

# How Business Can Support Women During the COVID-19 Crisis

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This memo provides an overview of some of the challenges facing women in the context of the COVID-19 global health pandemic and lays out a checklist for companies to ensure a gender-sensitive approach to their response.

## The Gendered Impacts of COVID-19

Across the globe, companies are facing critical decisions about their strategy for business continuity or considering a temporary shutdown of their operations. The impacts of the current COVID-19 crisis and how companies respond will be felt differently by women. Preliminary data shows men are at a slightly higher risk from the virus than women.<sup>1</sup> However, women face a range of other risks related to the virus driven by existing inequalities and discrimination. The section below highlights three areas where women are particularly vulnerable and, if unaddressed, could have serious immediate and long-term consequences.

- » **Increased care work:** School closures impacting over 90% of the world's students and restrictions on in-home health and care workers leave women juggling paid work and caring for their loved ones. For many women, the decision to cutback or forgo their salary makes better financial sense: women are more likely to work part-time or make less than their spouse. This is also driven by discriminatory gender roles, with women taking on a disproportionate share of unpaid care work than their partner.<sup>2</sup>
- » **Domestic violence:** The COVID-19 situation is particularly worrisome for those at risk of domestic violence, largely women, who find themselves confined with the perpetrator. Following the outbreak of the virus in China, reports of domestic violence increased threefold compared to 2019.<sup>3</sup> Financial insecurity due to lost wages may decrease victims' ability to leave abusive relationships. In addition, support services for domestic violence victims are likely to be overwhelmed easily, including shelters, counselling, health services and hotlines.
- » **Vulnerable job categories:** Women are overrepresented in many of the most vulnerable sectors currently. To start, women are the majority of health and social care workers—representing 70% in 104 countries—making social distancing and confinement nearly impossible and increasing their risks of contracting the virus. Women are also highly concentrated in areas seeing major lay-offs and furloughs, including flight attendants, daycare workers, and service industry workers. In the apparel supply chain, where 70-90% of workers are women, many retail and supply chain workers are losing their jobs, having their pay cut, or are unable to access their wages. In addition, women-owned businesses are usually smaller and have less access to credit than their male counterparts making them less resilient to economic shocks.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30526-2/fulltext#%20](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30526-2/fulltext#%20)

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>; <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/feminism-womens-rights-coronavirus-covid19/608302/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1005253/domestic-violence-cases-surge-during-covid-19-epidemic>

<sup>4</sup> <https://eige.europa.eu/news/coronavirus-puts-women-frontline>; <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/626611519938668327/Topic-Note-Using-Property-and-Building-Credit-EN.pdf>

## What can businesses do?

The threat that COVID-19 represents is reason to reaffirm – and not to abandon – the commitment to promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment. Companies must prioritize health and safety while identifying and analyzing potential risks and impacts on women from the response measures. The list below outlines six measures for companies to support women and mitigate the gendered-impacts of the COVID-19 crisis:

1. **Provide financial support and paid leave to caregivers**, including monetary support for emergency childcare, disability, and elderly care and extend paid leave to all employees, including hourly, service and retail workers, covering sick leave and leave to care for dependents. Messaging around care should encourage women and men to take the time and resources they need to care for themselves and their dependents.
2. **Share resources around domestic violence to all employees** on how to report and access domestic violence support services (such as national/local hotlines and hyperlinks to local domestic violence services<sup>5</sup>) in employee communication, relevant HR resources and in consultation with experts. Allow employees to report domestic abuse through existing employee assistance programs. Provide monetary or in-kind support to domestic violence services.
3. **Ensure equal representation of women on internal COVID-19 taskforces**. A gender-sensitive and inclusive response can only be achieved if those designing it are representative of the workforce. Women should be equally represented on any internal taskforce, in addition to other groups, including, racial and ethnic minorities, and the LGBTQI+ community. Gender-related Employee Resource Groups are important partners to develop response plans supportive of all employees, including women and other vulnerable groups.
4. **Support women throughout your supply chain** by working with suppliers to ensure a gender-responsive approach to their employment practices and that workers are getting paid and can access their wages, by cash or digital transfer. Ensure workers have access to accurate information about personal hygiene, social distancing and COVID-19. Actively support women-owned businesses by guaranteeing payments and orders, providing advanced payments where possible, and supporting them to shift production to in-demand products. Support local organizations in sourcing communities to provide work with local women on job skills, retraining, and access to health, food, and domestic violence services. Gender-disaggregated data for suppliers will be critical to track the differentiated impacts on women over time and changes in procurement from women-owned businesses.
5. **Disaggregate all relevant data by gender** to track and monitor the differentiated impacts on women and men, including the breakdown of lay-offs, furloughs, and wage and bonus cuts. As the impacts of COVID-19 will likely be felt over many years, companies should continue to track this even after the crisis and look for signs of gendered impacts on promotions, pay increases, part-time work and turnover.
6. **Advocate for a gender-responsive and inclusive recovery**. As previous crises have shown, the impacts on gender equality will likely be severe and long-lasting. Ensuring a gender-sensitive recovery can mitigate the negative impacts on women in terms of reduced wages and savings, unemployment, and risks of violence and provide an opportunity to build a better future for all. BSR is committed to working with its members to meet the moment and build a different future through collaboration and [rethinking a 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Contract](#) that prioritizes inclusivity and diversity.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.keringfoundation.org/coronavirus-and-lockdown-specialist-organizations-mobilize-ensure-support-and-resources-victims>