



@WOMEN RK

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As the world was reeling under the dreaded pandemic, there was another virus that was affecting social structures.
Working women across the world were leaving the workforce, almost en masse.

At Aspire For Her, we realized the need to have India-centric data that reflected the state of working women in our country.
And from this idea, was born the Women@Work Report 2021.

Madhura Dasgupta Sinha, Founder & CEO of Aspire For Her, has the vision to add 1 million women to the workforce by 2025 by motivating women to enter and stay in the workforce. She roped in Dr. Nayan Mitra, Founder of Sustainable Advancements.

An acclaimed author and thought leader, Nayan put together a plan to reach out to almost 1000 women, through in-depth discussions, interviews and surveys. We heard the voices of the young starters, who were finding it difficult to enter employment, and of the entrepreneurs, who struggled to keep their small business afloat, of the mid-career professionals, who lost their jobs and their peace of mind due to continued lockdowns.

This is a comprehensive research report, with data and an analysis. It has stories of women from all walks of life.

Helped by the many mentors at Aspire For Her, and by the members of our young community, and many supporters and well-wishers, I know this is a step forward in the journey towards a more equal and equitable workforce in India."

- Poornima Shenoy
Chief Executive Officer, Hummingbird Advisors

"I follow traditions, yet I am contemporary ...
I nurture strong individuals that create stronger society.

I give them roots, yet let them glide.

I question, I answer, I argue, I fight,
I deliver, I foster, I stand by what is right!

I am, what I am!

I am proud to be a woman ... of today!"

- Dr. Nayan Mitra



ASPIRE FOR HER FOUNDATION

Aspire For Her (www.aspireforher.org) was launched on March 8, 2020 (Women's Day) with the mission to motivate **women** to enter and stay in the workforce. In the last year, **Aspire For Her** has built a strong community of 30,000 members and supporters, partnered with leading corporates like Barclays, IBM, Cisco, JP Morgan Chase, VMWare etc.; featured on national television and tied up with more than 300 educational institutions. Thousands of women are getting inspired to turn their career aspirations into action - from young college women to senior professionals across all corners of the world. It has grown to a community where mentors share their wealth of experiences, where learning meets curiosity, and dreams find destinations. As **Aspire For Her** completes one year, on Women's Day, we are proud to publish one of India's most comprehensive research reports **Women@Work** - and how the world changed for India's working women due to COVID-19, in partnership with **Sustainable Advancements**.

- **Madhura Das Gupta Sinha, Founder, Aspire For Her**

SUSTAINABLE ADVANCEMENTS

Sustainable Advancements (www.sustainableadvancements.com) is a woman-owned enterprise that is dedicated towards promoting the 5 Ps of sustainable development goals - people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership through Advocacy and Implementation. It delivers world-class teaching, promotes latest research, publication and consultancy using innovative, original and scholarly materials and enriches public discourse on various aspects of sustainability, corporate governance, business ethics, and Corporate Social Responsibility through forums, conferences, peer-to-peer exchange and expert-to-practitioner dialogue. Thinktanks, Companies, Universities, Foundations like Indian Institute of Corporate Affairs (IICA), NitiAayog, Powergrid Corporation, IndusInd Bank, Great Lakes, Levin Sources, Charities Aids Foundation, Smile Foundation have benefitted from our services. This innovative approach in creating original content and knowledge dissemination aids in bridging the gaps between ideas and actions, communities and businesses, India and rest of the world, thus moving a bit closer towards attaining sustainability. **Sustainable Advancements** provides major improvement in the existing service by not only being a pioneer in the field of original research, publication and knowledge creation on the sustainable development goals and allied fields but more so with a world acclaimed expert committee and renowned international collaborators, who are equipped to deliver some of the best discourses/ researches, consultancy and training on the subject. Through this research on **Women@Work** in collaboration with **Aspire For Her**, **Sustainable Advancements** aims to impact multiple **#SDGs**, viz. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 16, 17 and **#ChooseToChallenge** the status quo.

- **Dr. Nayan Mitra, Founder-Director, Sustainable Advancements**

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This publication is a comprehensive study that aims to understand the effect of COVID-19 on the women workforce in the formal sector in India. It summarizes the research as conducted by the **Aspire for Her Foundation (AFH)** and **Sustainable Advancements (OPC) Private Limited** during the third quarter of the financial year 2020-2021 on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their work, and has correlated them according to four variables - industry sector, occupational status, work experience and hierarchical position.

Since COVID-19 hit upon our lives, work-life balance has been adversely affected especially for working women who have been juggling between work commitments and unpaid care responsibilities. That is why it has become an urgent need to study the effect of COVID-19 on the women workforce in India.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the researchers as derived from the primary and secondary research collected in the months of October - December, 2020 - six months after the pandemic set in, in India.

