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The Impact of COVID-19 for Mid-career Women Seeking Leadership Positions in the Workplace

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The Impact of COVID-19 for Mid-career Women Seeking Leadership

Positions in the Workplace

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By

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Abstract

This research explores ways women in their mid-career seeking leadership roles are being affected in the workplace by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is targeted to organizations and leaders committed to gender equity in their workplaces particularly as they are developing new policies in response to COVID-19. Additionally, this research benefits women generally by providing tools for navigating the system and seeking the potential positive outcomes in the workplace. This system includes: work environment, social status, organizational culture, political environment, and policies. This phenomenological study analyzes qualitative data through interviews. It also includes extensive research of peer-reviewed journal articles referencing historical aspects of gender-based biases' in the workplace, the effects that past pandemics, epidemics and world crises have had on marginalized populations, as well as current studies on how COVID-19 has impacted the workplace.

Keywords: women in leadership, COVID-19, discrimination of women, workplace discrimination, bias, gender bias, gender roles, leave of absence, gendered workplace, work hours, work flexibility

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Chapter 1: Introduction

While women in the United States have been recognized to lead as effectively as men (Eagly, 2007), they have only recently reached leadership roles in male-dominated industries such as business, law, politics, higher education and media (Campuzano, 2019, p. 438). Discrimination, including that based on gender, can undermine an individual's ability to be hired, promoted, compensated fairly and maintain employment. Throughout this proposal, the researcher will adopt the *American Psychological Association's* (APA, 2019) definition of discrimination: "Discrimination is the unfair or prejudicial treatment of people and groups based on characteristics such as race, gender, age or sexual orientation" (para.1).

The *Women in the Workplace 2020* report commissioned by McKinsey in partnership with LeanIn.org found progress toward gender parity over the prior five years to be slow moving, "Representation of women in senior-vice-president positions grew from 23 to 28 precent, and representation in the C-suite grew from 17 to 21 percent" (p.8). Lacking equal positions of leadership, women are often not able to advocate for their rights and needs from a position of power. Though many companies are investing millions of dollars into diversity and inclusion programs, the progress is slow. Heilman and Caleo (2018) claim that, "Although a holistic view of organizations might suggest that gender parity has been achieved, a segmented breakdown of professions, positions, and industries offers a far less favorable picture" (p. 275). For gender parity to be achieved, major cultural shifts need to happen inside and outside the workplace to adjust our cultural norms of gendered roles within families, communities and workplaces.

Since the end of 2019, the world has been experiencing major shifts from one of the largest health and economic crises in recent history. COVID-19 has and will continue to cause changes to the workplace for everyone, and yet it puts women in an increasingly vulnerable position. By one account, "Women's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable to this crisis than men's jobs" (Madgavkar, White, Krishnan, Mahajan, and Azcue, 2020, p. 2). These challenges are mainly attributed to barriers such as: inflexible scheduling, caregiving, and access to remote work. Cohen and Hsu (2020) discussed this possibility in a *New York Times* article:

> As the pandemic upends work and home life, women have carried an outsized share of the burden, more likely to lose a job and more likely to shoulder the load of closed schools and daycare. For many working mothers, the gradual reopening won't solve their problems, but compound them — forcing them out of the labor force or into part-time jobs while increasing their responsibilities at home" (para. 3).

Historical discrimination has been magnified by this crisis. Understanding bias and discrimination past and present is key to understanding gender equity in the workplace, and in turn creating diverse, healthy and effective organizations. As Howard and Ulferts (2020) note, "A welcoming climate and a corporate culture that values diversity ensure the maximization of the strengths and opportunities" (p. 71). It is to be noted that the researcher will adopt the *American Psychological Association's* definition of gender bias throughout this proposal: "Any one of a variety of stereotypical beliefs about individuals on the basis of their sex, particularly as related to the differential treatment of females and

males"(APA, n.d.). With changes in the functioning of workplaces, there is also an

opportunity to look at how to incorporate recent and often forced innovations into

organizational policy to produce positive side benefits resulting from the pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis started to impact life in the United States early in 2020 with

the first cases between January 21 and February 23, according the Center for Disease

Control (CDC, 2020, para. 1). As of September 2020, increased research studies looking

to understand how this pandemic will affect women specifically in the workplace were

being published. Many of these articles give data to backup initial theories put forth by

Kantamneni (2020) in the spring of 2020 positing that the pandemic would severely

impact marginalized populations (p.3). *The Washington Post* reported:

> In the wake of widespread closings of schools and day-care centers, mothers are
>
> struggling to return to the workforce. Mothers of children ages 6 to 17 saw
>
> employment fall by about a third more than fathers of children the same age, and
>
> mothers are returning to work at a much slower rate. This disparity threatens years
>
> of progress for women in the labor force (Long et al. 2020, para 12).

Similarly, *National Public Radio (NPR)* reported United States Labor Department

statistics that state, "Just in September, 865,000 women over 20 dropped out of the

American workforce compared with 216,000 men in the same age group" (Schneider et

al. 2020, para. 4). Another article looked at how Latinas were impacted specifically, "As

hundreds of thousands of women dropped out of the workforce in September, Latinas led

the way, leaving at nearly three times the rate of white women and more than four times

the rate of African Americans" (Horsley, 2020, para.6).

Historical studies have shown how bias and discrimination have been directed toward women (Hideg, & Wilson, 2020), the barriers for women entering leadership roles (Phipps & Prieto, 2020), and how dominant groups are effective change makers for workplace equity (Mattingly, 2018). This information could inform how these phenomena will be amplified by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and thus anticipate how those histories could materialize today.

This research is targeted to organizations and leaders committed to gender equity in workplace, particularly as they are developing new policies in response to COVID-19. The data collected and analyzed during this research would inform people, male and female, on how bias and discrimination can influence women's experiences in the workplace and their ability to advance into leadership roles. The research data will benefit women by educating them about gender equity and arming them with tools for navigating the workplace. Finally, the research will also examine positive outcomes that women have experienced from the changes to the work environment. Given the amplification of women's experiences in the workplace since the start of 2020, there is the possibility for greater exposure of inequity and bias that could create momentum for change.

Table 1: Stated Definitions

Author(s)	Publication date	Word/Phrase	Definitions
APA	2019	Discrimination	Discrimination is the unfair or prejudicial treatment of people and groups based on characteristics such as race, gender, age or sexual orientation
APA	n.d.	Gender Bias	Any one of a variety of stereotypical beliefs about individuals on the basis of their sex, particularly as related to the differential treatment of females and males.
Merriam Webster	n.d.	Equality	the quality or state of being equal.
Oxford Dictionary	n.d.	Equity	The quality of being fair and impartial.
Merriam-Webster	n.d.	#Metoo	a movement calling attention to the frequency with which primarily women and girls experience sexual assault and harassment.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to analyze qualitative data through interviews and extensive research of published journal articles, and gain understanding of the actions and policies that could both positively and negatively affect the advancement of women, mid-career, in a post COVID-19 workplace. Within this study, mid-career will be generally be defined as referred to by U.S. Office of Personnel Management. "A mid-career professional is someone with more than 10 years of professional experience… If you look at a professional career as roughly 35 to 40 years, you could reasonably

consider a mid-career professional as being in years 10 through 25" (Kokemuller, 2018, para. 2). The analysis of the data for the study will lead to tools to guide organizations and empower women in a changing landscape.

Research Questions

The intent of this study is to identify how women are experiencing workplace shifts that have resulted from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and for the researcher through reporting on the data collected to make recommendations based on these experiences to employees and employers. The following specific research questions will be studied.

Central Question: What actions and policies could positively and negatively affect advancement into leadership roles for mid-career women in a post COVID-19 workplace?

> Subquestion #1: How do women explain their experiences in the workplace since the onset of COVID-19?
>
> Subquestion #2: Are there types of gender discrimination and/or bias women have experienced since the onset of COVID-19?
>
> Subquestion #3: How do women expect COVID-19 to affect their personal and professional lives in the future?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This section offers a review of scholarly literature relevant in five distinct areas to the study of how COVID-19 could affect mid-career women to advancing in the workplace including: previous research in the fields of gender equity in the workplace,

women's path to leadership, the gendered impact historically of past global health crises, the current literature relating to COVID-19, and an examination of interventions that organizations have been implementing. This review of literature reveals some areas of positive outcomes for women during the COVID-19 pandemic. However the data also shows point to tremendous challenges for women and the loss of previous gains in workplace equity. This review demonstrates how past theories and research inform women's current challenges.

Gender Equity in the Workplace

Extensive research has been conducted on bias and discrimination directed toward women in the workplace (Hideg & Wilson, 2020), the barriers for women entering leadership roles (Phipps & Prieto, 2020, Campuzano, 2019), and how dominant groups (meaning those with power, status and privilege) could be effective change makers for workplace equity (Mattingly, 2018). Review of the literature on gender gaps in hiring and gender discrimination in the workplace suggests there is value in having gender parity by increasing the effectiveness of organizations and goal achievement of groups (Goryunova, Scribner & Madsen, 2019; Heilman & Caleo, 2018; Hideg, & Wilson, 2020). Ultimately the need for gender parity is not just about equality but is also essential for success. Mckinsey & Company (2020) found in their 2019 corporate diversity report that, "Companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 25 percent more likely to have above-average profitability than companies in the fourth quartile—up from 21 percent in 2017 and 15 percent in 2014" (Dixon-Fyle, Dolan, Hunt, and Prince, 2020, para. 5). Words that are used often in this proposal are equality and

equity. The words are often used interchangeably yet have different meanings. In an effort to clarify the intent of the usage the definitions are provided. Equality is "the quality or state of being equal" (Merriam Webster, n.d.), or in other words the same. Equity then is defined as, "The quality of being fair and impartial" (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.).

Femininity vs. Masculinity

A dominant theme within the research on how gender presents itself in the workplace is tied with the view of femininity. Femininity is often negatively associated with weakness and caregiving as well as gentle leadership, and being more communal and accommodating (Eagly, 2014). This is in contrast with masculine traits being associated with strength, competition, and leadership (Baskerville-Waskins & Smith, 2014; Eagly, 2007). With the historical prevalence within organizational culture connected to male dominance, men and masculinity have become closely tied to symbolize leadership. There is a tendency to favor similar leadership styles and historical culture. People who embody those traits are more likely to rise within male-dominated organizations, thus making it difficult to motivate a change in culture. Women in these environments bear the responsibility to then adapt and adopt these cultural values and norms to advance. (Campuzano, 2019, p. 442-443).

