

# COVID-19 Reforms and Considerations: A Human Resource Perspective

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## Abstract

*December 2019 will be known in the history of mankind as a year that changed the course of corporate work environment and normal human lifecycle. China claimed the first case of an indifferent and unknown form of pneumonia on 31 December 2019. This rare form of virus spread like wild fire and gripped the entire China and was now ready to create world havoc. The World Health Organization (WHO) took cognizance of the fast spreading virus and on 11th March 2020 declared it a global pandemic. It was named as COVID-19 following the year it came into existence. The pandemic has shattered the dimensions of work culture, business environment, health infrastructure, technological infrastructure, social existence, physical, and mental wellbeing of individuals and business sustainability. Precautionary measures undertaken by the governments and authorities concerned in the form of lockdown and imposing ban on socializing have adversely affects businesses and raised questions of survival, challenging the world economy. Loss of jobs, reduced pay scales, incentives cuts, overnight expectations to adapt new technology and restructured human resource strategies have adversely affected the psychological wellbeing of the working class. From the Human resource perspective, several unseen and unpredicted challenges like social stigma and workplace alienation (for those tested positive), gender inequality, technological adaptation for old demographics have emerged as challenges for world leader and managers. The case brings to light, unseen and unpredicted human resource challenges and remedial measures. Also, possibilities of innovations in restructuring human resources policies to curb the above mentioned challenges shall be discussed.*

**Keywords:** Gender inequality, technological adaptation, work place alienation

## INTRODUCTION

December 2019 marked the existence of the unknown virus that affected millions of Chinese and was spreading fast to conquer the world and devastate the world economy (McKibbin & Roshen, 2020), [1] health infrastructure, mental health, business sustainability, and existence of mankind. The World Health Organization (WHO) took cognizance of the same and on 11th March 2020 declared it a global pandemic, it was named as COVID-19 following the year it came into existence.

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(Dirani KM, Abadi M, Alizadeh A, Barhate B, Garza RC, Gunasekara N, Ibrahim G, and Majzun Z, 2020) [2] state that the pandemic was unexpected and has posed potential threat to existence of mankind and challenged the global economic index. The global crisis has affected all sectors be it be production, manufacturing, education, health, small and medium business, service sectors, pharmaceutical companies (Kniffin K.M., et al., 2021) [3]. The pandemic created such an unprecedented position for which none of us were prepared. Millions of causalities and medical

emergency requirements popped up overnight challenging the health care systems and existing infrastructures, the precautionary and preventive measures undertaken by the government induced an emergency like situation that questioned sustainability and led to economic turmoil (Gopinath 2020) [4].

The Central and State governments imposed a lockdown as a preventive measure, as the course of treatment was not known and the virus was fast spreading (McGuire, A.L., et al.; 2020) [5]. Several organizations were forced to stop their business operations, raising questions of sustainability (Gallagher, 2020) [6]. The employees were either underpaid or not paid salaries as the business operations were forcefully shut. Unemployment, loss of pay and uncertainty has devastated the mental wellbeing of salaried labours and employees and increased the cases of mental trauma and psychological disorders (Walker et al., 2020) [7].

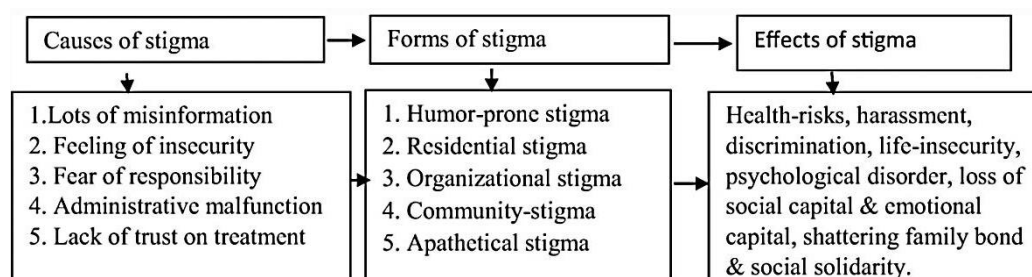
A large section of employees working were tested positive for the virus and were forced to stay at home and quarantine themselves in quarantine centers to prevent the spread of the pandemic. These guidelines were issued by world health authorities as there is still no specific cure, medication and treatment for evading the virus attack.

