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# Equal Rights, Equal Futures

## The Future of Work is Sexist. Let's Fix That.

If we do nothing, the future of work is profoundly sexist. That's not the future we want, and it's not smart business. [COVID-19's impact on the lives of women and girls](#) has rolled back progress on gender equality by a generation—36 years.<sup>i</sup> At the same time, the pandemic has accelerated the “fourth industrial revolution,” with social distancing and COVID restrictions moving industries towards automation and data-mined solutions. Sexism is harming women, and it's [crushing the economy](#). It makes work unpredictable, leads to [high turnover](#), and [reduces productivity](#). Women who already face discrimination, women of color, and disabled women have felt the biggest impacts. In the US alone, black women were the only people who saw unemployment rise in December 2021.<sup>ii</sup> Current trends show it will take 268 years to reach gender equality.<sup>iii</sup>

This does not have to happen. We have the power to change this future if we act now. The fourth industrial revolution must build stronger foundations for everyone. If not, it rolls back the progress we made over the first three industrial revolutions that opened up rights and opportunities. Equitable recovery from COVID-19 requires tackling the structural barriers that women and girls face; stronger investments in gender equality and women's economic opportunities<sup>iv</sup>; and strengthening women's leadership in COVID-19 response, recovery and beyond. These are fundamental rights we must uphold. They are also [good business sense](#).

We have the opportunity to unlock a resilient and promising future of work—if we prioritize and invest in gender equality. That means tackling the biases and barriers women face, thinking globally, and ensuring men are as invested in equality as women are because they see benefits, too.

## What's holding us back?

COVID-19 and the wider crisis have laid bare existing inequalities. It has highlighted that consciously or not, systems still operate as if women must do the bulk of the childcare and housework, that men should get first preference for jobs, that money should go to men first, and that violence against women is an acceptable behavior, especially if you're stressed. Those biases, combined with COVID-19, have put women at higher risk of violence, dramatically increased their unpaid care work, and pushed them into higher health risks.

- **Unpaid care work is skyrocketing.** With lockdowns, schools closing, and higher levels of family illnesses, women in low- and middle-income countries took on 270 additional hours of unpaid care in 2020, compared to only 70 hours for men.<sup>v</sup> That not only burdened women, it also took them out of the workforce.
- **Gender Based Violence rose.** COVID-19 pushed violence up dramatically. 243 million women experienced violence in 2020,<sup>vi</sup> with some countries seeing a 5-fold increase.<sup>vii</sup> Lockdowns and increased pressure increased violence at home and at work. CARE’s research showed that violence against women garment workers has doubled since the onset of COVID-19—up to 53%.<sup>viii</sup>
- **Women’s jobs were hit hardest, recovered least.** Women were 1.8 times more likely to be driven out of the workforce.<sup>ix</sup> Of women who lost jobs in 2020, 90% of them have left the workforce permanently.<sup>x</sup> While men’s employment has returned to pre-pandemic levels (for now), at least 13 million fewer women—and probably more<sup>1</sup>—have formal jobs than did in February 2020.<sup>xi</sup>
- **Women entrepreneurs got pushed out of even the margins.** Women-led businesses were more likely to close during the pandemic than male-led businesses, and women’s businesses lost more income than male-run businesses, and got fewer loans to help them recover.<sup>xii</sup>
- **The digital divide makes it worse.** COVID-19 accelerated the digital future of work. 243 million fewer women than men are accessing mobile internet across low- and middle-income countries.<sup>xiii</sup> In total, nearly a billion women cannot access mobile internet.<sup>xiv</sup> When women are online, it’s often unsafe for them. COVID-19 saw a 22,834% [increase in hate directed at women online](#) in Thailand, 953% in Philippines, and 93% in Bangladesh.
- **Leaders are usually men.** Women hold only 27% of managerial positions at work, and that trend got worse in the pandemic.<sup>xv</sup>, <sup>xvi</sup> In health care—one job category that should be growing in the pandemic—70% of workers are women, but 75% of leaders are men.<sup>xvii</sup> Women’s political leadership has a 78% disparity between men and women.<sup>xviii</sup>

“I want to send a message to men: **women are not weaker than you.** We earn the same money as you, we work the same amount of time as you do. Please spend more time with your families.”