Heilman and Caleo (2018) researched the lack of fit model by which they looked at how bias fosters the notion that women are not cut out for "male-typed" jobs which lead to negative performance expectations. They define their viewpoint as following:

Central to the model is a consideration of gender stereotypes—preconceptions

regarding what men and women are like. Gender stereotypes portray men as

agentic and women as communal (Haines, Deaux, & Lofaro, 2016). Whereas men

are thought to be assertive, bold, and aggressive, women are thought to be

relationship-oriented, nurturing, and kind. These stereotypical depictions also tend

to be oppositional, with both women and men viewed as lacking what is thought

to be most prevalent in the other sex. Thus, women are seen not only as

communal but also as not agentic. (pp. 726-727)

These attitudes become self-perpetuating, creating bias and validation of the status quo.

Heilman and Caleo (2018) found that due to negative associations with femininity,

women are often seen as having lack of commitment, drive, and are misaligned to be an

ideal candidate for male-typed positions (p.727). They found this to be true in working

class and white-collar roles. In both cases the male-typed positions were higher paying

and could lead to leadership roles with higher levels of power, as opposed to the female-

typed positions (p.732).

Motherhood and Caretaking

In addition to the gendering of roles within the workplace it is also helpful to look

at some of the roots of gendering being a cultural norm. Motherhood is intimately

connected to the challenges for women in the workplace. The literature frequently

references the "motherhood penalty". The motherhood penalty is defined by Kelly et al.

(2020), as " a loss of human capital when women become mothers and subsequently take

time off work, divide their attention between their jobs and home, and make other

potentially detrimental career decisions based on their children" (p.1). *NPR* reporter

Pallavi Gogoi (2020) explains how the gender pay gap is interwoven with this problem

because women make 82 cents for every dollar that a man makes, it is a clear economic

choice for couples who take a step back for parental responsibilities. As women gain

higher levels of education and incomes, the motherhood penalty increases. Additionally,

mothers often take leave time or reduce their hours at the same time that they are gaining

traction in their careers. This in turn gives men extra opportunity to continue their

careers, get promoted and increase their earns, the "dad premium" (para. 13).

Perceptions of Family Leave

Recent studies have examined the association between gender and parental leave,

particularly as a result of COVID-19. With schools and daycare centers closed, parents

are torn between being an active employee and caring for their children. Weisshaar

(2018) found previously that both men and women who opted out of work to care for

family, as opposed to leaving the workplace due to a job loss, are heavily disadvantaged

when reentering the workplace. This research found that this was due to employers

prioritizing career and work obligations in opposition to the priority of family life (pp.

55-56). In recent years the labor market has influenced employers to push for long hours

of service, while also remaining connected through devices. In a post COVID-19 world

this concept becomes more complex with the potential for employers sorting candidates

in this way. Penalizing parents for taking leave will then keep them from fully

participating in the workforce. COVID-19 will likely test this cultural norm. Misty

Heggeness of the U.S. Census Bureau reported on this trend and how it could erode

inequity in domestic leave for parents. Heggeness analyzed data on fathers living with school-aged children in 2020. She found that, "50% more of them were not actively working this fall compared with a year ago. This includes fathers who are not working and not looking for work, and fathers who might have taken sick leave or administrative leave or were on vacation" (Hsu, 2020, para.17).

Weisshaar (2018) also found that prior to COVID-19 women were opting out of employment primarily due to inflexibility of workplaces and the inability to adequately satisfy both "intensive jobs and intensive parenting" (p.53). With the likely increase of remote work opportunities, the researcher looked at how COVID-19 may actually increase the level of flexibility through remote work for parents who might otherwise opt out of work for a period of time.

Rudman and Mescher (2013), conducted a study on the family leave phenomenon to compare the utilization of negative employee stigma next to felinity bias to predict the likelihood of negative outcomes for men who ask for family leave (p.325). Through a series of qualitative research including volunteer experiments, they found that men experienced an increase in the perception of negative feminine traits like being considered "weak and uncertain" (p.322) and lower on masculine traits like being "competitive and ambitious"(p.322) when they requested a family leave. Thus, these men failed to adequately display the characteristics of the ideal worker. Additionally, they found that being a male advocate for gender equality can also be seen as having a higher level of femininity (p.325). Thus the researchers questioned if tactics like gender neutral

policies could help reduce this stigma around leave for men (p.323). Heggeness believes

the cultural correction should be based in the negative association with femininity:

> Gender inequality in the workforce is driven in part by similar forces in the
>
> domestic sphere. Far more mothers than fathers interrupt or scale back their
>
> careers to care for young children and manage the household. Eroding or
>
> eliminating the imbalance on the home front will likely lead to greater equality in
>
> the labor market" (Hsu, 2020, para. 16).

Many fathers have had increased exposure to and action within, domestic responsibilities

with the onset of COVID-19. Perhaps this could help shift gender roles that are a barrier

to equality for women in the workforce.

Power and Entitlement

Mattingly (2018) in her dissertation research developed the theory that men, being

in the position of power, are essential advocates to change cultural bias toward women.

Mattingly observed that women are often put in the position of having the responsibility

for increasing gender diversity. However, without equality within positions of power, it is

as important to train men in ways to increase gender parity and to understand the inherent

value of parity. Mattingly (2018) developed and tested a training program, "Men as

Allies," to research the impact of gender equity training to shift norms (p.28). She found

high levels of interest in her training, as workplaces were looking at accelerating their

gender equity efforts with the spotlight on the #Metoo movement (p. 82). #Metoo is

defined by *Merriam-Webster* as: a movement calling attention to the frequency with

which primarily women and girls experience sexual assault and harassment (Merriam-

Webster, n.d.). She concluded that positive advances were obtained regardless of

participant motivation. Additional research could include combining this data with an

experiment to see how perceptions toward femininity were explained by these male

participants in Mattingly's training (p. 82). This could test whether perceptions shifted as

male participants gained an interest in gender equality in their workplace. Is there a

critical threshold or males who go through this type of training to cause the workplace

culture to shift?

Rehmann (2019), in her thesis, sought to research how benevolent sexism

opposed to hostile sexism can have negative effects on career advancement and the self-

esteem of women. Rehmann uses the following definition:

Benevolent sexism views women with a superficially positive attitude.

Benevolent sexism refers to a positive orientation towards women that portrays

women as admirable for their unique feminine features, while simultaneously

deeming women weak and, by consequence, dependent on men for protection and

provision [Glick et al., 2004; Eagly, Mladinic, & Otto, 1991] (p.3).

The results of her study showed that benevolent sexism in the workplace negatively

impacts women's affect and behavior. Benevolent sexism was also negatively impacting

female self-esteem. Benevolent sexism is a tool to keep women from advancing within

the workplace and ultimately has negative outcomes for groups where it is present.

During a global health crisis, this research will offer an important opportunity to

understand the different, sometimes masked, sexism that can be present in the workplace,

and how this type of sexism may be impacting policies, staff reorganizations, and procedures.

Hideg and Wilson (2020) explored how discussions of the inequity of marginalized groups often causes fear in the privileged and powerful. "Reminding people about past injustice against a disadvantaged group (e.g., women) can invoke social identity threat among advantaged group members (e.g., men) and undermine support for employment equity (EE) policies by fostering the belief that inequality no longer exists" (Hideg & Wilson, 2020, p.176). This then undermines the ability to create progress, due to the fear of loss from those who sit with power. Men react with denial that there is still gender discrimination today. The efforts to promote equality then backfire. "Social identity theory [Tajfel & Turner, 1986] suggests that people derive a sense of identity and self-worth from their membership in different social groups [e.g., gender, ethnicity) and that they are highly motivated to maintain and protect positive images of their social identities" (Hideg & Wilson, 2020, p.178). This theory relates back to Mattingly's theory that men are essential in moving the needle on gender equality, as well as with Rudman and Mescher (2013) who found that men who advocate for women are seen as embodying femininity, thus incentivizing holding up the gendered norms of men being strong and women being weak (p.324). Thus, until men (or the significant other of females being impacted) become personally affected by gender inequity there will remain little motivation to change the culture.

Manne (2020) examines how women are systematically discriminated against through male entitlement. She argues that as a culture Americans are comfortable with

seeing women reach certain levels of power. However, once a woman seeks the highest

levels, they will, in turn be seen with negative attributes and ultimately, as power hungry:

> Social psychologists have speculated that there's something about women who
>
> seek the highest positions of power and the most masculine-coded authority
>
> positions that people continue to find off-putting. In one study, hypothetical
>
> female politicians were described as running for the Senate experienced little
>
> gender bias until they were explicitly portrayed as power-seeking-in which case
>
> gendered backlash was striking…They speculate that similar penalties may apply
>
> to women seeking more humdrum positions of power-for example, as a boss or a
>
> manager-they are perceived as highly masculine-coded. (p.163)

The dominant theme of gender bias being held with negative views of femininity,

leads to the question of how, during this extraordinary time, COVID-19, might spark

cultural change or further imbed past discrimination. Will men need to start to fill more of

the childcare and domestic responsibilities which could shift attitudes about men's

responsibilities with their families? Will COVID-19 force the reevaluation of gender

roles or further ingrain them?

Women's path to leadership

The story of the career trajectory for men and women, the path toward leadership

starts early in life. Fitzsimmons et al. (2013) researched how gender impacts career

growth through a number of phenomena. In childhood, boys and girls alike observe

gender roles within their family and are likely to endorse similar gendering throughout

their lives (p. 246). Children are also unequally encouraged to take risks in their play

based on their gender, which in turn inhibits their ability to build confidence and self-

esteem. Fitzsimmons et al. illustrates how, successful male and female CEOs found their

ways to leadership through different means:

> Perhaps the most obvious example of proxy capital development in childhood was
>
> self-efficacy, which males acquired through their fathers, their leadership roles in
>
> team sport and other risky childhood play… Self-efficacy for the female
>
> respondents was acquired from female family members, overcoming adversity
>
> and participation in family small business (p. 259).