The act of isolation and mystery surrounding the virus has led to several psychological disorders, trauma and social stigma for the infected patient (Huang, C., Wang, Y., Li, X., Ren, L., Zhao, J., Hu, Y., & Cao, B., 2020) [8, 9]. The causes, forms and effects of stigma can be many and varied. Figure 1 discusses about the social stigma associated with COVID-19.

The employees tested positive for the virus had to counter several myths surrounding the cause and also face work place alienation. Post recovery, regaining normalcy was a biggest hurdle as fellow colleagues and work mates had their own reservations and did not prefer working with recovered employees.

Overnight adoption of the new normal-Work from Home (WFH) has posed in new challenges pertaining to technological infrastructure and training needed for old demographics. Private spaces at home have been intruded by work places and challenged the privacy and social connects. From an organization perspective accountability of work allotted, managing workforce, performance measures, follow ups and providing technological infrastructure have emerged as major challenges. Work from home has become a new normal, challenging existing team composition. Blending the technological compatibility of the senior employees and extracting work in a virtual environment have emerged as major challenges.

Changing family systems and inclination of individuals, towards moving away from home town for better employment opportunities have restructured the family into is Dual Income Single Kid-DISK families. This transition calls for gender inequality raising issues of unequal distribution of work, personally at domestic level and professional level during the COVID era.



**Figure 1.** Social stigma associated with COVID-19: Causes, forms and effects (Developed by Ashek Mahmud & M. Rezaul Islam). (Source: *International Journal of Community Well-Being* (2020).



**Figure 2.** Task sharing opportunities during work from home, elaborating gender inequality.  
(Source: <https://www.facebook.com/madovermarketing/posts/4072243216174915>)

Figure 2 illustrates the volume of work put in by a women working from home compared to a man. Women at home are expected to take care of the daily chores, manage children and also work and yet be professional. The unpaid labour burdens a female more compared to a man and raises issues of gender inequality. The COVID era has intruded privacy and changed the definition and meaning of personal and professional work times. The roles of women need to be redefined at least at a professional level and managed at a personal level at home while working from home.

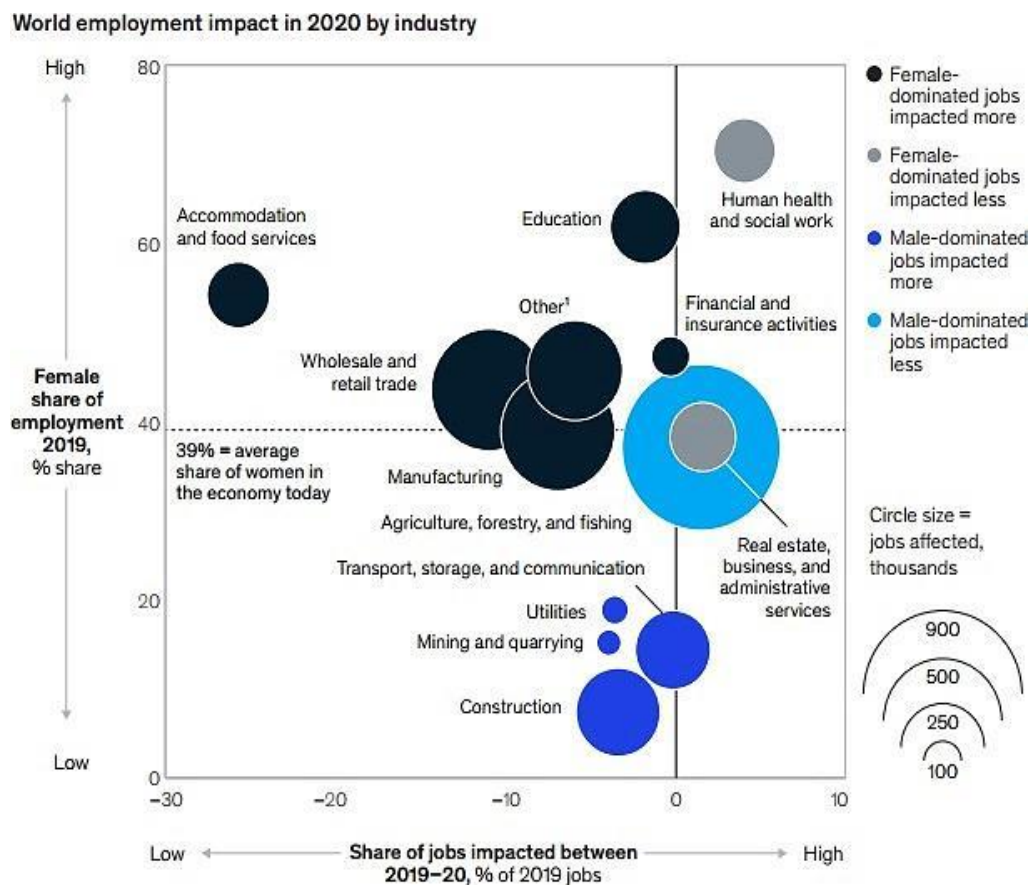
The think tanks of the company and the policies adopted by leaders are very crucial in such times of crises that contribute to quality of life and wellbeing of mankind.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The given state of the pandemic calls for serious thoughts and consideration studies related to working conditions for making workplace better in terms of self-sufficiency, community belonging, proficiency (Deci & Ryan, 2000) [10, 11], safety needs (Kasser 2009) [12] and corrective measures.