With a deep understanding into the psyche of the Indian working woman, the research throws up the clear need for a community just for them, to meet some of the challenges which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. There is a need for women to connect and communicate with each other, to discuss common barriers and obstacles in the professional journey.

The research should be the foundation of our work with women's communities in India and their evolving needs. Especially in the pandemic-riddled world, it is imperative to build online communities, which come together through shared pain. These communities need support and career resources - like mentors and role models, learning and skilling paths, career previews and opportunities, and most importantly, the ability to learn and grow with peers. Also, we need to realise that 'working women' in India, are by no means a homogeneous demography and so it is important to offer sharply directed resources to different networks within the community (say, like women in banking technology or women returning to work or aspiring entrepreneurs).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABBREVIATIONS

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease – 2019
US	United States
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
SGB	Small and Growing Businesses
UNGC	United Nations Global Compact
FLPP	Female Labour Force Participation
INR	Indian National Rupee
TUC	Trades Union Congress
CMIE	Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy
ILO	International Labor Organization
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
USA	United States of America
UN	United Nations
USD	United States Dollar

OUR PRIMARY RESEARCH

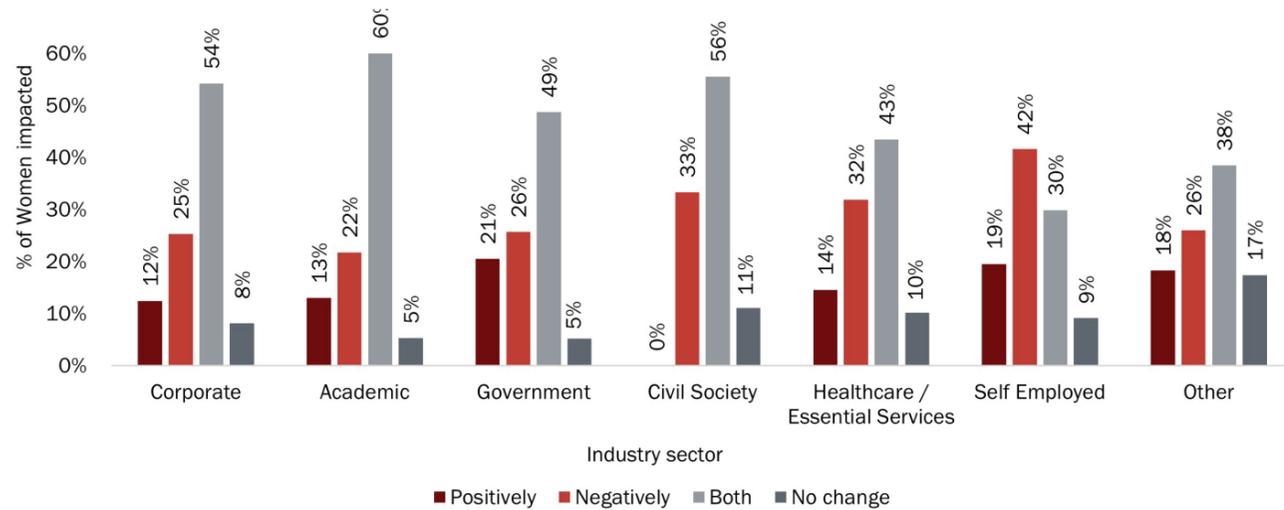
To understand the impact of COVID-19 on Indian working women, we conducted a comprehensive research with a sample size of 800 women across various industry sectors, occupational status, work experience, and hierarchical positions. Our sample size belonged mainly to the metropolitan cities of Mumbai (38.8%), Kolkata (19.8%), Bangalore (7.8%), Delhi (6.3%), Chennai (5.0%), and Hyderabad (1.6%), while 20.9% of the respondents were from Other cities.

This Synoptic Report summarizes the research as conducted by the **Aspire For Her Foundation (AFH)** and **Sustainable Advancements (OPC) Private Limited** during the third quarter of the financial year 2020-2021 on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the women workforce in the formal sector in India, which has then been correlated according to four variables - industry sector, occupational status, work experience and hierarchical position.

To know more, please request access to the detailed research report. Write to us at support@aspireforher.org

INDUSTRY SECTOR – SUMMARY

FIGURE 1: EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON WORKING WOMEN BASED ON INDUSTRY SECTOR



The research had the highest representation from the Corporate sector (41%), followed by the Academic (21%), Other (13%), Self Employed (10%), Healthcare / Essential Services (9%), Government (5%) and Civil Society (1%). While all the sectors are self-explanatory, the ‘Other’ sector comprises of women who are currently in some other sector or are not currently in employment (Figure 1).