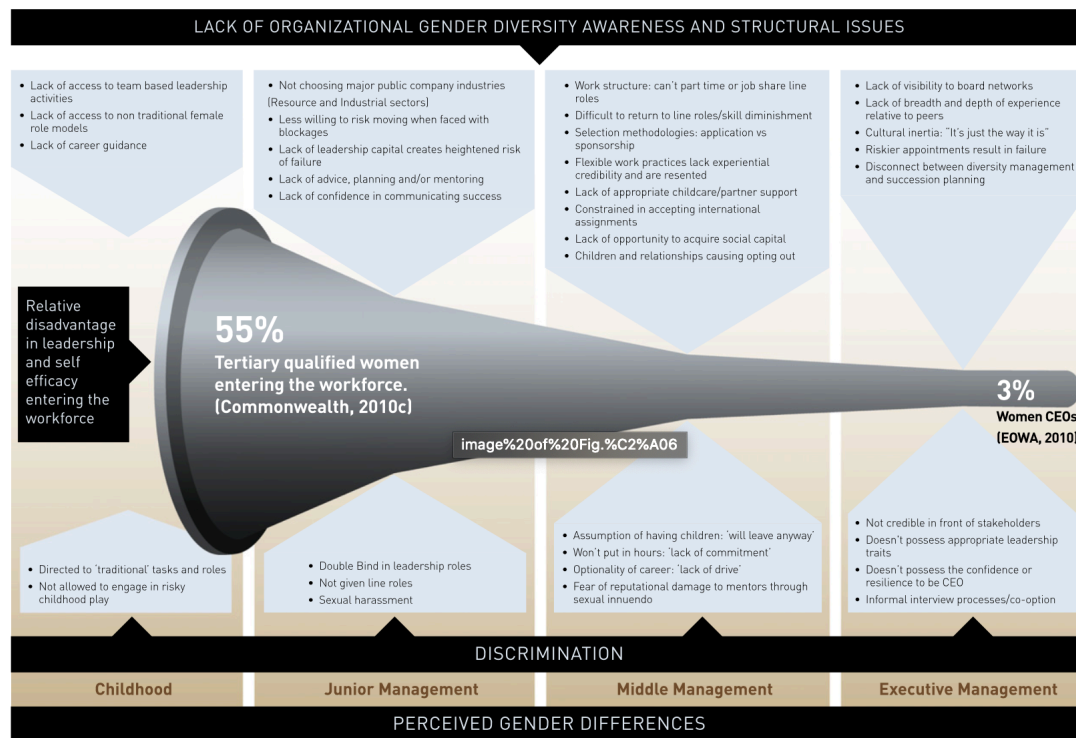## CAUSES AND TIMING OF GENDER DISPARITY IN CEO ROLES

Figure 1
Causes and timing of gender disparity in CEO roles.

Note: From Fitzsimmons, T., Callan, V., & Paulsen, N. (2013) Gender disparity in
the C-suite: Do male and female CEOs differ in how they reached the top? *The
Leadership Quarterly, 25,* 262.

Fitzsimmons et al. (2013) also discusses that once in the workforce women often aren't able to acquire social capital in the office due to the inequitable division of domestic labor. Those who are able to be available for long and unpredictable hours are therefore benefited (p. 246).

Gender Barriers in Professional Development

When Fitzsimmons et al. (2013) examined the timeline of career development for women they argued there were specific perceived gender barriers during each phase of development (childhood, junior management, middle management and executive management). In childhood they argue that girls lack access to nontraditional female role models, career consulting, are directed away from team based leadership activities, and activities that could pose risk in favor of activities that reinforce traditional roles. Once they move into a career, women are less likely to choose to work for industries with major public companies. They also find themselves lacking leadership capital which increases the feeling that there is opportunity for failure. Similarly, women do not have equal access to mentoring and career planning advice, and haven't built the confidence to show off their successes. Finally, women at the beginning of their careers are not offered roles that have clear lines to leadership positions; they are often given two irreconcilable demands in leadership assignments and contend with sexual harassment (p. 262).

Further, once in their mid-career, Fitzsimmons et al. (2013) find the pressures and constraints of the workplace structure on women increases with the perceptions surrounding family. Women find that roles with a line to leadership positions have inflexible structure and interruptions to a career, such as a leave of absence for maternity

leave, make it difficult to return to line roles. Flexible work schedules are perceived as having less experiential credibility and are resented. Women also tend to lack childcare and support from their partners in domestic responsibilities. There can also be barriers to accepting international opportunities. This implies that there are discriminatory beliefs related to having children and partners which can result in women opting out of the workplace. Ultimately, women are seen as lacking commitment, and drive while continuing to contend with sexual harassment (p. 62).

Finally, Fitzsimmons et al. (2013) moves to examine the challenges for women entering executive management. They are said to lack the network to corporate boards, the breadth and depth of experience of their peers, and encounter corporate disconnect between diversity and inclusion efforts and succession planning. Women are discriminated against because they are not seen as having leadership traits, and are often left out of informal hiring practices for leadership positions. (p. 262).

The research of Fitzsimmons et al. allows a connection to the focus of this research. In a study that was published in 2013, several of these barriers directly correlate with what the data has said regarding the challenges that women are facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This illustration of the path for women's careers, particularly those in mid-career, leads to further interest in understanding how this group will be affected in a crisis that has closed schools, and childcare facilities, and forced many to work from home. When Fitzsimmons et al. published their research in 2013 they noted that the percentage of tertiary qualified women is 55% of those entering the workforce which then ultimately leads to just 3% of women as CEOs (Fitzsimmons, et al., 2013, p. 262).

This data points to a needed disruption in the pipeline to leadership roles for women to achieve gender equity.

The Glass Ceiling and Broken Rung

The *Women in the Workplace 2019* survey was conducted by *LeanIn.org* and *Mckinsey & Company*. In the report, Thomas, Cooper, Konar, Bohrer, and Mohsenin (2019), differentiate between the glass ceiling and the broken rung:

> The "glass ceiling" a term introduced more than 40 years ago refers to an invisible, systemic barrier that prevents women from rising to senior leadership. But contrary to popular belief, the glass ceiling is not the biggest obstacle to women's progression. It is actually at the first step up to manager or the "broken rung" (p. 10).

The report makes a case for the power of the broken rung. If women were promoted and/or hired into manager positions early in their career they would be able to move up similarly to men into leadership positions. The *Women in the Workplace* (2020) report states that, "If women are promoted and hired to first-level manager at the same rates as men, we will add one million more women to management in corporate America over the next five years" (p.3) This brings more women through the pipeline that are considered to have the skills and experience to continue to be promoted.

This research relates to two key areas of this study. First, it is related to the previous acknowledgement of the motherhood penalty and the father premium. Fitzsimmons et al. connects as Gogoi (2020) did that women who are reaching middle management as their careers are steadily advancing find themselves at a crossroad where

at same point they encounter the barrier within the parental responsibilities. Additionally,

Marianne Schnall (2020) reports that COVID-19 has impacted women in executive level

positions and caused them to either leave the workplace or cutback on their roles. Despite

the fact that this study is focused on women in their mid-career, it is important to

acknowledge women in executive roles also impact the pipeline for women below them

through mentorship, representation and sponsorship (Schnall, 2020, para. 7).

Past global health crises

Wenham et al. (2020) studied the gendered impact of COVID-19 from a global

perspective. They state that women are more likely to be working in essential positions

and in healthcare at higher levels. This not only increases exposure levels but also makes

women positioned to be essential voices on outbreaks and finding local trends. Thus, the

need for women in leadership positions during times of crisis is integral. Globally, they

also found that since women often have a lack of power in politics and business, their

needs generally are not considered. The researcher gives the example of the Ebola

outbreaks during which supplies for reproductive and sexual health were shifted to meet

emergency needs. There then was a rise in maternal mortality (p.847). The uneven

distribution of power can affect women across the global in every aspect of life. This

relates to this research in that it will specifically look at how the needs of women in the

workplace are being met, identifying outcomes for workplaces and noting the distribution

of power from participants in the study.

The impacts of COVID-19

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) released a technical brief titled-

COVID-19:A Gender Lens. It noted that, due to gender norms men were less likely to

seek healthcare during this crisis not wanting to be seen as weak, thus extending the time

of diagnosis and treatment of the virus. Connecting this theory of how men are seen

within the social construct as breadwinners, they may feel greater pressure to work with

the risk rather than face economic hardship by staying home. This, in turn, could create

challenges for families including the unnecessary spread of COVID-19 when not

diagnosed (p.5).

The economic downturn related to COVID-19 could have different gender-based

outcomes than health crises in the past. Alon et al.(2020) have said that men usually lose

employment at higher rates during a recession. In this case, they are seeing that social

distancing has impacted female-dominated positions at a greater rate and added

additional responsibilities for women when childcare and schools are not open. Thus,

women are losing or leaving employment at a higher rate. However, they are expecting

more flexible work arrangements for employees as a result of COVID-19, and that social

gender norms will be challenged due to men in some cases becoming the primary

household member to manage childcare (pp.1-2).

An early article by Neeta Kantamneni (2020) was released in June 2020. The

article examines the impact of COVID-19 on marginalized populations and made some

astute predictions. Kantamneni anticipated that women who can work from home will be

expected to shoulder the majority of the household and childcare responsibilities.

Additionally, considering the income inequality between men and women, there would be

an expectation that there will be an increase of women putting careers aside to prioritize the household needs. This then could mean that COVID-19 will create a change with the satisfaction levels for women with their work and/or household responsibilities (p.3).

Kantamneni's theories were shown to be true as the pandemic continued and studies were released. At the end of September 2020, *The Washington Post* reported, "In the wake of widespread closings of schools and day-care centers, mothers are struggling to return to the workforce. Mothers of children ages 6 to 17 saw employment fall about a third more than fathers of children the same age, and mothers are returning to work at a much slower rate. This disparity threatens years of progress for women in the labor force"(Long et al. 2020, para 12). Similarly, *NPR* reported Labor Department statistics that, "Just in September, 865,000 women over 20 dropped out of the American workforce compared with 216,000 men in the same age group (Schneider et al. 2020, para. 4). In consideration of the ability to return to work, "Black women are facing the largest barriers to returning to work, data shows, and have recovered only 34 percent of jobs lost in the early months of the pandemic. They are among the most likely to work in low-paying service-sector jobs, which have been slow to rebound at a time when it is still a major health risk to be around others"(Long et al. 2020, para 32).

Women at all levels within organizations are being impacted by the pandemic. Losing women who are in middle management reduces the already smaller pool of leadership-tracked employees. Losing women from the workplace who have already attained leadership roles has different and concerning effects on women's path to equity. In The 2020 Women in the Workplace report LeanIn.org described this phenomenon.

Over 50 percent of senior-level women say they consistently take a public stand

for gender and racial equity at work, compared to roughly 40 percent of senior-

level men. And they're more likely to mentor and sponsor other women: 38

percent of senior-level women currently mentor or sponsor one or more women of

color, compared to only 23 percent of senior-level men. (Thomas et al., 2020, p.

25)

Caretaking and domestic responsibilities have been shown as a primary area of stress for

families and women again and again are shown as taking on a greater portion of that

responsibility.

Collins, Landivar, Ruppanner and Scarborough (2020) studied the gender gap as it

relates to work hours. They found that in families with young children, mothers reduced

their hours four to five times as much as fathers did. This leads then to a growth of

20%-50% in the gender gap in work hours (p.2). Some have theorized that with increased

exposure to the invisible labor of childcare and domestic work, men would take on some

of the burden. Collins et al. found virtually no change in the number of work hours for

men in the study (p.3-4).