The pandemic has negatively affected the mental wellbeing and has been the main reason for augmented nervousness, despair, and lack of self-worth and stress (Rajkumar 2020) [13]. The people affected by the pandemic have witnessed a tenfold increase in depressing emotions and concern for social risks has been enhanced. This has led to decreased life satisfaction (Li, Wang, Xue, Zhao, & Zhu, 2020).

(Cao et al., 2020) increased apprehensiveness about social and financial stability were the primary concerns of those who had adversely been affected the pandemic.



**Figure 3.** Disproportionately represented share of women in the industries that are expected to decline the most in 2021 due to COVID-19.

(Source: International Labour Organisation, McKinsey in partnership with Oxford economics: McKinseys Global Institute Analysis).

(Lan, Wei, Hsu, Christiani, & Kales, 2020; Maciaszek et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2020) claimed that the most affected sectors in terms of psychological disorder relating consequences were medical care, education and those working in the service sectors.

(Madgavkar, A., White, O., Krishnan, M., Mahajan, D. and Azcue, X., 2020) [14] claimed that the pandemic has devastated and affected a greater world population and has raised serious concerns about gender inequality.

A study states that women’s jobs are 1.8 times more in danger to this crisis than men’s jobs. Women make up for 39% of the global employment and account for 54% of summated job losses. The study identified that, the unpaid care disproportionately carried out by women at home and the pandemic situation currently prevailing is increasing the burden on women more than men and is the major reason for women to quit their jobs to prioritise the home care front. This state is contributing to women unemployment globally even though men and women work in different sectors.

The Figure 3 is a graphical representation of the unemployment survey conducted during the pandemic and the affected sectors in America and India. From an Indian perspective, the major chunk of the unpaid care that is 80 to 90 percent is the responsibility of women. The nature of work in India is still gender specific, irrespective of the profession that men and women work in. The pandemic has adversely affected the women in several ways in terms of increased hours of unpaid child care and managing the daily chores. Statistics prove that 75% of the unpaid care at home is usually managed by women.

The responsibility of managing the family burdens the women and contributes to the possibilities of women staying away from jobs or leadership roles claims the Power of Parity research. In majority of the situations, it is the women who sacrifice their professional careers compared to men. This pandemic situation has overburdened women in terms of job losses and added responsibilities of family and others.

Societal and physiological segregation of women makes the prospects for women more difficult. Most of the women are employed in the service sectors and the Figure 3 displays the impact that the pandemic has had on this sector.

Societal framework and attitudes are responsible for shaping the current state of consequences that women are facing due to pandemic. These aren't new beliefs but rather traditional societal mindsets about the role of women.