In which sectors were women affected the most?

Most women in each sector felt they have been both – negatively and positively impacted by the pandemic. **In no sector was the positive impact more than the negative impact. In fact, the negative impact on the Self Employed (41.6%), Civil Society (33.3%) and Healthcare/Essential Services (31.9%) far outstripped the positive impact.** Women in the Self-Employed segment who were negatively impacted state their reason as having to work harder/longer during this pandemic, followed by financial worries; while the reasons for women in civil societies being negatively impacted could be that the funding priority for some of the issues that they were already working on got diverted to health care. Moreover, the lockdown and subsequent social distancing rule greatly jeopardized the dynamics of the civil society organizations that strived on physical connect. The respondents of Healthcare/Essential Services show a significant gap between the proportion of women positively (14.5%) and negatively (31.9%) impacted, where some of the reasons perceived were increased exposure to the virus, extended work hours, potential decrease of patients due to the fear of safety from the virus in hospitals, feeling burnt out and effect on mental health, increased levels of stress, etc.

Was the impact of the pandemic gender neutral among the various sectors?

50.6% of women working in the academic sector and the government sector (42.1%) felt they were worse off as compared to men. Of the women working in the government sector, only 47.4% felt that the pandemic impacted both men and women equally, and 42.1% of them felt that women were worse off. This is also replicated in the healthcare and essential services segment with 46.4% and 39.1% respectively. **Majority of the women however felt that the pandemic impacted both men and women equally, apart from those in the civil sector.**

Is the crisis putting companies at risk of losing female talent?

Majority (54.2%) of the women working in the Corporate sector felt that they were both negatively and positively impacted due to the pandemic and the **25.3% of women in this sector felt they were negatively impacted as 54.2% of them had to work harder/longer to achieve deadlines, 48.8% of them stated work life balance had become worse, while 36.4% of them also stated they had added burden of housework/childcare/eldercare. 24.7% of them had no increment/ bonus.**

Did COVID-19 throw new challenges for women in the academic sector?

The Academic sector had a significant proportion of women experiencing both negative and positive impact (60.0%) of the pandemic. 21.8% women felt that they were negatively impacted stating that majority of them had to work harder / longer, while 41.8% of them also stated they had added burden of housework/ childcare/ eldercare. **Adapting to an online video medium to render educational services was also difficult to adapt to.**

Did government employees face additional worries?

Most of the women working in the government sector, who were negatively impacted were **worried about getting exposed to the virus while going to office (43.6%) and a lot of them also stated that they had to work harder/longer (38.5%).** Similarly, a large proportion of them (35.9%) who had to work from home stated they had added burden of housework/childcare/eldercare. Lastly, 23.1% of them also mentioned no increment/bonus.

How did the pandemic impact Women working in Civil Societies?

About 55.6% women working in civil societies were also both negatively and positively affected, however, 33.3% were negatively affected and the rest 11.01% felt no change. The possible reasons for this could be that the **funding priority for some of the issues that the civil societies were already working on got diverted to health care. Moreover, the lockdown and subsequent social distancing rule greatly jeopardized the dynamics of the civil society organizations that strived on physical connect.**

What bothered the healthcare and essential services sector?

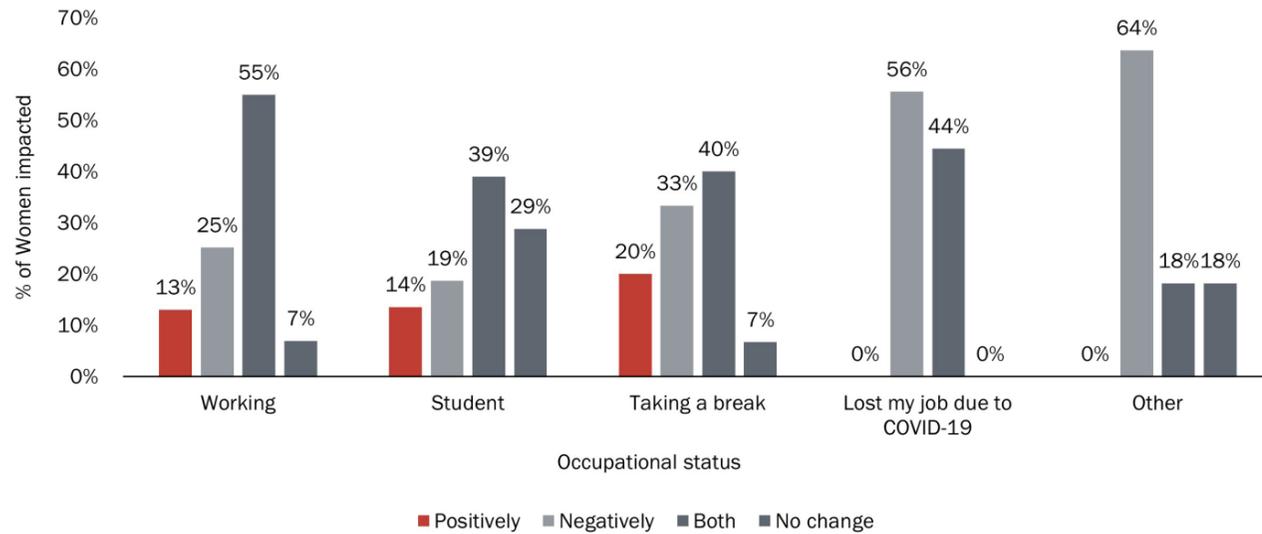
According to our survey, women health workers **faced additional care work at home (31.9%) as well as double burden and longer shifts at work (26.1%).** Also, 20.3% of the women negatively impacted, were worried of getting exposed to the virus while going to work.