Similarly, the concern of women losing ground within their careers can be seen

through a juxtaposition with male progress. A study done by Qualtrics and Boardlist

which found that men were receiving promotions at a much higher rate than women:

34% of men with children at home say they've received a promotion while working

remotely, while only 9% of women with children at home say the same. 26% of

men with children at home say they've received a pay raise while working

remotely, while only 13% of women with children at home say the same. 29% of

men with children at home say they've taken on additional leadership while

working remotely, while only 10% of women with children at home say the same

(Rogers, 2020, para 23-25).

Women in their mid-career will feel these effects for the remainder of their careers further

exacerbating a problem that existed prior to COVID-19. Collins et al. (2020) remarked on

this specifically, "If women scale back their work hours but men do not in the pandemic's

aftermath, future merit-based opportunities and pay raises may disproportionately benefit

men whose work commitments remained high during the pandemic" (p. 7).

Reports on interventions in the workplace

A number of articles have been written about how organizations have adopted

policies and processes to accommodate and support employees during the many

challenges that COVID-19 brings to employees.

McGregor (2020) for the *Washington Post* discussed how organizations are

adapting their benefit plans during this 2020 cycle to meet the needs of staff. "A survey

by the Business Group on Health, an advocacy group that represents large employers,

found that for 2021, 53 percent of its members plan to expand virtual care options, while

36 percent plan to expand access to mental health services" (McGregor, 2020, para.5).

With the increase of telehealth access available, organizations like the Expedia Group are

offering access to online therapy platforms and mental health providers. Similarly,

McGregor added that there are employers who are starting to pay for couples therapy,

understanding that more time at home can create increased conflict (para. 15). One of the

more creative solutions was from the Expedia Group who offered employees with

children the use of the corporate IT help desk for technical issues in remote learning

(para.23). This solution utilizes available bandwidth for one group of IT employees while

having other staff members maintain productivity and reduce frustration with reduced

interruptions from children.

Gallup interviewed 100 members of the CHRO Roundtable, an organization that

includes chief human resources officers from more than 650 of the largest companies in

the world. The interviews were intended to gather data on how these organizations were

responding to COVID-19. Policies and procedures that directly impacted employee

wellbeing included items such as increasing sick leave or paid time off, suspending

punishment for time off of any kind, allowing unlimited unpaid time off, communicating

best practices for protecting against COVID-19 and adjusting schedules due to school

closures and building occupancy (Emond & Maese, 2020, para.12).

In a study on employee engagement during periods of working from home and

lockdown as a result of COVID-19, Chanana and Sangeeta(2020) reported a number of

tactics that they learned organizations were enacting:

Many companies nowadays are developing numerous employee engagement

practices like virtual team meet-ups, virtual learning and development, conducting

weekly alignment online sessions, webinars with industry experts, and also

webinars for anxiety and stress, online team building activities, online family

engagement practices, brainstorming, apology, and appreciation online session,

shared content such as TED Talks, online books, online courses, live sessions for

new-skill training, online communication exercise, online sharing best practices

of maintaining health and hygiene, digital classrooms training modules, e-learning

modules, online guidance for exercise and meditation, online recognition and

acknowledgment of employees, online employee feedback, short online game

session, virtual challenges and competitions, 5 minutes of informal talk, entire

team gathers over video conference for lunch, online counseling sessions, and

social interactions in the virtual office (p. 6).

Deficiencies of Current Studies

While there is some reporting on employee benefits and engagement strategies,

the literature lacks studies to help understand how to move forward in businesses, to re-

engage employees from marginalized populations, to return to pre-COVID-19 levels of

workplace diversity and then surpass it. Ellingund et al. (2020) for McKinsey studied

how employers could respond to the current needs of diverse employees. They made the

important acknowledgment that the challenges that will lie ahead for businesses will

require the highest levels of creativity and innovation. Diversity is a key component to a

work environment that breeds these results. "The qualities that characterize diverse and

inclusive companies—notably innovation and resilience—will be crucial as companies

recover and transition to the next normal" (para. 10). Thus, an area for future research

would be studying strategies to ensure that when moving forward there are diversity

efforts, including female representation in leadership positions and accounting for what

has been lost in order to rebuild the pipeline for women to higher level leadership

positions.

In conclusion, a number of trends were identified in cultural views of gender that are likely to arise in this research looking at the effects of COVID-19 on women in the workplace. There is deeply rooted bias connecting femininity with attributes perceived as negative and viewing masculinity as positive. Aspects of hiring, leadership development, and policy development all appear to have roots in gender bias. Given the reported trajectory of women's career growth, those in their mid-career align with the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has created and are likely to reinforce historic gender bias. Given the massive changes over a significant yet still undetermined amount of time, COVID-19 will likely spur changes to culture and workplaces that will impact men and women differently. After reviewing past research, it is clear that this research will find troubling results, bright spots and ultimately, strategies for employers, employees and policymakers to utilize.

Overview

There are substantial studies on historic workplace gender bias and discrimination. These circumstances have proven to challenge women's ability to reach gender equity in the workplace, presenting compounding obstacles throughout their careers. Women have been led, through culture and the systems of education, to female-typed jobs and generally lacked significant representation in positions of power to advocate for gender parity. COVID-19 is being reported as reinforcing historic discrimination and bias through the lack of childcare, assumed caretaking and domestic responsibilities, and the questioning of women's leadership ability. Conversely, men have been largely unaffected in their work hours, pay and ability to be promoted. The literature

has shown there have been successful efforts in workplace interventions to support

women during COVID-19. Creative solutions and commitment to equity will be essential

for women, but also for the overall strength of the economy by having a full workforce.

As this pandemic continues, additional research will lead to increased understanding of

the narratives and the implications of this crisis on women in the workplace.

Chapter 3: Research Method

To examine the gendered effects of COVID-19 in the workplace, this study

utilizes the qualitative method approach of phenomenological research design.

Phenomenological research design is where "The researcher describes lived experiences

of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants. This description

culminates in the essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all

experienced the phenomenon" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13). This type of research

is usually conducted through interviews, which were utilized in this study. Interviews

offer extensive data collected through a small group of participants, giving opportunity

for open-ended answers on lived experience and the ability for the researcher to request

further information as needed. "Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe

behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to

interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate" (Merriam

& Tisdell, 2016, p. 108). The participants included women who were in their mid-career,

living in the United States, and who were working with consistency between March 2020

and March 2021. The researcher sought to have diverse representation of participants

through the types of organizations and fields they worked in as well as racial diversity.

Data Collection

Data was collected starting in February 2021, once the researcher gained approval

from the University of Southern Maine Institutional Review Board (IRB). Data was

collected through semi-structured interviews including the primary research questions as

well as probing questions as necessary. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) refer to aspects of

semi-structured interviews which include: flexibility within the structured line of

questions yet meeting required sets of questions that tie to the study's central research

question (p. 110). The research includes approximately ten in-depth interviews which

were approximately an hour in length. Groenewald (2004) quoted both Boyd and

Creswell agreeing that for a phenomenological study, ten interviews allow the researcher

to collect sufficient data (p. 46). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain how researchers

know when they have collected an adequate amount of data being when no new

information is coming forth and the data becomes redundant (p. 101). Interviews were

conducted over *Zoom* (video meeting platform) due to current COVID-19 restrictions of

meeting individuals in person. The interviews were also be recorded through *Zoom* and

transcribed manually. A full description of the structure of the interview process is shown

in Table 2.

Based on the ability to interview participants remotely, recruitment happened

outside of the researcher's home location of Portland, Maine. The interview participants

included females who were working during the COVID-19 pandemic and in their mid-

career. The researcher recruited participants by means of convenience. Recruitment thus

began within the researcher's network and focused on a diverse group within that

network of age, race, professional status, parental status, and professional focus. Groenewald (2004), discussed "purposive sampling," which drives selecting participants based on the assessment of the individual's connection to the phenomenon being investigated (p. 45). The researcher utilized "snowball sampling" (Anderson, 2020, p. 151), meaning that at the end of interviews, participants will be asked to offer connections and introductions to people who also might participate in the research through interviews. These recommendations were not required to complete the interview process and not all referrals were utilized.

Potential participants were contacted by the researcher by email, introducing herself and explaining basic information regarding the research. The email requested to schedule an interview at the convenience of the participant should they meet the eligibility. Once the researcher and participant scheduled a time for each interview, the researcher sent the participant the research consent form to review and sign prior to the start of the interview, as well as a link to the *Zoom* meeting.

Maintaining the confidentiality of the participants was a priority in this research. Names and workplaces are not used in the study or subsequent study report. Individuals were assigned numbers to correspond with their responses and organizations will be described only as the business type, location and their general size. The use of phone and internet based video conferencing tools are expected to have provided a secure environment. The researcher hosted the interviews in a private location. The participant was then responsible for securing a physical location to participate via the video conferencing platform that allowed for their own confidentiality. The data collected and

recordings were stored in a password protected folder on the researcher's personal computer. Additionally, the individually identifiable data was destroyed after the study was complete

In the first segment of the interview, participants were asked to respond to a series of questions related to their demographics, to assist in data analysis. The information requested included: age, highest level of education, ethnicity, parental and marital status, and years in the workplace. Participants also were asked to summarize their professional experience thus far. Participants were given specific time at the beginning of the interview and end of the formal interview to ask the researcher questions.

The researcher's interview questions sought to uncover the experiences of the women who participated that connected with the researcher's study of the actions and policies that could both positively and negatively affect advancement into leadership roles for women mid-career in a post COVID-19 workplace. The questions were modeled from Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) description of what good questions entail; to stimulate a holistic and through look at the studied phenomenon. The types of questions fall into six themes; experience and behavior, opinion and values, feeling based, knowledge based, sensory, and background/demographic questions (p. 118). Additionally, questions were written to spark descriptive answers, opposed to a simple yes or no response. The researcher also avoided using leading questions within the interview to avoid bias from the researcher.

Research Interview Questions

- Could you summarize your professional history? What is the general size, location and field of your employer?

- What do you think the gender split is within your organization?

- Has your employment status changed as a result of COVID-19?

- How satisfied are you with your current job or work status? Explain.

- Explain changes within your workplace or most recent workplace (policies, culture, benefits, leadership) that have occurred since COVID-19 was introduced.

- Has your employer or most recent employer implemented policies that affected you positively or negatively? Did any of these policies affect women in a different capacity than men?

- What are the most beneficial actions for the employees that your employer or most recent workplace has taken since the start of the COVID-19 virus?