Woman in Vietnam

COVID-19 is accelerating the fourth industrial revolution, and that’s pushing equality to the back burner, rolling back gains people fought hard to claim in the first three industrial revolutions. According to the World Economic Forum, 6 out of 8 “jobs of the future” are heavily male dominated. As COVID-19 accelerates job disruption requiring technical skills, women are severely underrepresented and under supported in those job niches—like data or cloud computing.<sup>xix</sup> Green jobs and climate action could create 65 million new jobs by 2030 in fields like public transit, efficient buildings and clean energy, but those jobs largely overlook women and reinforce gender inequality. Health workers are 70% women, and there are at least [25 million new health workers needed by 2030](#), but only 25% of leaders in the field are women, and women are dramatically underpaid.

### Digital Divide Meets Unpaid

**Care Work:** In [Peru](#), women entrepreneurs are accessing online professional development opportunities for 10 minutes at a time, sometime between 10pm and 4am. That’s the only time they have free between their jobs and caring for their families.

“If I hadn’t been brave, I might not be here now,” Marlita Tenorio Gonzales, Peru.

## Where we can make smart investments

The private sector needs to act now to avoid more setbacks on women’s rights and millions in lost revenue in the economy. That includes investments in women as leaders, as workers, and as entrepreneurs. It

<sup>1</sup> The World Economic forum estimates that gap could actually be 4% larger because of gaps in data around gender equality and the lack of sex-disaggregated data. World Economic Forum, “Pandemic Pushes Back Gender Parity by a Generation, Report Finds”. March 2021, <https://www.weforum.org/press/2021/03/pandemic-pushes-back-gender-parity-by-a-generation-report-finds/>



also means partnering with men and boys for true equality. Companies and private sector actors need to have gender equality strategies, business cases, line items in their budgets, and a core part of their business model. That includes investing in equitable leadership opportunities at all levels of their company. Here are some investments that we know will pay off for a more equal future.

## Investments in leadership equality

- **Women’s leadership at work:** Women garment workers in Asia are taking the lead to organize for safer working conditions. In Laos, that meant that **women who experienced sexual harassment dropped from 1 in 6 to 1 in 20.**<sup>xx</sup> That required partnership from factory owners—usually men. Make sure companies and governments have women leaders at all levels, and that those leaders are part of key policy conversations.
- **Women leaders and organizations.** Women’s Rights Organizations have been on the forefront of gender equality in countries all over the world for decades. They have critical expertise on what investments will work, and how those investments can pay off over the long term. Pay to support these groups and fund their time and expertise to design gender equality strategies for the future of work.
- **Equality in agriculture:** Investing in gender equality—working with men and women—in Burundi more than doubled rice production, dropped violence, and gave a \$5 return for every \$1 invested. As a major driver of economies and of climate change, improvements in the agriculture sector’s equality and climate impacts are a cornerstone of a resilient future for everyone.
- **Equal pay for health work.** Investments in health workers could provide a \$10 return for every \$1 invested in the system.<sup>xxi</sup> It will also strengthen pandemic preparedness—which is better for the economy.
- **Focus on an equal future.** Companies should invest in training, education, and employment opportunities that close the gap in the “jobs of the future” that currently show dramatic underrepresentation for women.
- **Include and pay women throughout supply chains.** Ensure that women are involved in global supply chains and that they get equal pay and recognition for the work they do. Pay special attention to women farmers, women in the workplace, and women health care workers.

“[it] moved us from darkness to the light.” Woman in Sudan

“I feel good change in my life. I can frequently talk with people. **Now we work together with men.** ... Now I speak confidently with women and men on any issue. This is big change in my confidence.”  
Woman in Pakistan

## Investments in Equal Safety and Communities

- **Reduce unpaid care burdens.** Help people figure out how to split the load of unpaid care—childcare, housekeeping, looking after sick family members, etc. Support parental leave for all, childcare for all, and sick leave for everyone.
- **Savings and solidarity.** Every \$1 invested in savings groups (85% of whom are women) shows a return of \$7 in the first year, and \$18 by year 5. Those benefits support women and men, and they provide a critical foundation for leadership and resilience.
- **Equal entrepreneurship.** Investing in women entrepreneurs can create \$5 trillion in economic growth. In Rwanda, women created 100,000 jobs at less than \$10 invested per job created when they got training, mentorship, and partnership from men.
- **Safety at work.** Investing in equality—for men and women—and participation from workers can unlock \$42 for every \$1 invested. \$26 of those dollars benefit the companies that support workers and their rights. Everyone who is safe at work<sup>2</sup> and at home is more likely to be leaders, to have higher production, and to be resilient to shocks.
- **Partnering with men and boys for equality.** Getting men involved—understanding the needs and barriers they face, and the social norms that constrain them—are a key part of the solution. Everyone benefits in a more equal society.
- **Promote digital literacy and equal access to technology** and create safe online spaces and resources for everyone. Reduce access online barriers to women’s entrepreneurship.