Why were the self-employed women affected most?

The Self-employed category had the highest percentage of respondents that were negatively affected by COVID-19 at 41.6%. 27.3% of them that were negatively impacted state their reasons as having to work harder/longer during this pandemic, followed by financial worries at 26.0%. Meanwhile, 20.8% of the negatively impacted women had to shut down their business due to cancelled projects, unsatisfactory financing, etc.

OCCUPATIONAL STATUS – SUMMARY

FIGURE 2: EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON WORKING WOMEN ACCORDING TO THEIR OCCUPATIONAL STATUS



The highest representation among the various Occupational status has been from the Working Group (72.1%), followed by Student (7.4%), Other (2.8%), Lost job due to COVID-19 (2.3%) and Taking a break (1.9%). All the positions are self-explanatory, while, 'Other' constitutes of women who have not started working.

What was the Indian working woman's experience in this pandemic?

The proportion of working women that were negatively impacted was 25.1% and those that were both positively and negatively impacted was 54.9%. These numbers combined indicate that over **80% of working women were negatively impacted in some form**. 38.5% of working women said they were adversely affected by added burden of housework/ childcare/eldercare and 43.7% stated that work life balance has become worse. This is understandable as the average age of these women is 37 years among which 52.7% had children.

What is the way ahead for women who lost their jobs due to COVID-19?

2.3% of the respondents lost their job due to the pandemic. It is a **significant number when extrapolated and applied to the female workforce of the country**. 55.6% of the women in this survey who lost their jobs due to COVID-19 were negatively impacted whereas the rest 44.4% felt they were both positively and negatively impacted. However around 78% of them mentioned being affected by financial worries.

Why were female students comparatively better off?

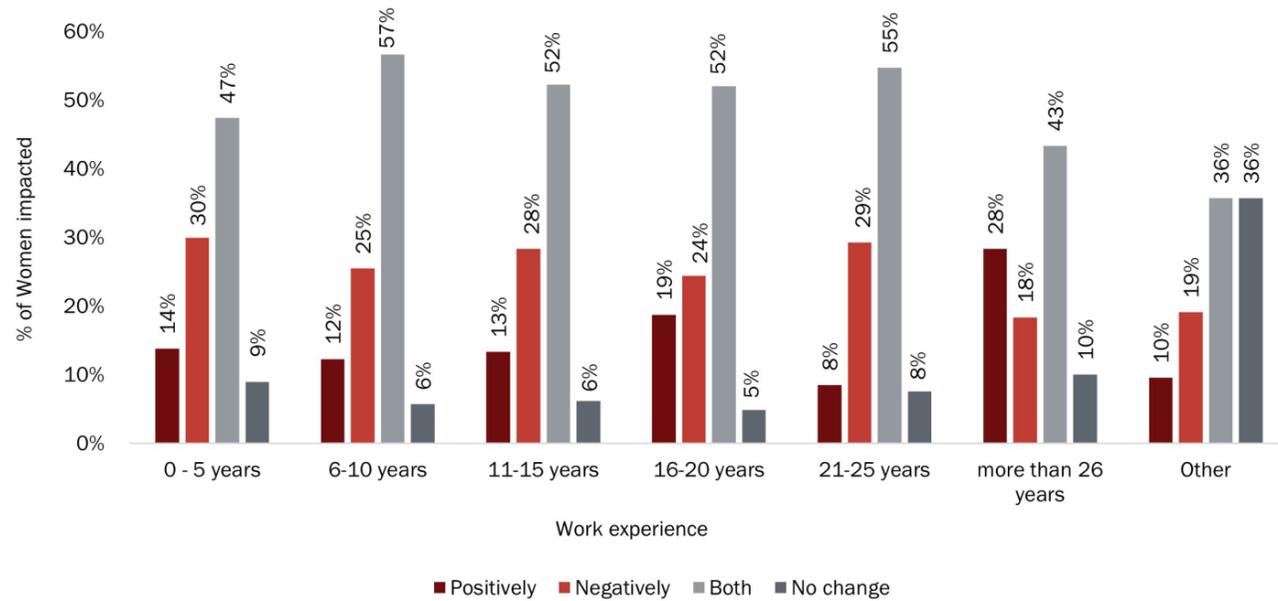
The proportion of female students that were positively affected due to the pandemic stood at 13.6% and those that were negatively affected was 18.6%. The proportion of female students that experienced 'No Change' was 28.8%, relatively a very high statistics for the "No Change" response. This could be because students were relatively shielded from the pandemic compared to those already in the work force or about to enter it. **While the student community had challenges of their own, such as cancelled classes, online teaching, lack of clarity about examination, attending classes/lectures from home, etc.; they did not have to face a stagnant economy, pay cuts, and job losses.**