- How does COVID-19 impact your feelings associated with your work environment or most recent work environment since COVID-19?

- Are there ways you are positioned to advance into leadership or higher level roles your organization or field?

- Do you have examples of positive outcomes that you have experienced because of COVID-19?

- Could you describe the organizational culture of your workplace or most recent workplace?

- How has your home life changed as a result of COVID-19 (parenting, household tasks, social, etc)? Are there ways that those changes are different from your partner?

- Is your spouse or partner currently working?

- What are ways that you have experienced or witnessed gendered responses post COVID-19 within the workplace?

- Do you have a mentor in your workplace or field? If so, tell me about that relationship?

• Do you expect your career trajectory to change based on COVID-19? Are there aspects of this that has an affect based on gender?

• Are there ways that you have experienced or witnessed gender bias or discrimination? Are there examples specific to women advancing into leadership roles?

• If you are currently working remotely do you hope to continue after COVID-19? Do you think your employer will be open to continued remote work?

• If there is one thing you could change regarding your employment in a post-COVID-19 workplace, what would it be?

• Describe if your ability to seek a promotion or an increase in pay has been affected by your situation during COVID-19?

• Do you have examples of how you balance your work with your personal and/or family responsibilities?

• How has that balance changed since the start of COVID?

• Have you utilized childcare at all during the past year? If so, explain the arrangement.

• If you have kids in school describe the model (hybrid, remote, all in person) and how schooling responsibilities have been divided among you and your partner.

• Are there discussions within your workplace about the challenges of this time with colleagues? If so, are these supportive conversations?

• What has been the biggest source of stress for you since COVID-19 started?

• Do you feel as though you have been taking care of yourself mentally and physically during COVID-19? How have you been doing this or not?

Table 2. Interview Structure

Pre-interview	1. 5 days prior to the interview the researcher provided the participant with the consent form and a Zoom link for the interview.

Interview Introduction	2. The researcher thanked the interviewee for participating and discussed the purpose of the study. 3. The researcher confirmed that the interview would be recorded. 4. The researcher reviewed the consent form and asked if the participant has any questions. 5. The researcher informed the participant that the interview would last approximately 1 hour. 6. The researcher explained the structure of the interview.
Demographic questions	7. The researcher asked the participant demographic questions regarding their age, highest level of education, ethnicity, parental status, marital status, and years in the work-place. 8. The researcher asked the participant to summarize their professional background.
Central questions	9. The researcher asked the research interview questions.
Probes	10. The researcher utilized probing questions to further the depth of the responses.
Wrap-up	11. The researcher reserved time at the end of the interview to give the participant a chance to ask questions. 12. The researcher requested that the participant contact her with additions to their responses if needed. 13. The researcher informed the participant that they will receive a copy of the final research report if they request it.

Data Analysis

In order to examine this phenomenon through the individual's experience the researcher utilized data analysis methods described by Merriam and Tisdale (2016), with the goal to make conclusions by winnowing, grouping and bringing meaning to the collective data (p. 202). Steps in this process included: (1) A through initial review of the data to seek responses that tie directly back to the research questions. (2) Consideration

of the epistemological framework, in this case a feminist framework. How are participants making meaning of their experiences (3) Coding of the data by tracking patterns among the themes that connect back to the research question. (4) Reevaluated the large number of themes to pinpoint those that are most relevant to the research questions. (5) Reviewed data points to ensure direct connection points to the narrowed themes that have been identified. (6) Combined themes (codes) into fewer categories (axial coding). (7) Consider how researcher bias could impact all of these steps (p. 207-208). The researcher conducted all of the coding manually for this study opposed to using a software designed for the task.

As each of the interviews concluded, the recordings along with researcher observation notes, and documents were transcribed. The goal was to examine five to seven themes, identifying complex connections which were intended to lead to a narrative including specific policy recommendations for organizations as well as to build awareness for women as they contend with effects within the workplace of COVID-19.

Reviewing Research Literature

Historical research on the women's leadership, women's path to leadership, cultural shifts and effects on women within past pandemics, epidemics and world crises were referenced and utilized in this study to understand past behavior and cultural norms to anticipate how those histories could materialize today. Additionally, since this is a phenomenon occurring in real time, current research was reviewed as reports were released.

Validation Strategies

Within qualitative research an essential step is confirming the reliability of one's research. "Validity is one of the strengths of qualitative research and is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account [Creswell & Miller, 2000]" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 199). For this study, aligned with best practice, multiple validation procedures included; member checking and peer debriefing. "Use of member checking to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings by taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200). Similarly, one uses peer debriefing by "locating a person (a peer debriefer) who reviews and asks questions about the qualitative study so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.201).

Chapter 4: Ethical considerations

Though risks were minimal for the participants, there was the highest concern for confidentiality through scrubbing the data for participant names and workplaces. Furthermore, the interviews do have the potential to be unpleasant for some individuals. Discussions of job loss, harassment, gender bias, and other related experiences could be difficult for participants to discuss. The emotional stress and concern for potential personal information to be at risk was of great concern to the researcher. Despite the risk of harm in either sense being low, the researcher was mindful to remind the participants of their rights to skip any of the questions asked or end the interview. Participants were

fully informed of the research goals and purpose following the University of Maine

System IRB consent requirements.

Chapter 5: Findings

Participants

Recruitment began within the researcher's network and focused on a diverse

group considering age, race, professional status, parental status, and professional focus

with all participants being in their mid-career. The researcher also utilized "snowball

sampling" (Anderson, 2020, p. 151), meaning that at the end of interviews participants

were asked to offer connections and introductions to people who might participate in

interviews. Snowball sampling was used until the researcher reached the goal of intended

interviews for the study. Nine women in total were interviewed for the research. The

women ranged in age from 34 to 43 years old having been in the workplace for 9 to 20

years. Fifty-five percent of the women are white, 11% African American, 11% Latina and

22% Asian. They work in organizations that are nonprofits, for-profits, higher education,

and state agencies. They have 0-4 children and live in Maine, New York, Virginia and

California. Complete demographics can be seen in Table 3.

Eighty-one codes were initially created during the coding process to organize the

interview transcripts. From there the researcher divided the codes into eleven discussion

themes which exceeded the intended goal of five to seven. Themes included; (a) working

from home; (b) career trajectory; (c) quality of life; (d) division of household labor; (e)

employee benefits; (f) silver linings (g) exhaustion; (h) femininity bias; (i) representation;

(k) racial bias; (l) flexibility. The themes were then organized, addressing the research

questions to which they were most applicable. The analysis begins with the subquestions

and then summarizes that information to address the central research question.

Table 3. Participant Demographics

Part. #	Age	Ethnicity	Years in the Workplace	Relationship Status	Org Type	Kids	Location
1	35	White	15	In a long term relationship (male)	For profit	0	Los Angeles, CA
2	36	White	14	Married (Male)	For profit	2	Maine
3	39	Asian	13	Married (Male)	Higher Ed	4	Virginia
4	42	Latina	20	Married (Male)	Higher Ed	2	New York City
5	39	African American	16	Married (Male)	Nonprofit	4	Maine
6	36	White	15	Married (female)	Nonprofit	2	Maine
7	41	White	20	Married (Male)	Nonprofit	2	Maine
8	43	Asian	20	Married (Male)	State Agency	1	New York City
9	34	White	9	Married (Male)	Nonprofit	1 and Pregnant	Maine

Subquestion #1: How did the participants explain their experiences in the workplace

since COVID?

Each of the nine participants separated their conversation regarding their

experience into sections covering the initial three to six months of the pandemic and the

months thereafter. The distinction was made generally to illustrate how typical life

initially shut down. With the exception of essential workers, offices went remote, schools

and daycares closed, and contact beyond households stopped. Participant #5 who has four

children in her household reflected:

> With COVID, it was scary in the beginning, having kids, thinking if something
>
> happens to you, what will happen to them? It was stressful and scary. I think, even
>
> if you have money, but you don't have health, it doesn't benefit anything. So, just
>
> being with each other and staying healthy put peace back in my mind (Participant
>
> #5).

As spring turned to summer what was thought of as initially as temporary moved to being

a long-term event and, though challenges remained, the shifts normalized.

Working from Home

In March of 2020, all of the women interviewed were sent home from their

workplaces. From there, the decisions employers made about what changes to benefits

they would offer varied. One participant was already working from home, so she needed

to adjust to having her husband and two kids in house as well. Another, who is a teacher,

was home with her kids but also conducted remote learning with the lead teacher for her

school's pre-K class. Participant #9 works for an organization that previously had strict

rules prohibiting or discouraging work from home. That nonprofit organization was

forced to shift and became generally supportive of staff who had children at home.

Participant #4 also was not allowed to work from home prior to COVID-19 based on

union rules at the college where she is employed. When the college administrative offices

closed everyone shifted to remote work. However, there was not much flexibility around

childcare and remote schooling. The participant said:

> There was very little flexibility around schedule. For instance, they basically said,
> if you can't work during the hours your kids are in school, then you should be
> asking for leave. You should be putting in for Family and Medical Leave Act
> (FMLA) because, they made it clear, that childcare was not their problem. They
> said, it isn't our problem when you are on campus, so it still isn't our problem
> when you are working off campus (Participant #4).

The shift to remote work was an adjustment for all the participants. The organizations, however, took very different approaches to policies relating to remote work.

Employee Benefits

Three of the participants discussed benefits and policies that went beyond the safety of working from home. Two of these women worked for nonprofit organizations, the other at a for-profit. These organizations recognized the challenges employees were facing and focused on paid time off (PTO), reduced and/or flexible work schedules, and additional mental health benefits in their health plans to alleviate some of the stress. Participant #7 noted:

> Early in the pandemic we had a policy that gave us unlimited PTO, recognizing
> that everyone has something going on with kids at home for parents, or to care for
> whatever else during a period of time. For a few months they moved all of us to
> 30 hours a week, which I really respected. They didn't want to position people
> where they felt like they had to ask or advocate for themselves to get it. They just
> wanted to say everybody that is full-time, work is scaled back so you can do what
> you have to do (Participant #7).

 Similarly Participant #6 explained being provided with unlimited PTO:

> They asked us to report the hours we worked and hours we couldn't work related
>
> to COVID or personal related stresses. People were able to take time to take care
>
> of their kids or a relative or if they were sick with COVID…I tended to work
>
> 20-25 hours for those first few months (Participant #6).

Later in the interview Participant #6, explained that the gender split of her organization

was around 70% women in administrative roles, many of whom had young children. She

noted:

> The flexibility was important since otherwise they would have to lay off half of
>
> their employees or more than half or deal with the consequences of people unable
>
> to do their jobs. I was surprised at the flexibility, but for leadership it was
>
> impossible not to have flexibility (Participant #6).

