries around the world as borders have shut down, yet organizations have found ways to continue to be profitable in this climate. In fact, McKinsey released a report about the future of work after the COVID-19 pandemic and they found that "about 20 to 25 percent of the workforces in advanced economies could work from home between three and five days a week" (McKinsey, 2020).

The notion of inclusion has developed significantly in the last year, given we need to be more inclusive of each other's daily realities. The merging of home and work life has been incredibly difficult to balance, with children at home chatting with their parents during meetings, small workspaces, and lack of internet connection, among many other things that can cause some distraction. The companies that have been most understanding of the different realities faced by each employee during this pandemic are the ones that can look towards building a more inclusive workplace, allowing for reduced social divisions, and encouraging all employees to be their most productive (Catalyst, 2020). These organizations that continue to be understanding of their employees even after the pandemic, and allow more remote work, will be the ones that can offer women who have been adversely affected

by the pandemic a faster return to work, and therefore expand their talent pool for future leadership (McKinsey, 2020).

Inclusion in 2021 has evolved to now also signify to be mindful and inclusive of how each employee is most productive: "Hiring diverse talent isn't enough — it's the workplace experience that shapes whether people remain and thrive" (McKinsey, 2020). In her article "Inclusive Leadership Fosters an Inclusive Workplace Culture", Davis explains that unconventional workplace settings have been labelled "The Gig Economy" and were introduced by companies such as Uber, Lyft, and Airbnb (Davis, 2020, pp 12-15). These companies were disruptive to the existing "9 to 5" workday as they provided a new option to receive income with schedule flexibility. Davis uses these companies to suggest now that workers have been working outside of the office, organizations must continue to be inclusive of employee preference, which will lead to higher productivity (Davis, 2020, pp 12-15). This is what will make way for a more diverse workforce. Finding that diversity of talent now means having the open-mindedness to allow employees to have more say in how and where they work (Davis, 2020, pp 12-15). Prior to the pandemic, there existed a bias against those who preferred to work from home; they were seen as at a disadvantage against those who went in to have "face time" in the office. Allowing employees to work remotely and at hours that are more advantageous (when it can be permitted) means that companies can even seek talent in different cities, casting an even wider net on what it means to be inclusive (McKinsey, 2020).

It is however important to acknowledge that not everyone has enjoyed working remotely. Catalyst released a report that explores how some individuals struggled with remote work, emphasising that LGBTQ+ employees especially could find it difficult to share their homes on videoconference (Catalyst, 2020). Additionally, it was outlined that women and minorities could be more at a disadvantage due to limited home-office space and technology constraints, in addition to childcare obligations (Catalyst, 2020). This is where the disconnect currently exists and will cause a long-term negative impact on the future talent pool. Given the reality that women and minorities in lower-paid, lower-skilled jobs have been most impacted, it will be important for organizations to continue to offer the ability to work from home, and even more so once the pandemic is over (McKinsey, 2020). Women who have been forced to move outside of city limits and who will struggle to commute long distances for work will benefit the most from the ability to work remotely. Additionally, those who lost their jobs may have had to give up spots in daycares, which are difficult to obtain in the first place. This means that remote work will be key until they can find alternatives to caring for their own children in the day (McKinsey, 2020). Remote work will allow women to re-enter to the workforce faster and avoid any long-term negative impacts of the pandemic. Fostering inclusivity means understanding that every employee is facing different challenges, and new steps need to be taken moving forward (Deloitte, 2016).

VII. PAVING THE RIGHT WAY FORWARD

McKinsey found that even with the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to continue pushing for gender equality as this will help buffer economic fallout (McKinsey, 2020). They recall that the stagnation in equality numbers of the past 5 years could worsen significantly with the effects of the pandemic, and that women will ultimately have reduced economic security and benefits. The report explored the significant investment required in five key areas (“education, family planning, maternal mortality, digital inclusion, and unpaid care work”) to boost gender equality but found that the benefit is 6 times higher than the spending:

[the spending] could amount to \$1.5 trillion to \$2.0 trillion in incremental public, private, or household annual spending in 2025, or 1.3 to 1.7 percent of global GDP in that year. This is 20 to 30 percent more than what would be spent in a business-as-usual case in 2025 (as a result of rising population and GDP). Yet we found that the economic benefits of narrowing gender gaps are six to eight times higher than the social spending required.

It was also highlighted that having a more diverse workforce could foster the resilience needed to overcome the fallout of the global pandemic, therefore it is a key time to continue investing in gender equality (McKinsey, 2020).

McKinsey then proposes several actions that can be taken to limit the potential widening of the gender gap, and subsequent economic fallout. They suggest addressing the equity gap in unpaid childcare by having subsidised childcare or worker support programs, facilitating access to digital channels and devices given the accelerated automation as one consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and promoting funding for women entrepreneurs to allow for diverse ideas to boost the economy (McKinsey, 2020).

Some organizations already recognize this need. Chipotle’s chief diversity, inclusion, and people officer proposes that if companies upskill existing employees and promoting from within creates a more diverse workforce. She went on to explain that Chipotle puts much emphasis on their management pipeline as 70% of their workforce identifies as part of a diverse group, and 70% of those in management roles have come from the broader workforce (Fortune, 2021). The article went on to suggest that upskilling programs should be offered for free or at an affordable price to all employees, giving them enough time while working full time to complete the programs as a long-term solution for supporting company culture (Fortune, 2021).