Has the pandemic worsened the gender divide among the various occupational status?

61.1% women who lost their jobs due to COVID-19 felt women to be worse off than men, followed by women who took a break at 46.7%, closely followed by working women at 42.3%, and students at 35.6%. **This trend indicates that women suffered on the professional front due to factors beyond industry dynamics and recessionary period caused due to pandemic. There were clearly gender based disparities in the pandemic experience for men and women. These could be stemming from differential treatment of women in the workforce, or a disproportionate share of household responsibilities.** It is possible that the impact on men was limited to the industry/employment related factors only, and hence only up to 5.1% of respondents feel men are worse off.

WORK EXPERIENCE – SUMMARY

FIGURE 3.2: EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON WORKING WOMEN DEPENDING UPON THEIR WORK EXPERIENCE



The survey had the following representation in work experience - the highest being from women who have 0-5 years (33%), followed by 16-20 years (16%), 11-15 years (15%), 21-25 years (14%), 6-10 years (14%) and more than 26 years (8%) of practice.

Why women with the least work experience were the most severely impacted?

We found that women who are early in their careers, with work experience of 0-5 years were most adversely impacted (30.0%), closely followed by women who have 21-25 years of experience (29.2%). **The reasons cited for this negative impact were increased working hours (20.3%), work-life balance becoming worse (16.7%), added burden of housework (10.6%), no increment/bonus (10.0%), financial worries (5.5%), and a pay-cut (5.2%).** A few self-employed women also mentioned having to shut down their businesses. Women who had work experience of 0-5 years were mostly women in Entry level/Junior Roles, who were at the nascent stages of their career and were subject to the threat of job loss and lack of alternate opportunities.

Did the varied burden of household responsibilities affect women differently across work experience levels?

The proportion of women that were **negatively impacted by COVID-19 was highest for women who had 0-5 years of experience (30.0%)** followed by those who had 21-25 years of experience (29.2%) and 28.3% among 11-15 years of experience. While we glanced at the reasons for the impact on women in less experienced/junior roles, the reasons for negative impact on women with 21-25 years' experience could be the fact that over 93.4% of them had children.

Is the disparity between impact on men and women worse for experienced women?

49.6% of women with 16-20 years of experience perceived women to be worse off than men, followed by women with more than 26 years' experience at 43.1%, 11-15 years at 42.5%, 6-10 years at 38.1%, 21-25 years at 37.7%, and 0-5 years at 36.0%. It is evident here that women who have moved up the the management ladder feel that the impact of the pandemic seems to be worse for women than men. **According to the survey, the negative impact on men was unanimously less than the impact on women, since mere 1% - 5% of respondents feel men were worse off than women.**

Why were women worse off than men during the pandemic?