In many cases there was an organizational connection between benefits like additional

PTO and flexibility where there was a higher proportion of women in the organization,

particularly those with women in leadership.

Participant #2, a manager, was encouraged by her organization to focus on

communication and support for her team at her for-profit employer. "As managers were

really encouraged to lean in with our folks and make sure they were ok" (Participant #2).

She discussed that in her position, with a team to support, that communication was held

up as a top priority.

Participant #4 made a lateral move within her organization during the pandemic.

The change in supervisor made a difference in her experience: "Having a more supportive

supervisor is really helpful right now. Someone who appreciates my work and values

what I do, makes it easier" (Participant #4).

Division of Labor

Division of labor shifted in all of the households based on shifts in childcare,

schooling, and family members spending their days at home. In the first few months,

support of all kinds outside of one's household evaporated. Many of the participants

mentioned that for household labor, the division largely stayed as it was prior to

COVID-19, but that what needed to get done had increased. The women who had

children in remote schooling at any point largely found themselves as the primary parent

managing those needs. An exception was Participant #4 who discussed that her husband

does more of the homeschooling:

> The gender roles are unusual in our house because he deals with most of that
>
> (remote learning) because the demand on my time is ten times more than in his
>
> role. "Ben" has always done the cooking because I don't cook. I always have
>
> done the dishes. I do most of the cleaning of the apartment (Participant #4).

This participant also took on a new position during the pandemic. The new role was

considered a lateral move with slightly more pay. The role however increased her

exposure as a leader within her organization.

Many of the women interviewed had additional help with childcare from family

members pre-COVID-19. In most cases this resource was no longer available as a safety

precaution. Participant #6 reflected on the loss, "Those social connections as related to

parenting and sharing the load of raising children is clearly missing from our

world" (Participant #4).

Exhaustion

All of the women interviewed at some point frankly said they were tired. The

mental load that the pandemic created and the ambiguity around how long it would last

has been exhausting. Participant #9 said, "It has permeated every decision. We have to

think about every decision and what we are comfortable with before we do

it" (Participant #9). Similarly, Participant #4 stated:

> The strain is hard. I have never been so exhausted in my life. Sometimes I do not
>
> wish to wake up. I have never been so emotionally exhausted. It is hard because
>
> you don't get the separation. The emotional drain, I definitely think I am more
>
> stressed, but the inability to separate work and home life since you are constantly
>
> on, is difficult…I have never felt so tired and so overworked. There is no stop to
>
> your day (Participant #4).

Many of the women started initially during the pandemic working late at night to keep

up. As the reality set in that this was going to be a long-term event, they had to adjust.

Participant #3 discusses this:

> In the beginning, I was trying to get up in the middle of the night or really early to
>
> try and get stuff done that I felt I wasn't getting to. Then, I just started feeling
>
> really tired during the day and then I couldn't get much done during the day and it
>
> was counter productive… My strategy has since been to try and get a good night's

sleep and accomplish what I can in normal hours and if things don't get done,

then just dealing with that and saying oh, well (Participant #3).

Participant #7 agreed:

It is rare that I do work on the weekend and at night. I did initially and found that

it is a marathon, not a sprint and the work will wait…It was something I did

before and COVID has just reinforced boundaries" (Participant #7).

Silver Linings

Though it has been a difficult time, there have however been silver linings for the

nine women interviewed. Though some relationships have suffered, others have become

stronger. "The kids have enjoyed having more time at home. Some of the bonding that

has happened over the past year has been great and will show value in the years to

come" (Participant #6). Similarly, Participant #7 said:

As hard as it is and it has been, it has been really nice just to have a lot of time

with my three family members. We just are able to have different kinds of

moments… It is cool to get to see my kids during school. It's nice to not feel

pressured to do social things, and it's also kind of nice not to be on the road and

traveling for work" (Participant #7).

Shifts from COVID-19 also allowed one participant to see her coworkers and team

bringing their whole selves to the workplace.

You got a much broader sense of who someone was. Before people tended to

bring their office selves into the office and kept their personal lives at home. You

got a glimpse into people's personal lives through all of this… I kept my camera

on no matter what was going on. So, I think people just got to a certain comfort

level with teammates that we didn't have before. The things we learned along the

way built more trustful work relationships. You can't put a price on this or

quantify that. But you could see it happen over time and that it creates a higher

performing team (Participant #2).

Subquestion #2: Were there types of gender discrimination and/or bias women had

experienced since the introduction of COVID-19?

During the interviews, many of the women said they hadn't experienced overt

gender discrimination or biases. There were however subtle aggressions or socialized bias

of men being in leadership roles. Specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic many

of the participants discussed that the issues and biases that have come with the pandemic

were not so much a gender issue, but a parenting issue. Ultimately this often led to bias

around femininity, whether directed at a man or woman.

Femininity Bias

Generally speaking, Participant #7 has experienced that even in her organization, led by

women with a gender split of approximately 65% women and 35% men, men tended to

be in leadership roles. She reflected this by saying:

I would say in my experience there are a lot of women in my work and a lot of

female leaders so I have not personally experienced a lack of representation.

However, I have found even though the ratio is skewed with more women than

men, of the men that are there, tend to be in more leadership roles. My current

organization the senior leaders are all women, but if you look at the next level

there are a lot of men. I am not sure there is gender bias specifically, but there is

something there. Men who enter at lower levels rise up quickly (Participant #7).

Though most of the mothers felt strongly about their partner's support and effort,

there were indications that there are different expectations for mothers and fathers.

Multiple women noted aspects of subtle bias creating a level of benevolent sexism

(Rehmann, 2019). It was mentioned that men rarely are seen in Zoom calls with children

and when they do show up, they often tell their kids to go find their mothers. Many

husbands managed to find rooms in which to close the door and work, or were able to

return to their offices at their organization.

Participant #2 discussed a mistake that the for-profit company she works for made

in the initial weeks of COVID-19:

I think the only misstep was that they did voluntary work from home at the

beginning of COVID. It lasted a couple of weeks… It put pressure on people to

feel like they had to make the decision. People like me who had kids out of

school, had to say we don't feel comfortable going into the office. Then there was

the concern that we would be looked down upon because we weren't going in.

When they made it a blanket policy, everyone works from home, it made it feel

like we wouldn't be judged (Participant #2).

In this case the organization's leadership was likely trying to maintain productivity and

give flexibility, but in the process was subtly accentuating the parent or motherhood bias

indicating who was committed to work and who was not. Thankfully the organization

corrected the issue by realizing the disparity and with necessity of safety.

This same participant discussed how the people in the upper ranks of her for-profit organization are primarily men, and men who had spouses who didn't have jobs outside the home. During COVID-19, she felt this difference sent a message to employees that reinforced stereotypical gender roles.

At my peer level as managers, the other managers and I were equally impacted. We were splitting time with our partners. No one had a stay at home parent. When you went up in the echelon, you would hear people say, 'I am so lucky'. I actually wrote in after a whole company town hall. One of the top folks at the organization responded to a question about how he was dealing with the challenges with COVID said, 'I am so fortunate that my wife stays home'. That was the worst message to any female and to the dad's crushing splitting responsibilities with their wives (Participant #2).

Representation

Some of the women also found themselves in the position of being the only women in the office with a young child or children at all. Participant #3 is a faculty member at a university with thirteen other faculty members in her center. Of those thirteen only three are women. She is the only one with children, of which she has four. Another woman noted that, "Most of the people in my office are single without children. I am the only one with a minor child" (Participant #8). Participant #8 is the director of the office, so has been able to set the stage for her own flexibility as well as expectations for her team.

Participant #2 recently worked in the IT group within the organization she has been with for around twelve years. She discussed the gender split among staff as being approximately 30% women and the leadership being maybe around 20% female. When asked if she felt represented in leadership, she said this:

I worked in our women in technology work stream for years. Just trying to get some visibility into those numbers. It isn't something the organization is interested in sharing. I have been told that there are issues with confidentiality. We have pulled them manually though. And it doesn't take much when you are on a call with the senior leaders and you see the discrepancy. In terms of the IT side, they have a long way to go to have gender equality. So no, I don't feel represented in terms of the IT leadership team. There needs to be more representation and diversity at the organization generally (Participant #2).

There is one participant in the group that does not have children. As a contract employee in television production, she was struck by the opportunity that came to her as an unmarried woman without children. She explained it this way:

Ever since we have gone to working from home and they need people to be on-set, those opportunities have been more prevalent for me because they know I am not married or a mother. I can travel, I can leave my house for a month and not have to watch kids. I have had more inquiries about my availability in the past year than ever before (Participant #1).

Racial Bias

Two non-white participants commented that the bias that they have experienced in

the workplace is related to ethnicity, not gender. Participant #4 who works in higher

education explained, "I have predominately worked for women and usually for white

women which is usually where the challenge lies. Rarely is it gender" (Participant #4).

Participant #8, who is an Asian woman living in New York City, discussed being scared

during the police aggression towards people protesting the death of George Floyd.

>"It was awful to live here when there was active aggression for protesters and
>
>police towards each other right in front of our house for weeks… That was scarier
>
>than COVID. It doesn't feel as much of an active threat than burning police cars
>
>and police running over people… We have external threats all over. People who
>
>want to do us harm, who live with us… people who are supposed to be protecting
>
>us are trying to hurt us" (Participant #8).

Subquestion #3: How did women expect COVID-19 to affect their personal and professional lives in the future?

Career Trajectory

A few of the participants felt that their career trajectory would be largely

unchanged by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, others had prolonged educational

requirements, hiring freezes at their organizations, and individual reassessments of their

interests and priorities.

Participant #8 is actively seeking a new role. She has reached the ceiling with her

current employer, but has struggled to find the next position. In the time of COVID-19

networking has been challenging and selling herself as an "outside the box" candidate has been hard when conversations can't occur in person. She explained this:

> I have decided to retool and redirect my career. There are fewer obvious options available to you in mid-career when you have high expectations for advancement, salary, etc.… I have always been satisfied working in the nonprofit sector jobs. I however feel like I have gotten underpaid based on what I have seen some of my peers get paid and my husband gets paid more. For the same amount or slightly more time I could be getting paid twice as much or more. What am I doing then? Especially now with a child. Not that I need a ton of money, but realize I would like to have more funds available for our family (Participant #8).

Her current position gives her flexibility, but she believes her pay suffers. Parents, women in particular, in professional positions find that jobs that are the most flexible and family friendly, have lower wages. Women then are often put in the position of weighing salary against flexibility. There is also the problem of career stagnation plaguing females in their mid-career. "I feel like I need to make a move or I am going to flatline" (Participant #8).