Companies now need to push for diversity and inclusion more than ever because those who have been most affected are a potential pipeline for future talent. They must embrace the idea that every worker has a different way of working, which will maximize their productivity. As previously mentioned, McKinsey found that even before the pandemic, employees in lower-level roles felt less included in the workplace (McKinsey, 2020). To attract this talent and create loyalty, organizations must acknowledge the efforts needed for an inclusive workplace and apply them, such as allowing employees to work remotely if the employee wishes to, as it may give women a chance to settle back into their work behaviours before having children at home. It will take some time for these families to settle back into a former routine and

being inclusive to allow women to work from home during the transition will give them more opportunities to get back into the job market. Another McKinsey report about diversity in the workplace outlines the shortfall in the number of women of colour who are placed in roles lining them up for CEO positions (McKinsey, 2018). They are at a total disadvantage and usually twice more likely to be placed in “staff” roles, which are defined as roles that are not lined up for CEO roles in the report, also noting that “black women suffer a double burden of bias that keeps them from the uppermost levels of corporate leadership” (McKinsey, 2018). This is just one instance that illustrates the immense gap that still exists in giving equal opportunities to all in the workplace, and the potential diversity of talent and ideas that were being lost before the pandemic. With minorities and women being most affected, organizations will need to double efforts to stay the course for diversity and inclusion initiatives (McKinsey, 2021). Additionally, having more women in the workplace will allow for future women in leadership positions; they can be seen as more inclusive leaders, and this will help drive diversity initiatives.

Some organizations already recognize this need. Chipotle’s chief diversity, inclusion, and people officer proposes that companies upskilling existing employees and promoting from within creates a more diverse workforce (Quiroz-Gutierrez, 2021). She went on to explain that Chipotle puts much emphasis on their management pipeline as 70% of their workforce identifies as part of a diverse group, and 70% of those in management roles have come from the broader workforce. The article went on to suggest that upskilling programs should be offered for free or at an affordable price to all employees, giving them enough time while working full time to complete the programs as a long-term solution for supporting company culture (Quiroz-Gutierrez, 2021).

The glass ceiling may become a cement ceiling if actions are not taken now. Losing women in the workforce will remove long-term opportunities for new more inclusive leaders, which in turn will diminish prospects and talent for other women and minorities, therefore increasing the wage and gender gaps further (McKinsey, 2020; McKinsey, 2021). Organizations may feel inclined to focus on short-term goals, such as limiting any losses of profits once vaccine rollout is complete, and lockdowns are lifted. However, prioritizing short-term objectives is a more reactionary strategy and can have long-term consequences, such as a lack of talent for future leadership positions. Fostering inclusion and diversity is a long-term goal that can only be achieved through constant effort.

Given the pandemic’s accelerative effect on automation, the two best actions that an organization can take is to offer an internal upskilling program and to give employees access to digital channels for remote work. An upskilling program ensures a long-term leadership pipeline and creates a culture of loyalty within the organization. Having a strong workplace culture is essential to employee satisfaction and the long-term success of the company. offering the option of working remotely has not impacted profitability levels during the pandemic; many organizations saw their profits increase. Some workplaces believe that working together in the office builds team rapport, however finding a balance, and asking employees to come in 2 days a week instead of 5 would be a

“win-win”; the in-person relationships will continue to be built, and those who need to be home to re-adjust to a post-pandemic world will have more peace of mind to do so.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The theories of the glass cliff and the glass ceiling are not likened to glass because they are easily breakable and within reach, but because they are a window to missed opportunities, and prevent traction from climbing up once a woman begins to slip. If action is not taken now, the glass ceiling will no longer be breakable, and the only way for women to slide is down the cliff. In other words, these theories that reflect reality will be solidified to the point that women will feel the regressive effects for decades to come. It has been widely proven that women are selected to lead during times of crisis because of apprehension to disturb the status quo; men are given more leadership opportunities therefore they are believed to be better leaders. This is not true and the benefits of gender parity in leadership positions are clear; decades of studies have proven this. Women possess key inclusive leadership traits such as role modelling and drive to give opportunities to all that are imperative at a time like this, when it is necessary to help women back into the workforce with so many other elements at play, such as automation and remote work. To achieve this, a gender-balanced talent pool must be nurtured so that they can be ready for leadership opportunities, regardless of their gender or race. This was the reality before the COVID-19 pandemic; however, the global crisis has put organizations in a place where they must decide whether to invest and progress or focus resources elsewhere and regress.

Leaders in a post-pandemic world must be more inclusive to continue the progress towards gender equity in the workplace, which in turn will help organizations build a strong pipeline of future leaders who support the company culture. Organizations must push to implement the necessary initiatives such as upskilling programs, enabling remote work, and considering the family situations of many given the negative effects of the pandemic. Fostering an inclusive environment will lead to stronger workplace loyalty. By demonstrating this level of empathy at a time when it is most needed, companies can ensure that the existing efforts towards gender equality in the workplace are not lost, and the way towards inclusion and diversity can be paved. The efforts towards gender equality have been proven to boost global GDP and improve economies around the world. Without implementing the abovementioned required actions, women who struggle to gain employment after COVID-19 will have their opportunities severely limited. Profitability and growth depend on inclusivity; the companies that realize this will see the short and long-term advantages. Others will fall behind and leave the door open for those progressive enough to claim market share.

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