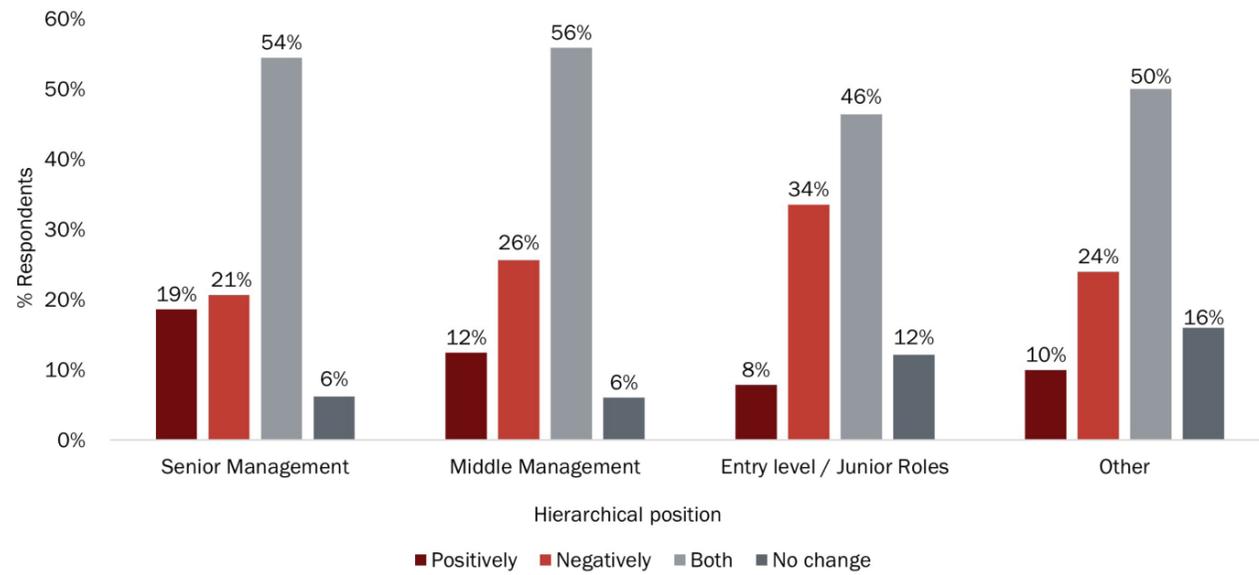
Over 85% women in the range of over 11 years of experience are married and in fact, a higher proportion of these women lived with in-laws than married women in Junior Roles. **Marriage and living with a spouse and in-laws can significantly increase expectations of household duties for women, and with longer work hours in a work from home set-up, these women can bear the brunt of this dual role as a working professional and a care giver.** This explains why, as women move higher in their field of occupation, they have a more grinding experience than men.

Do the reasons for the negative impact on women change with work experience?

The most common response received was having to "Work longer and harder", thus leading to a worsened work-life balance. Women with up to 15 years of experience cited this issue the most frequently, followed by (25.7%), (23.0%) and (19.3%) women from the work experience segments of 11-15 years, 0-5 years and 6-10 years, respectively. In the 16-20 years' work-experience bracket, (50.4%) of the working women cited the reason as "Added burden of housework, childcare, and eldercare", more than any other work experience category. **It is evident, older women tend to have more household responsibilities, with older parents and young children.** Majority of the women also had to take pay cuts and did not receive any increments or bonuses due to businesses trying to cut costs across their segments.

HIERARCHICAL POSITION – SUMMARY

FIGURE 4: EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON WORKING WOMEN ACCORDING TO THEIR HIEARARCHICAL POSITION



The highest representation has been from the Middle Management (42%), followed by Senior management (22%), Entry level/Junior management (21%), and Other (15%). While all the positions are self-explanatory, 'Other' comprises of women who are currently not in employment, or who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

Why women in Senior Management had an equal positive and negative impact?

Nearly 18.6% women in Senior management were positively impacted and at the same time, 20.7% of them stated that they were negatively impacted. This could be due to **contrasting effects of increased household burden and unexpected improvement in the work schedule due to work from home**. While the positive factors include flexible work timings, being able to look after both their child and work, and saving on travel time; the negative aspects included having to work harder and longer hours along with the added burden of housework/childcare/eldercare.

What was the effect on Middle Management?

Middle Management had a negative impact from the pandemic, due to the direct relationship between age and seniority of position. 25.6% of the Middle Management reflected this in the survey. They are more likely to have younger kids and be burdened with childcare responsibilities. **Their average age was 37 years and over 52% of them had children, while 11.7% of them had children under the age of 10**. Further, over 16.0% of them did not have any household help. With many companies attempting to cut costs, they also faced the stress of uncertain employment.

Is the impact of increased household burden less severe for entry level and Junior roles?

Entry Level/Junior Role category had the highest proportion of women that were negatively affected at 33.6%. Around 50.7% of the Junior Role women have stated long hours and the burden of work as their reason for the negative effect. The psychological effect of long working hours, a breakdown of the office-home divide, and the discomfort of acclimatizing to a new workplace virtually could be some of the potential causes.

However, a deeper insight can be obtained when the reasons for this impact are studied. 25.0% stated no increment or bonus as a reason equally with added burden of housework/childcare/eldercare, followed by financial worries (17.1%), pay cut (15.0%) and not getting promotion (11.4%). **When compared on a relative basis to women higher up on the management hierarchy, women in Entry level and Junior Roles were more impacted by the financial/employment aspects of the pandemic, and less impacted by gender-based disparities such as a disproportionate share of household responsibilities.**

How did the pandemic affect the gender divide with respect to hierarchical position?