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<sup>i</sup> World Economic Forum, “Pandemic Pushes Back Gender Parity by a Generation, Report Finds,” March 2021,

<https://www.weforum.org/press/2021/03/pandemic-pushes-back-gender-parity-by-a-generation-report-finds/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://blog.dol.gov/2022/01/07/5-numbers-from-the-december-jobs-report>

<sup>iii</sup> World Economic Forum, “Pandemic Pushes Back Gender Parity by a Generation, Report Finds,” March 2021,

<https://www.weforum.org/press/2021/03/pandemic-pushes-back-gender-parity-by-a-generation-report-finds/>

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid

<sup>v</sup> Kenny, Charles, and Yang, George. “The Global Childcare Workload from School and Preschool Closures During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Center for Global Development*, June 2021, <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/global-childcare-workload-school-and-preschool-closures-during-covid-19-pandemic>

<sup>vi</sup> United Nations Development Programme, “Gender-Based Violence and COVID-19,”

[https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/undp-gender-GBV\\_and\\_COVID-19\\_0.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/undp-gender-GBV_and_COVID-19_0.pdf)

<sup>vii</sup> United Nations, “Intensification of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls,” Pp. 4, July 2020.

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/07/a-75-274-sg-report-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls>

<sup>viii</sup> [https://www.careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/Covid19\\_AFS-research-report\\_EN\\_Final-Jan21.pdf](https://www.careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/Covid19_AFS-research-report_EN_Final-Jan21.pdf)

<sup>ix</sup> World Economic Forum, “Pandemic Pushes Back Gender Parity by a Generation, Report Finds,” March 2021,

<https://www.weforum.org/press/2021/03/pandemic-pushes-back-gender-parity-by-a-generation-report-finds/>

<sup>x</sup> Rauhala, Emily., Narayanswamy, Any., Shin, Youjin., and Ledur Júlia. “How the pandemic set back women’s progress in the global workforce,” *The Washington Post*, August 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/coronavirus-women-work/>

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid

<sup>xii</sup> Rubiano-Matuleevich, Eliana and Iacovone, Leonardo. “Building Back Better from COVID-19: Boosting Women’s Entrepreneurship,” June 2021,

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/140651624866963247/pdf/Building-Back-Better-from-COVID-19-Boosting-Women-s-Entrepreneurship.pdf>

<sup>xiii</sup> GSMA, “The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2021,” June 2021, <https://www.gsma.com/r/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2021.pdf>

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid

<sup>xv</sup> World Economic Forum, “Pandemic Pushes Back Gender Parity by a Generation, Report Finds,” March 2021,

<https://www.weforum.org/press/2021/03/pandemic-pushes-back-gender-parity-by-a-generation-report-finds/>

[https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf) (page 6)

<sup>xvii</sup> Delivered by women, led by men: A gender and equity analysis of the global health and social workforce. Geneva:

World Health Organization; 2019 (Human Resources for Health Observer Series No. 24). Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0

IGO.

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid

<sup>xix</sup> World Economic Forum, “Global Gender Gap Report,” March 2021, [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf)

<sup>xx</sup> CARE, “STOP Sexual Harassment Project,” <https://www.care.org.au/stop-sexual-harassment-project/>

<sup>xxi</sup> Dr. Bernice Dahn, Dr. Addis Tamire Woldemariam, Dr. Henry Perry, et al. Strengthening Primary Health Care through

Community Health Workers: Investment Case and Financing Recommendations.; 2015. <https://www.who.int/news/item/03-08-2015-strengthening-primary-health-care-through-community-health-workers-investment-case-and-financing-recommendations>

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<sup>2</sup> For example, ratifying the ILO convention 190 and addressing GBV in the workplace help keep women and men safe at work.