

# The Road to Recovery From the Pandemic:

## The Importance of Male Allies

There is no doubt that this ongoing COVID 19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on years of hard-won battles in gender equality and women's empowerment. It has been the 'perfect storm' for vulnerable women all over the world, and they have been disproportionately affected on more than one front since the pandemic began a few months back. Consider this:

- The industries that are the most female-dominated in terms of numbers<sup>1</sup> - retail, food & beverage, hospitality/accommodation, and administrative/support services to name a few – are also those that offer limited avenues for remote work and telecommuting options. They have also unfortunately been the hardest hit industries by the lockdowns. Hence the layoffs and retrenchments in these sectors have robbed the women the opportunity of paid work – even if they were not very high-paying and high growth industries<sup>2</sup> in the first place.
- A high proportion of the front-line care workers are women – and they have been fighting battles on many fronts. The stress from increased workload, the fear of contracting the virus and spreading it to their families, the grief over lost patients and colleagues all come at the cost of their mental and physical well-being.
- Women-led businesses form a high proportion of micro and small businesses in the informal sector, especially in ASEAN countries<sup>3</sup> and these are in the danger of being wiped-off in post-covid economies, leaving these women entrepreneurs without an option for a livelihood.
- The already high incidence of violence against women specifically domestic violence, also hit an all-time high in Singapore and across the world<sup>4</sup>, with the victims facing their ultimate nightmare of having to share a roof with their perpetrators with no option to escape the brutality due to the stay-home restrictions.
- It is well-known that globally, women traditionally shoulder three times the load on unpaid care work than men<sup>5</sup>; women are also most likely to forego work and career to take care of children. Even with both partners working, women shoulder more than their share of housework and care burden. According to an MSF survey<sup>6</sup>, an overwhelming 9 in 10 working women indicated that they did more caregiving and household chores, and over 97% of women cited housework and childcare as the main reasons for not being in the workforce.
- According to another survey<sup>7</sup>, even before the COVID 19 disruption, Singaporean women experienced a high level of unmanageable stress at work, which led them to neglect their physical

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<sup>1</sup> <https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Employment-Tables2019.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Manpower; Singapore Department of Statistics; McKinsey Global Institute analysis

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/SSD-Gender-FWE-report\\_0.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/SSD-Gender-FWE-report_0.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/coronavirus-more-cases-of-family-violence-during-circuit-breaker-police-to>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS\\_633284/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_633284/lang--en/index.htm)

<sup>6</sup> MSF Survey on Family and Work, Insight Series Paper No. 4/2017

<sup>7</sup> 2019 Cigna 360 Well-being Survey, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/sleep-deprived-singaporean-workers-among-most-stressed-globally-survey>

health more than men. The additional responsibilities brought about by the lockdown restrictions have only made these statistics worse for women - globally and locally.

The economies around the world will take years to rebuild and flourish.

As an important part of the economy, the private sector has a huge role to play in the all-round recovery and has the power to balance the scales for women in their own way. To quote the UN, 'the private sector has a responsibility to use its power, influence and resources to protect the rights and physical and mental well-being of employees, as well as to ensure long-term business recovery efforts restore economic stability.'

Herein lies the unique opportunity for the organisations in the private sector to 'right a few wrongs' that have stood in the way of women's advancement to the upper rungs of the corporate hierarchy over the last several years. The pandemic has brought about major structural changes in the way organisations work and their leaders can leverage on these to bring about a positive change in the mind-sets of their employees and permanently influence a more inclusive corporate culture.

### **Men as allies for gender equality at the workplace**

It is a fact that men vastly outnumber women in senior leadership roles in most organisations. As people with the power to influence gender parity, male leaders must demonstrate vision, courage, and genuine collaboration with women to rework policies and practices that disrupt traditional attitudes, narratives, and beliefs. This would help in levelling the playing field for men and women when it comes to work – professionally and personally.

#### a) Remove 'face-time' from the equation

For a start, the organisations and leaders should get over the culture of 'presenteeism' and 'face-time'<sup>8</sup> to evaluate employee productivity and must make flexible work arrangements the default norm. Genuine flexibility means encouraging employees to work where they are most productive. Studies on flexible work arrangements have largely concluded that working from home leads to better productivity and engagement.