44.8% women in senior management perceived women to be worse off than men, closely followed by middle management at 43.2% and Entry Level/Junior Role at nearly 37.1%. **This trend indicates that as women move up the management ladder, there is a clear perception of widening of the gap between impact of the pandemic on men and on women.** It is possible that the impact on men was limited to the industry/employment related factors only, and hence only 1- 4.5% of respondents feel men are worse off.

What is the 'dual burden' of the Indian Working Woman?

82.1% and 66.5% of Senior and Middle Management women are married, compared to 24.3% Entry/Junior Level women. In fact, a higher proportion of married Middle Management women lived with In-laws than married women in Junior roles. Only 21.0% of married Senior management women, and 24.6% of married Middle Management women received help from their spouses. **With longer work hours and a work from home set-up, these women bear the brunt of the dual role as a working professional and a care giver.** As a result, women in Senior management strongly felt that women were worse off during the pandemic.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The pandemic has had a perceptible impact on women in various stages of their lives, across different industry sectors, occupational status, work experience, and hierarchical positions. This research not only provides an in-depth understanding of this impact, but also adds a gender lens on how factors such as family composition, marital status, children and domestic work has influenced the female experience in this pandemic.

The pandemic has brought upon economic insecurity, job loss, broadening of gender gap and income loss today. The consequences on education and employment will be long lasting, and if unaddressed, will reverse hard-won gains in gender equality. It will have a snowballing effect on the lives of women and girls for years to come and the fallout will be more severe for the most vulnerable of them.

The call for action needs to be now. Suitable policies, programs, and implementation of new remote approaches by the government are required to ensure that the undesirable impacts of the outbreak are addressed.

Some of the indicative (not conclusive) steps that governments and businesses can take to mitigate the adverse economic impacts of COVID-19 on women are as follows:

Reconciliation of paid and unpaid work

Provide all primary caregivers with paid leave and reduced or flexible working arrangements. Provide essential workers with childcare services. More efforts are also needed to engage citizens and workers in public campaigns that promote equitable distribution of care and domestic work between men and women.

Support for women-owned and women-led businesses

Businesses owned and led by women should receive specific grants and stimulus funding, ease of tax burdens as well as subsidized and state-backed loans. Economic relief should similarly target sectors and industries where women constitute a majority.

Support for women workers

Implement gender-responsive social protection systems to support income security for women to affordable and quality childcare services which will enable more women to be in the labour force. Bridging the gender pay gap is urgent, and it begins by enacting laws and policies that guarantees equal pay for work of equal value and stop undervaluing the work done by women.

Provide incentives to businesses to maintain a diversity portfolio

Businesses to provide special incentives to maintain a diversity portfolio and also to increase and maintain women recruits. Employers can provide support to their employees by making flexible working the norm, leading with empathy and trust, ensuring that reward, succession, and promotion processes address unconscious bias, creating learning opportunities that fit within the employees' daily lives.

Empower women to enter the workforce

Young women to be encouraged to enter the workforce and develop perseverance to keep her job needs to be made into a structured life skill development and inculcated from school.

Provide family counselling

Sensitize men and other family members to support women in domestic work, child care and other care services. This should be done at all levels – government, business, academic institutions and other social structures and institutions. Media can play an important role here to spread the word.

Encourage career after family

Encourage businesses to employ women in suitable roles after a break. Provide adequate skilling and upskilling for her to gain confidence. Encourage 'gig' economy for women.

Direct income support to women

Introduce economic support packages, including direct cash-transfers (which would mean giving cash directly to women who are poor or lack income), expanded unemployment benefits, tax breaks, and expanded family and child benefits for vulnerable women and their families.

