

INCLUSION & DIVERSITY 2021 VIRTUAL SERIES

Will COVID-19 set gender equality back by a generation?

Wednesday 17 March 2021, 1.00 – 2.00 pm GMT

How has the pandemic impacted gender equality?

- Women have done the majority share of home-schooling and childcare during the COVID-19 crisis. This has had an impact on their ability to do paid work and on their mental wellbeing.
- A greater proportion of women were furloughed than men and, when furloughed, for a longer duration than men.
- The government's response to the crisis has shown that mothers have not been factored into decision-making, highlighted by the fact that pubs were opened before schools.
- Violence against women has increased: there is a statistical certainty that women you work with are subject to violence or harassment.

What should organisations be doing to address this gender equality impact?

- Policy and process are very important, but **culture** is even more important – a culture where people feel safe to challenge and disclose (at any level) and where women feel comfortable to bring their whole selves to work.
- Prioritise the **3 Ss**:
 - Space: giving women the space to have the conversations needed to make disclosures and for women to feel safe doing so.
 - Sanctions: organisations need to show they are listening and taking these issues seriously.
 - Signposting: individuals should be signposted to the necessary advice and support.
- There is no "one size fits all" solution: it is important that organisations listen and survey its women employees on what they need, what the business should be doing and whether leaders are being inclusive leaders. Organisations do not have all the answers yet, but they should be asking questions.
- Promote **inclusive leadership** that ensures that all voices are heard (not just the loudest).

How do we ensure that gender equality is not just a 'tick box exercise'?

- This comes from genuine and sincere leadership. Organisations must realise it is the right thing to do and not

just better for their bottom line.

- By enabling diverse candidates opportunities for jobs and promotions, making them feel valued and establishing more rigorous career path frameworks where it is clearer how to progress in your role.
- By ensuring that employees can genuinely be themselves and bring their specific lived experiences to work.
- By including women in conversations about the future, not just about the present, and adopting an intersectional and holistic approach.

How is the crisis an opportunity for positive change?

- Every job should be flexible by default. However, there is the risk of a tiered workforce emerging, with "elite" workers who are physically in the office versus a lower tier of those who work from home. We must ensure we are not building discrimination or bias into the system: the focus must be on output and performance.
- Men in leadership should ask themselves what they would demand if they were not getting access to promotion or were not being paid equally, and take action to support women.
- The focus was initially on where we work; this should now be on how we can get work done in a way that address inequalities. This is a time for companies to innovate and consider new options, whether that be, for example, a 4-day working week or ensuring they facilitate men to take parental leave.
- There has been a shift towards prioritising wellbeing. Organisations should support their women's mental health by adjusting their expectations, providing a supportive 'do what you can' approach and offering confidential counselling services.
- Encouraging and enabling men to take on parental responsibilities. Equal parental pay is a critical part of this. As long as women bear the brunt of childcare responsibilities, we are unlikely to get gender parity at the top of organisations.
- One also needs to be mindful of the positives, such as how the attitude towards remote working has changed during the pandemic. We need to ensure this continues and focus on leadership setting behaviour, where men (not just women) also continue to work from home after the pandemic.

Chaired by:



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