In opposition to this, Participant #7 has a tangible opportunity available. Her manager left the organization recently, leaving his position open. She questions the alignment that position would have with the work she enjoys doing, but also if it is the right time for taking on more. She comments:

I am wrestling right now if I actually want to do that and frankly like a piece of this is I'm just tired, so I don't like the idea of doing something new and bigger. I might feel different in a different place in life than right now (Participant #7).

Advancement often means increasing work hours, as well as the accessibility to the office. These sacrifices are seen as showing commitment to the work in many organizational cultures. Working long hours is viewed as a badge of honor, as opposed to evidence of inefficiency or inability to delegate. As women move through the corporate structure, again they meet the barrier of weighing mid-career advancement against their socialized role in their families. Families weigh the cost of childcare and household management and often surmise that two partners with intensive jobs don't merit the effort without a huge amount of non-parental, often paid, support. In turn, one person in the partnership often takes a step back in their career, stays stagnate in their growth or takes a more flexible role to support the family while the other spouse is able to drive forward. Typically, it is the female in a heterosexual relationship who presses pause and weeded out of leadership roles through unnecessary roadblocks (Parker, 2015, para. 2).

Participant #5 has been working on her Bachelor's degree which is the next step to being able to advance to a lead teacher role. She is confident in her ability to attain that position as well as be successful in the job, but needs to complete her degree to move forward. Additionally, she has always worked two jobs because she sends money home to family in Sudan and Uganda. During COVID-19 that money was even more essential to her extended family and life was more challenging at home. Thus, because of COVID-19, she has taken a semester off from her schooling, but plans to start back up as things start

to normalize. In this case her career trajectory has stagnated due to interruption in her educational accreditation.

Participant #2 had flexibility around working from home a couple days a week prior to COVID-19. She had started a new position at her organization a month prior to the interview, which likely will increase her ability to go to the office less and thereby avoid making the 45-minute commute. "It did debunk the attitude that we couldn't be as effective working from home, but I actually think productivity went up… It has proved that this is an effective way of working"(Participant #2). With being able to work from home full-time Participant #2 and her husband made life decisions on things, like changing their daughter's school, which would not have been possible otherwise. Remote work has become a priority for her as she advances within her career. She anticipates this could impact her work in the future, "It could be something that alters my career, needing to go back into the office, but I am also really good with that" (Participant #2).

Participant #1 who works in television production has, as previously mentioned, seen an increase in contract work. However, as she looks to advancement beyond the pandemic, she wonders if not being part of "the boys club," means there is no place for her. She estimates that the company that has employed her for twelve years is about 30% women and 70% men. She explains her situation this way:

> I am a producer, next I would become a supervising producer, then a co-
> executive producer then executive producer. That is the natural progression for
> someone that does this work. That is ideally where I should be but there are so
> many other people at this company that want to do that as well it feels like I have

to leave to go somewhere else…I am hoping that the risks I have taken over the

last year will show, but probably not, they don't care (Participant #1).

As television production increases with vaccination rates, Participant #1 will need to

manage her next steps in her career. Because she was able to work through the pandemic

due to not having childcare responsibilities, she questions if she will be able to advance

despite historical barriers for women to get promoted within her organization.

Additionally, will she advance beyond producers who needed to step back to care for

children (primarily women)? In her case, the pandemic may have shifted the traditional

"broken rung" (Thomas et al., 2019) where women typically stall in their ability to get

line roles for leadership positions, but not for those with children.

Central Question: What actions and policies could positively and negatively affect

advancement into leadership roles for women mid-career post COVID-19?

Flexibility

As mentioned by Participant #2, there has been forced innovation around remote

work. Employers who were previously resistant to integrate it had to find ways to make it

work and trust their people. The women in this study largely found that it is possible for

employees to be productive, effective and engaged while working from home. "There

was a very clear shift to "anything is possible in a remote workplace," which is a really

good thing for workplaces in general" (Participant #6). This one shift in the workplace

could be a huge advancement for women. As, Fitzsimmons et al. (2013) found, women

with children are seen as having a lack of commitment to their workplace. This has been

particularly true with requests for flexibility and remote work. Not all women or mothers

want to work from home, or at least all the time. However, this is an additional tool in the

toolbox. Encouraging male participation in similar remote practices in the coming years

and shifting the social association of men seeming weak through this participation

(Rudman and Mescher 2013) could give women the space to thrive in their positions.

Giving women more flexibility at work however isn't giving men a pass, by making it

easier for women to work and be the primary parent for childcare and household

responsibilities.

To lead with greater autonomy and flexibility, organizations can actively prioritize

trust in their hiring processes without gender bias. Though this feels like a basic

qualification, it appears to be at the root of the failure of previous attempts to increase

remote work. "She (the Executive Director), has had problems with one person in

particular which has made her establish broad rules for everybody. Individually, I have

found her to be very understanding and that she trusts me" (Participant #9). Participant #9

lives about one hour from her office. When considering what she hoped for in a post-

COVID-19 workplace she said:

> I think that I would enjoy being in the office and collaborating with my
>
> colleagues. I don't think I would want to work from home 100% of the time. My
>
> duties don't change based on where I am. I haven't seen a change in what my job
>
> is or the way I do my job… I would prefer to have more flexibility in being able
>
> to work from home or to be able to work from home a greater amount of time.
>
> That is something I hope would change post-COVID-19, but it depends what the
>
> post-COVID-19 world looks like, the quality of people in my office, and how

much my boss can trust them and not taking advantage of the system (Participant
#9).

The impact of flexibility in this case is two hours a day spent driving, as opposed to doing
more work at home, spending time with family, sleeping, etc. The researcher believes that
igniting a change effort involves rewarding those who are modeling the desired behavior
instead of punishing the team for the lack of trust resulting from the acts of perhaps one
employee.

Quality of Life

Many of the participants discussed their overall improvement in quality of life,
particularly after the first six months of the pandemic. This shift happened once schools
and childcare facilities starting opening for full or partial in-person learning, remote work
became normalized, commuting was reduced, time with family changed, and work
patterns shifted. Remote school gave parents a different window into their children's
education and women who previously spent long hours out of the house felt reconnected.
Participant #9 commented on this:

> I do think that part of it is that people are reevaluating their lives and seeing the
> nine to five workday, wondering how they did it before. I wonder, too, how I did
> it. How did I commute two hours, work all day and then take care of my kid?
> How did that feel full? I feel full now (Participant #9).

As the vaccine rollout expands and organizations discuss what the next normal
looks like, Participant #9 hopes to be part of that conversation at her office. Her
department has six people at her level. Since she started at her nonprofit organization

there have been a couple of people who have retired, which has shifted the dynamic and

culture significantly. When she started, she was the youngest person in the office and

colleagues all had either had no children or adult children. Since then, she has had a child

with another on the way, and the new team members hired are in her age group and also

have young children. She framed it as:

> I hope there is an opportunity to say, this is what we want the new normal to be
>
> based on. All of the benefits we have had in the last year and what we have
>
> gotten done. We have all been working hard and done what we need to do, so
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> hopefully, there is something there. I am curious how the leadership is
>
> considering it (Participant #9).

Chapter 6: Discussion

This study reviews the interviews of nine female participants and their unique

experiences related to COVID-19. Each experience shared in the results serves as a

significant and impactful segment of these women's lives. Women generally have had

vast challenges and joys during this time and this research seeks to examine the impacts

related to these examples by applying them to the workplace more generally.

COVID-19 resulted in employees and employers pulling back the curtain and in

many cases seeing new possibilities in how the workplace can be redesigned. As noted

within the literature review, women have left the workplace in astounding numbers

(Schneider et al., 2020). The women in this study, have been fortunate to all be able to

maintain their employment during this time. However, they are at the crossroads that

Fitzsimmons et al. (2013) found in mid-career for women, where work structures are

often inflexible; breaks in employment mean it can be hard to return to line roles; flexible work arrangements are resented and seen as less credible; there is a lack of role models, mentors and sponsors; and women often have a lack of support from partners and appropriate childcare. During COVID-19 shutdowns, men have had greater exposure and access to domestic responsibilities. The spouses in this study did take on more household responsibility, but more work does not always mean equal work.

Despite this exceedingly difficult time, many of the women noted an increase in their quality of life. To them, the idea of going back to the way it was before is not possible from either an organizational health perspective or from a quality of life perspective. Participants were both interested in reconnecting with their colleagues and clients in person but also, in some cases, reluctant to give up the benefits of working from home. They experienced increased professional productivity because of the reduced commuting time, and the flexibility around personal commitments appealed to them. Policies that offer flexibility will be essential to getting women back to work. However, it is important to consider that if women opt to work more from home, then offices could potentially be populated by mostly men. This study does not investigate perspectives of men working from home as a point of comparison. Nonetheless, how then are these work communities and cultures redesigned to give access to development opportunities, meaningful work, social capital, and mentors to all men and women, parents and non-parents alike?

The researcher is not suggesting that women should be afforded "special" treatment or held to a different set of standards than those of men. The path to

advancement needs to consider the human life cycle and that both men, women, and gender non-conforming people are valuable contributors to organizations. On the other side of the pandemic, we have learned during this crisis can create shifts leading to happier and healthier (mentally and physically) employees who are more productive and motivated, experience more diversity and representation in their workplace, and have more longevity with organizations.

Ada Calhoun in her book, *Why We Can't Sleep* talks about Generation X being the first generation of women raised to believe that they "have it all," work and family. Highly scheduled lives often lead to the feeling that we, as women, weren't doing a great job at either. This book, published in 2020 prior to the onset of COVID-19, adds weight to these concepts:

> We thought we could have both thriving careers and rich home lives and make more and achieve more than our parents, but most of us have gained little if any advantage. Economist Isabel V. Sawhill, of the Brookings Institute, told me that a typical forty-year-old woman in America now makes $36,000 a year working full-time. After child care, rent, food, and taxes, that leaves only about $1,000 for everything else. Even women who make more may feel uneasy about their financial future, stunned by how hard it is just getting through the week, or disappointed by how few opportunities seem to come their way…Societal, historical and economic trends have conspired to make many women's passage into middle age as a crucible of anxieties (Calhoun, 2020. p. 20).

Regarding parenting and paid time Calhoun (2020) later explains:

According to the Pew Research center, in 1965 mothers spent nine hours a week

on paid work and ten hours on child care. In 2016, mothers spent twenty-five

hours a week on paid work and fourteen on child care. Something has to give, and

it's usually women's leisure time or sleep (p.107).