Support for informal workers

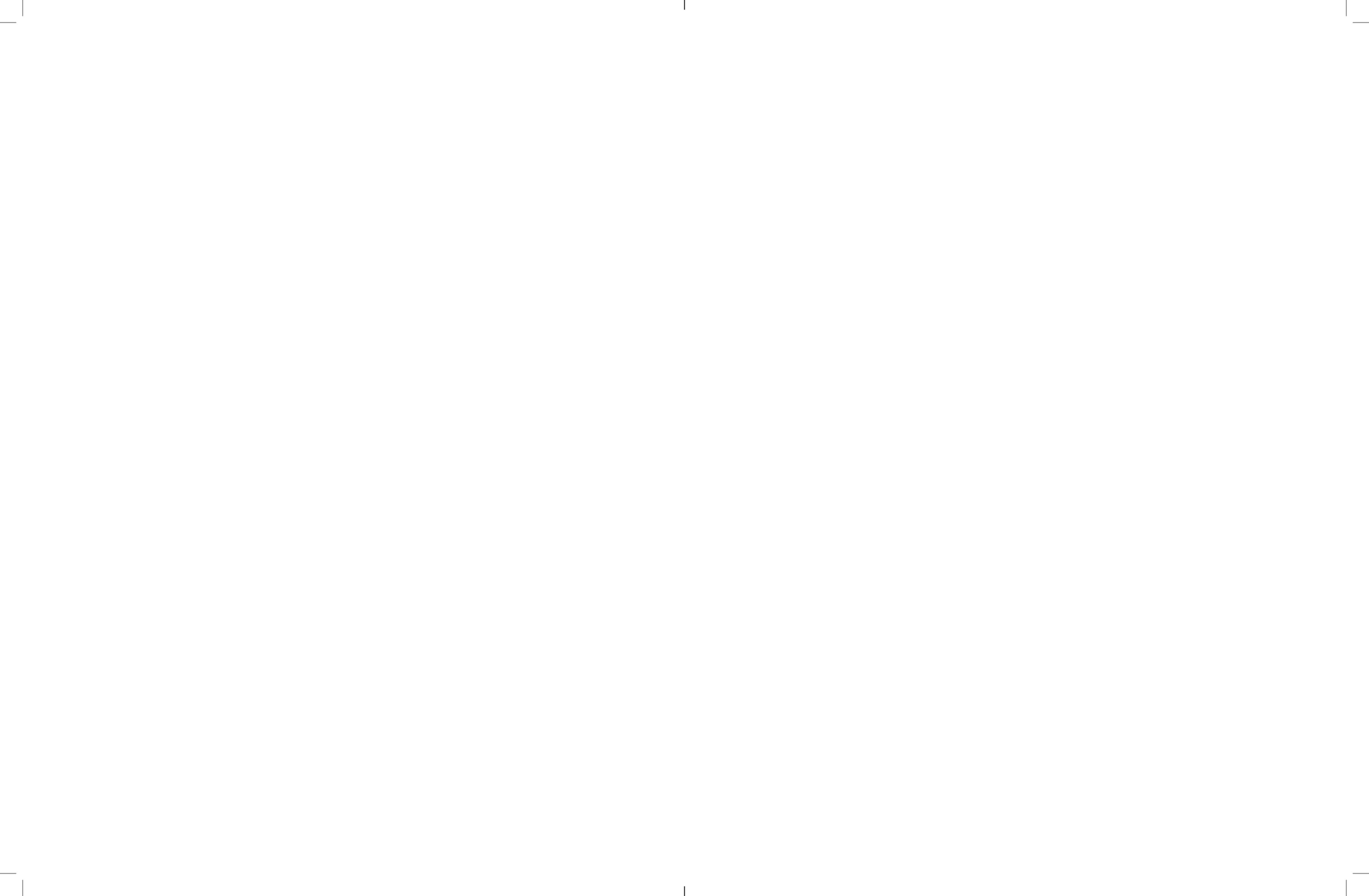
Provide social protection and benefits to informal workers. For informal workers left unemployed, cash transfers or unemployment compensation can help ease the financial burden, as can deferring or exempting taxes and social security payments for workers in the informal sector.

With a deep understanding into the psyche of the Indian working woman, the research throws up the clear need for a community just for them, to meet some of the challenges which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. There is a need for women to connect and communicate with each other, to discuss common barriers and obstacles in the professional journey.

The research should be the foundation of our work with women's communities in India and their evolving needs. Especially in the pandemic-riddled world, it is imperative to build online communities, which come together through shared pain. These communities need support and career resources - like mentors and role models, learning and skilling paths, career previews and opportunities, and most importantly, the ability to learn and grow with peers. Also, we need to realise that 'working women' in India, are by no means a homogeneous demography and so it is important to offer sharply directed resources to different networks within the community (say, like women in banking technology or women returning to work or aspiring entrepreneurs).

Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations Member States in 2015 as part of its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims to achieve gender equality and to empower all girls and women. This International Women's Day, 2021 let us all unite to take a pledge: **to encourage more 'Women in Leadership' who can empower and support more and more women and men to achieve an equal future in COVID-19 world! The time for action is NOW. Let's #ChooseToChallenge.**







The research Women@Work brings out important recommendations based on the findings. It was heartening to see Aspire for Her and Sustainable Advancements created correlations between various aspects of personal life and its effect on professions. Gig economy is here to stay. We need to better the diversity equation in India together.”

- Shabnam Siddiqui
Executive Director, UN Global Compact Network India



I applaud institutions like Aspire for Her & Sustainable Advancements who are actively studying the impact of COVID-19 on women entrepreneurs, whilst also providing solutions through their mentorship efforts.”

- Navya Naveli Nanda
Co-Founder & CMO, AARA Health
Founder, Project Naveli