A recent post-covid survey<sup>9</sup> found that one-third of employees in Singapore felt they were more productive working from home. The same study found that 35% felt their mental health has improved since working from home and were feeling less stressed. Hence flexi-time and flexi-place work arrangements would contribute towards a win-win scenario for organisational productivity and employee satisfaction.

This would go a long way in making sure that women who 'are needed in two places at once' won't be forced to choose between work and family commitments, while giving men the chance to share the unpaid care work equitably with their partners.

#### b) 'Normalise' usage of flexible work arrangements

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<sup>8</sup> <https://hbr.org/2012/02/my-manager-expects-me-to>

<sup>9</sup> <https://hrmasia.com/a-third-of-singaporeans-feel-more-productive-working-from-home/>

Although many companies have implemented flexible work arrangements<sup>10</sup> (FWA) and family-friendly leave policies, it is still considered primarily a benefit for female employees. These perceptions tend to stigmatise these programmes for men, resulting in very few men using these benefits.

The lockdown has brought about a first-hand appreciation in men of the challenges their partners face in balancing unpaid work (household chores/caregiving) with paid work (professional responsibilities). In many cases, the world-wide restrictions on business travel and wide-spread work-from-home norms have enabled men to take a more active role in the household chores or childcare, be it out of force or choice. As men see the important role that they play in supporting their partner's career and taking an active role in their children's lives, they will be more open to availing the parental leave/benefits that they had seldom taken advantage of before the pandemic disruption.

This is where the male leaders can lead by example - either by advocating for and availing of parental leave/family-specific benefits or by using flexiwork/time arrangement themselves – to demonstrate to their colleagues that these are not to be perceived as 'women's programs'.

The benefits of leaders 'walking the talk' are multifold:

- For one, it would ensure the wide-spread organisational buy-in and 'de-stigmatise' the FWAs and policies for the men.
- For the men, it would 'normalise' putting family ahead of the organisation when needed without the fear of being penalised.
- It would help relieve the stress/guilt that women feel when they are forced to take time off for family-care reasons, because 'everyone is doing it'.

c) Build deeper relationships

The pandemic has made it easier to talk about family and domestic challenges like never before; leaders can leverage this opportunity to develop deeper relationships with their employees and build stronger and more resilient teams. Having open channels of communication would make conversations about family and domestic responsibilities more gender neutral. This would also help create an all-round inclusive environment where women feel encouraged to air their ideas and opinions, confident that they will be 'heard' and feel valued. The feeling of contributing in a meaningful way in turn helps women overcome the 'imposter syndrome'<sup>11</sup>.

In conclusion, women represent the biggest opportunity for economic growth. In a full potential scenario in which women play an identical role in labour markets to men, as much as \$28 trillion could be added to global annual GDP in 2025<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, when leaders rebuild their businesses with a focus on gender equality, everyone – the organisations, economies and societies - wins.

Every cloud, however dark, has a silver lining, or three. As some wise women have said, "times of unprecedented crisis present unique opportunities for unprecedented action"<sup>13</sup> – these are those times and it would be a shame to squander this unique opportunity to empower women for the greater good.

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<sup>10</sup> Higher in the service sector industries at 62.8% and lower in the manufacturing sector at 42.7%  
[https://data.gov.sg/dataset/proportion-of-establishments-offering-formal-flexible-work-arrangements?resource\\_id=571b3bd5-3e81-49ce-98db-996ca7b69515](https://data.gov.sg/dataset/proportion-of-establishments-offering-formal-flexible-work-arrangements?resource_id=571b3bd5-3e81-49ce-98db-996ca7b69515)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/women-entrepreneurs/imposter-syndrome-women-careers/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/07/gender-equality-women-employment-covid19/>

<sup>13</sup>

<https://gracamachetrust.org/2020/06/18/times-of-unprecedented-crisis-present-unique-opportunities-for-unprecedented-action/>

*[United Women Singapore](#) is a self-funded charity. If you feel as passionate about our cause as we do, and would like to get involved, click [here](#) to find out how!*

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