There are changes that we can now see are possible in the workplace. Though it wouldn't

mean that women really can succeed at doing it all, it could shift culture to bring partners

further into the shared burden (and joy) of childcare as well as giving greater access to

opportunity in the workplace.

Scrutiny has long been placed on working mothers claiming there are negative

effects on children due to their work. Cissna (2020) cites studies showing that children

can however have a positive childhood experience regardless of the working status of

their mothers. The important aspect is the inclusion of a nurturing or caring adult which

could be a parent, daycare, or other caregiver (p. 147). Additionally, there were positive

social gains from having a working mother: "Children who grow up watching their

mothers work hold more egalitarian gender role ideology and have more egalitarian

views toward the roles of men and women (Barnett & Rivers, 1996)" (Cissna, 2020,

p.147). Cissna's analysis reflects the reoccurring concept reported by the researcher that

parental partner time and attention have equal value in positive childhood experiences as

well as families' need for quality childcare to allow for participation in the workforce.

There are aspects of how we have socialized the workplace that connect the

design of the path to advancement to favor men. Conscious or unconscious bias,

femininity bias (Eagly, 2014), the motherhood penalty (Kelly et al. 2020), are some of the

major factors holding women back from achieving their full leadership and career

potential. Equity for women then, in turn, can be seen from the male perspective, inviting

men to have access to and encouraging the utilization of benefits like working from home

or parental or family leave without penalty and also without being seen as lacking

commitment (Heilman & Caleo, 2018).

Employees' motivation for productive and engaged work can be influenced by the

successful meeting of their human needs for fulfilling and productive lives. This is

individualized for employees, depending upon their unique personal situation and

particular stage of life. The researcher believes that by meeting personal work needs,

individuals and organizations can increase employee's job satisfaction, effectiveness and

productivity as well as personal wellbeing.

As Weisshaar (2018) noted; men and women who opt out of work to care for

family are disadvantaged when they return to the workplace (p.55-56). In March 2021,

McKinsey & Company released a study on paternity leave. They found in their 126 male

participants that one hundred percent were glad they took parental leave and would make

the same choice again. Ninety percent of the participants found their relationship with

their partner improved (the study included only heterosexual men). Twenty percent of

participants said they were concerned that taking leave would have long term effects on

their career. Despite concern about their career advancement they felt, "the benefits

outweighed the risk" (Colantuoni, Rajbhandari, Tolub, Diome-Deer & Moore, 2021, para.

23). The study found paternity leave set fathers up for more active participation in

childcare and overall parental decision-making, stronger bonds with their children,

increased awareness of how they spent their time at work, and ultimately improvement in their spouse's career.

It is important to consider this study was with participants who took leave, thus were already in an organization or career path that allowed for or made them comfortable with the option. Further acceptance of family leave could have a huge impact on the barriers women face to achieve equity in the workplace. Colantuoni et al. (2021) provided some advice to employers that is consistent with the findings in this study, with application for both men and women: the work culture needs to support leave, there needs to be policy that reinforces that support: and the timeline for advancement should be unaffected for those who take leave (para. 26).

Additionally, Lawler used the equation "Performance = Motivation x Ability" (Gallos, 2006, p. 635). The equation illustrates that motivation without skill will not equal a high level of performance and vice versa. Thus, if motivation accounts for half of the ultimate impact for success, then organizations need to understand how to provide their employees with those tools to foster motivation in addition to training for skill. Women generally have higher levels of education (Mattingly, 2018) when entering the workforce than their male counterparts. It is the social support through mentors and the advancement structure that demotivates and disrupts alignment for women with leadership positions. In the same vein as family leave, building systems of mentorship and advancement sponsorship that is part of organizational culture and proactively includes women early in their careers and rewards participation could assist in rebuilding the "broken rung".

Organizations are going to need to consider shifts in their products, technology needs, training and development programs, and office needs as they move into the next normal. Women are an essential part of the workforce from the perspective of simply addressing unfilled positions, but also contributing to diverse teams which are more creative and innovative (Puccio, Mance & Murdock, p. 242-243). Organizations need to find ways of bringing women back to the payroll. We are at a turning point in history where the path to leadership can be re-evaluated to examine aspects that have been built to work for men and hinder women's advancement.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

Organizations were at crossroads where innovation was required for survival when COVID-19 shut down offices. This shift provides the opportunity for workplaces to build on this innovation and have conversations with employees about what the future can look like and how to shift policies and processes that were once considered unchangeable. The researcher expects that organizations that led with flexibility, creative thinking, trust and collaboration, will likely move through these challenging times with greater strength and with more committed employees. Not all employees can work from home, or at specific times, but the researcher believes that all workplaces have opportunities to innovate in this realm. Our families, governments, communities, and workplaces benefit from the actions and voices of women.

As we all examine our priorities, needs and goals, men and women alike can consider how their personal interests intersect with socially constructed ideas of what the workplace should look like. The challenges the COVID-19 pandemic can have a silver

lining for organizations. In this urgent time, individuals are motivated to make change

and organizations should follow. This research points to benefits of leading with

autonomy, where challenges for employees can be addressed with a humanistic approach,

offering flexibility and trust, shifting perceptions of time, and maximizing productivity

while valuing employees' personal lives.

Change is difficult, but employees and employers alike have all strengthened in

the past year. The researcher believes that the status quo, the way things were done

before, is not an acceptable option.

In closing, the thoughts of one of the participants in this study provide an apt

coda: "We have become a stronger nation, strong people and strong mothers. We are

women, we were already strong but we have become even stronger while dealing with

the difficult situations of the past year" (Participant #5).

Chapter 8: Suggestions for Future Research

Examining the experiences of nine women in their mid-career, seeking how

COVID-19 might impact their advancement to leadership roles has revealed many areas

that could be studied in future research. Examples would be: looking at specific aspects

of the path to workplace leadership and how that system has been built to benefit men.

Research could also examine organizations during COVID-19 and beyond, specifically

looking at changes in policies and benefits compared to staff attrition rates (male and

female). Organizations with female and male CEOs could be compared and contrasted to

understand financial implications of COVID-19. Research could also study women who

have left the workplace during COVID-19 to understand the reasons they left and how they could be brought back into the workplace.

Chapter 9: Researcher's Perspective

As a woman who has experienced discrimination and bias during her career, the researcher was motivated to research this subject to address her own need for information. She is able to approach this research from a position of privilege as a white woman, but seeks to understand generally how women are experiencing this world health crisis, thus challenging her cultural and world viewpoint and personal experiences. Her motivation in seeking a Master's Degree in Leadership and Organizational Studies was to further her ability to be a champion for equitable, healthy, and effective leadership.

This research was conducted in a time of heightened political polarity. President Trump campaigned in 2016 and governed on the continuation of white male privilege and further devaluing marginalized populations. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic the country contended with misinformation, a lack of coordinated national effort to deal with healthcare, job loss, challenges to businesses, social services, etc.

Many Americans are filled with anxiety about how their lives changed and will continue to do so, many are coping with lost loved ones to COVID-19, and struggling with mental health challenges that isolation has brought. During the development, research and reporting of this thesis there was an election and inauguration bringing hope in health and advancement for marginalized populations. Despite his election loss in 2020, President Trump will have lasting effects on the United States.

On October 26, 2020, Amy Coney Barrett was sworn in to succeed women's leader Ruth Bader Ginsberg on the United States Supreme Court. Coney Barrett is one example of lasting impact as the youngest Supreme Court Justice who could serve for decades. Her conservative views are likely to impact the rights and privileges of women and marginalized communities. At the same time Kamala Harris will serve as the first female and woman of color to serve as Vice President. Her representation in the White House will bring invaluable advocacy for women in addition to other marginalized groups.

The researcher's professional background has included work within the creative industry in New York City, collaborating with photographers and magazines. Additionally, she has extensive experience working in nonprofit organizations with a focus on higher and international education and social justice. While working in international education she managed strategic initiatives that promoted student diversity, equity and inclusion as well as intercultural communication.

This research allowed the researcher to dig deeper into organizational psychology, discrimination of marginalized populations, as well as workplace culture and how leadership can effectively address inequity.

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Appendices

Appendix A.

NOTICE OF IRB REVIEW AND APPROVAL

DATE:	January 05, 2021
TO:	Marczak, Emily, Leadership Studies
	Gibson, Joyce, Leadership Studies
FROM:	
PROTOCOL TITLE:	The Impact of COVID-19 for Mid-career Women Seeking Leadership Positions in the Workplace
FUNDING SOURCE:	None
PROTOCOL NUMBER:	20-10-1564
APPROVAL PERIOD:	Approval Date: January 05, 2021

The project identified above has been reviewed by the University of Southern Maine 's Institutional Review Board (IRB) using an expedited review procedure per 45 CFR 56.110. This approval is based on the assumption that the materials submitted to the IRB contain a complete and accurate description of all ways in which human subjects are involved in the research.

This approval is given with the following terms:

You are approved to conduct this research only during the period of approval cited above;

You will conduct the research according to the plans and protocol submitted;

You will immediately inform the Office of Research Integrity and Outreach (ORIO) of any injuries or adverse research events involving subjects;

You will immediately request approval from the IRB of any proposed changes in your research, and you will not initiate any changes until they have been reviewed and approved by the IRB;

As applicable, you will only use the informed consent, informed assent, and/or parental permission document(s) that have the IRB approval period marked in the footer;

As applicable, you will give each research subject a copy of the informed consent, informed assent, and/or parental permission document(s);

As applicable, you will comply with the University of Maine System Information Security Policy and Standards, the Muskie School of Public Service Securing Protected Information Policies and Procedures, and any other applicable USM policies or procedures;

If your research is anticipated to continue beyond the IRB approval dates, you must submit an Annual Renewal at least 60 days prior to the IRB approval expiration date; and

You will submit a Final Report upon completion or discontinuation of the research.

The University appreciates your efforts to conduct research in compliance with the federal regulations that have been established to ensure the protection of human subjects in research.

Sincerely,

Hamasoor, Sheilan

Appendix B.

FINAL APPROVAL FORM

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

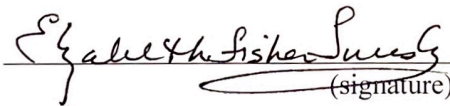LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL STUDIES MASTER DEGREE

May 1, 2021

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Emily L. Marczak entitled *The Impact of COVID-19 for Mid-career Women Seeking Leadership Positions in the Workplace,* be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Leadership and Organizational Studies Master Degree Program.

_____ Dr. Joyce T. Gibson, Thesis Advisor
(signature)

_____ Dr. Elizabeth Fisher Turesky, Second Reader
(signature)

Accepted

_____ Dr. Dan Jenkins, Chair, Leadership and Organizational
Studies
(Signature)