### **Motivation, Meaning at Work and Remedial Measures**

The Pandemic has changed the aspects related to mental health and has caused a threat to psychological wellbeing of mankind. Experimental studies confirm the shattering outcomes of work alienation for employees in the form of attitudinal change (reduced work place involvement), behavioural changes (irregularity at workplace and increased absenteeism), adverse health issues leading to burnout, changes in work efficiency (decrease in labour productivity) and compulsive consumption behaviour (alcohol consumption) (Chiaburu, Thundiyil, & Wang, 2013) [15].

Table 1 presents an overview of outcomes pertaining to work place alienation (Kozhina, A.A. and Vinokurov, L.V., 2020), [16] effects of the same on motivation at work and remedial measures to overcome the trauma. It is high time that corporate organisations revamp the policies pertaining to human resource management and adopt remedial measures to overcome the devastating effects of the pandemic on workforce.

### **The E-working Environment and Challenges Posed**

The new normal-work from home has changed the way organizations work. Employees working from home have reduced the cost of running a business. Several companies are also considering, making work from home permanent option (Waizenegger, L., McKenna, B., Cai, W. and Bendz, T., 2020) [17]. There has been an increased demand for enhancing the technological infrastructure. The change in working spectrum has also posed several challenges as mentioned here:

- Absence of dedicated work timings
- Mixed up personal and professional lives
- Need to create personal working spaces at home
- Abridged supervisions leading to reduced efficiency
- Improper communication leading to work ambiguity
- Unclear assessment matrix

Other than the above mentioned challenges, grooming the old demographics to work virtually has also been an area of concern. Not all employees are tech savvy and adaptable. Table 2 elaborates challenges posed by the new normal conditions and remedial measures that can be considered to overcome them. Below is an extract from (Almaiah, M.A., Al Khasawneh, A. and Althunibat, A., 2020) [18] research work and the derived challenges that they have put forth.

### **GENDER EQUALITY AT WORK: A STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE**

The role of women in home and at work needs to be redefined; women play a key role in every aspect of personal and professional workspace, from managing the daily chores to efficiently completing the unpaid labour that comprises of household activities and managing professional workload. Compared to the roles that men play in personal life, women put in more work that goes unrecognized. The Pandemic has further, magnified the stress on women, while working from home as it has blurred the

**Table 1.** Outcomes/motivational effects and measure pertaining to work place alienation.

Outcomes of alienation	Motivational outcomes	Remedial measures
Attitude towards work	Low involvement at work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post recovery counseling at organizational level to the affected and team.</li> <li>• Regular training sessions on meditation and mind grooming techniques on wellness can be conducted.</li> </ul>
Changes in behaviour	Absenteeism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One to one counselling of the staff by an expert psychologist.</li> <li>• Team briefing to clarify myths and realities pertaining to post recovery from COVID.</li> <li>• An empathetic approach for performance measurement towards affected</li> </ul>
Health consequences	Burnout	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing medical aids and insurance for employees affected with COVID.</li> <li>• Conducting free check-up camps and providing the basic medical infrastructure for wellness.</li> <li>• Charting out recreational activities that contribute</li> <li>• to physical and mental well being</li> </ul>
Changes in work efficiency	Decrease in labour productivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of forums for discussing personal and professional issues.</li> <li>• Providing the needed support get the job done.</li> <li>• Being empathetic to resolve work related problems</li> </ul>
Feeling of Powerlessness	Loss of self-esteem and control on happenings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employee empowerment and engagement shall be the prime focus.</li> </ul>
Feeling of Meaninglessness		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining job roles and responsibilities, supported with the needed infrastructure and considerations</li> </ul>
Isolation	Absence of a sense of identification with the organization and fellow workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing Team engagement and community engagement programs can resolve the issue of isolation.</li> <li>• Ensuring the recovered employee works in a team can contribute to the feeling of oneness.</li> </ul>
Self-estrangement	A feeling of work not connected with self-realization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining job roles and importance of the hierarchical positions held.</li> <li>• In-case of irreparable circumstances, Job rotation can be done on a timely basis.</li> </ul>
Side effects	Alcohol consumption and other forms of compulsive consumption behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychiatrist counselling and Rehabilitation enrolment can be the possible measures that can be taken</li> </ul>
Job insecurity	Negative perceptions about employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managements have to frequently establish a communication with entangled employees</li> <li>• Team leaders and managers have to cultivate a healthy organization culture that promotes employee engagement and acknowledges performance</li> </ul>

