



Gender

3 Ways to Advance Gender Equity as We Return to the Office

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Illustration by Eleni Kalorkoti

As we plan the return to the workplace and think about what work might look like after the shutdown, leaders must remember gender equality and representation. The lockdown offers a unique opportunity to supercharge progress on gender equity by deliberately reworking policies and practices to usher in a new chapter in the history of work — one that is designed for men *and* women, particularly as family commitments come into play.

Before the pandemic, women did more unpaid work at home, were more likely to take time off from work to care for sick children, and to forego paid work to provide caregiving. Although many companies have implemented parental leave and flexible work arrangements to help, these accommodations generally are perceived to be for women alone. These perceptions fuel the motherhood penalty, reinforcing assumptions that women aren't as committed to paid work and are distracted by caregiving — biases that limit women's careers. These perceptions also stigmatize these programs for men, so fewer men fully use them.

But disruptions in work and household routines for a significant period of time, such as during the current crisis, can be instrumental in changing traditionally held gender norms. For example, research on parents who both take parental leave — a major long-term disruption to their typical work routines — found that these parents are more likely to maintain a more balanced and egalitarian approach to caregiving and household responsibilities over the long-term.

Consider this: Even when both partners are forced to work full-time from home, women still do more household chores, childcare, and homework oversight. And that was before the recent pandemic hit. Recent research suggests the additional burden of working from home while juggling child care, virtual schooling, and other household responsibilities is compounding stress in women's personal *and* professional lives. New evidence from Lean In reveals that one in four women say they are experiencing severe anxiety. More than half of all women are struggling with sleep issues. Far more women than men with full-time jobs and families say they have more to do than they can possibly handle.

Although most men may not be contributing their equal share to household chores, childcare, and home-schooling, they now have a first-hand *appreciation* of the challenges of balancing unpaid work with paid work. In a recent study on working parents, twice as many fathers as mothers described caregiving during the lockdown as extremely difficult

and 38% very strongly agreed that they should be doing more of the unpaid work at home.

Men are also gaining a new appreciation for the importance of connection, vulnerability, and empathy in their personal and professional relationships. Teleworking in the current crisis often starts with check-ins that create opportunities for providing emotional support, demonstrating authenticity, and sharing experiences with coworkers that build teamwork, trust, and work identity. Working fathers are also enjoying building relationships with their children and learning what it means to be an equal partner in terms of supporting their partner's career.

Finally, available and affordable childcare is critical for families *and* business. Nearly 80% of dual-career working parents used some form of paid childcare before the crisis, yet, during the lockdown, two-thirds of working mothers report being the sole caregiver for children.

Because men vastly outnumber women in senior leadership roles in most organizations, this is a golden opportunity for men-as-allies to purposefully leverage their newfound experience balancing teleworking and domestic partnership to truly move the needle on full gender equity. As organizational change agents, male leaders must demonstrate vision, courage, and genuine collaboration with women to rework policies, practices, and systems in order to create a new normal in our post-pandemic workplace, as well as in society more broadly.

Here are some recommendations to make this a reality:

Advocate for expanded and creative flexible work arrangements.

During this shutdown, more leaders are witnessing the benefits of more employees working remotely. A recent survey of chief information officers found that 71% agreed that a new appreciation for remote work arrangements will be a significant factor in their future plans for office space and technology staffing to support the new demand. Another study

found that 27% of dads would like more flexible work arrangements, and most working fathers agree that teleworking will provide women — especially mothers — more professional opportunities.

As you return to work, make flexible work arrangements the new normal. Change the modal expectation from the traditional five-day-at-work model to one or two days a week in the company office and the remaining days at home. Push back on traditional criteria for “face time” when evaluating employee performance. Genuine flexibility means encouraging employees to work where they are most productive. Flex-time and flex-locations are more likely to accommodate work and family schedules. And remember, when men advocate for these policies — and use them — they’re no longer perceived as “women’s” programs.

Keep working parents in mind.

Advocate for paid sick leave for all employees — and use it yourself! In our research, we found that when men modeled this behavior, it encouraged other men and women to feel comfortable using their maximum paid leave. Men as equal partners also have to do their fair share of taking children to the doctor or staying home with kids when they’re sick.

Advocate, too, for available and affordable childcare. This could involve off-site or co-op arrangements, benefits such as childcare vouchers, and even on-site care facilities (once they’re deemed safe to resume). Genuine gender balance and gender equity at work may be unattainable until top-rate childcare is accessible for everyone. Although organizations may be restricted or financially constrained right now and unable to provide as much childcare support as they’d like, partnerships in the community or with other companies may be smart options in the near-term. The federal government does this to some degree for its employees — albeit with a need for more.

Show off your family life.

When leaving work for children or family responsibilities, leave loudly. Don’t try to hide it. Too often men try to sneak out the back door or

silently sign off hoping no one will notice their absence. Normalize leaving work to meet your family obligations so that no one — including women you work with — is penalized or perceived in a negative light when they do the same. Encourage other men to openly prioritize their own commitments to partners and children. You can also do this when working remotely by announcing on your work collaboration and communication platform that you're logging off to take your child to the doctor or to attend a parent-teacher Zoom call.

And talk to your colleagues about your family. During the pandemic we've all learned that it's not only OK to talk about your family and domestic challenges, it's really powerful and meaningful to your team in building relationships and emotional connection. Continue these conversations when you return to work.

Crises are often catalysts for turning points in people's individual lives, and also for societies. The current pandemic will be another turning point, one that provides an opportunity to rework work in a way that disrupts traditional narratives and beliefs into new norms and values that make "work" work for everyone.



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