**Table 2.** Challenges posed by the new normal conditions.

<b>Demographical challenges</b>
<p><b>Description:</b> Age and gender differences leading to compatibility issues have emerged as a major challenge in the virtual work environment. Absence of familiarity and ability to cope up with the new working platforms with old demographics is a challenge that has emerged in the new normal.</p>
<p><b>Scope:</b> Staff Assessment based on technical compatibility, identification of training needs for old demographics, Reworking on forming digital working teams, differentiation of work in terms of their importance and urgency along with strategic work allotment based on technical compatibility.</p>
<b>Technological challenges</b>
<p><b>Description:</b> Although technology is an integral part of the work environment, its importance is enhanced during the pandemic era. Need for virtual forums that support recording of meetings and software’s to safely share data have been valued as never before</p>
<p><b>Scope:</b> Existing technological infrastructure needs to be upgraded to be compatible with latest platforms for business functionality. Also, need to train the employees on usage of technological tools and processes can be undertaken by the organizations</p>

<b>Infrastructural challenges</b>
<b>Description:</b> Work from home has complicated things on a personal front and also on a professional front leading to intrusion of work spaces in personal lives. Need to create a separate work space at home have complicated things; further need for upgraded technological infrastructure has made things more difficult.
<b>Scope:</b> From an organizational perspective, providing top end IT infrastructure can be initiated. But from a personal perspective adapting to the new normal is the only solution. Organizations can consider compensating for the efficient internet connectivity at home.
<b>Change management</b>
<b>Description:</b> Adapting to change is the major challenge that every organization has faced during the pandemic era. Resistance to adoption of new technology and working on digital forums has been challenging. Acceptability approach of experienced employees towards digital working from home has been negative.
<b>Scope:</b> Effective communication and technology support are the solutions to this problem. Employees need to be told the benefits of working from home. Also, 24x7 technological assistance shall be provided by companies to help employees understand the new work environment

space between private and professional life. Although we are all being recognized as a progressive society, we need to take into consideration the below mentioned aspects to bring in gender equality for women in personal and professional life.

### **Efforts to Address the Unpaid Child Care and Daily Chorus to be Taken Seriously**

A major chunk of the household work carried out by women is tagged as responsibility. Interventions have to be made to develop a frame work for rating and paying these initiatives by women. Mouse Genome Informatics-MGI claimed that as per a research conducted globally, the total unpaid work carried by women contributes to \$10 trillion, or 13 percent of global GDP.

### **Introduction of Flexi Programs**

Flexible working hours and timelines that are family friendly need to be accommodated in the administrative policies during the pandemic time.

### **Revamping the Review Systems**

An empathetic approach for work reviews and hierarchical up gradations to be designed taking into consideration the impact of role ambiguity that women face while working from home.

### **Improving the Digital Literacy**

Adopting training programs and creating virtual work places that facilitate working on new technology with the basic internet and computer infrastructure can be adopted.

### **Stimuli for Promoting Women Entrepreneurs**

Subsidized loans and training programs need to be incorporated by competent authorities to develop women entrepreneurship.

## **CONCLUSION**

The pandemic has changed several aspects of personal and professional life. The human resource strategies traditionally adopted, have been challenged and a call for restructuring these polices has been echoed by several experts. The paper has brought to light aspects pertaining to workplace alienation and the adverse effects it has on psychological wellbeing. Also, remedial measures to be undertaken for bringing in the changes have been discussed. The role of the company management and top leadership are crucial in such testing times. Efforts on creating open communication systems, personal and professional counselling of employees, empathetic approach for performance review, and creating a positive environment for employees of organization to ensure stability personally and professionally have been elaborated.

An attempt has also been made to discuss the concerns surrounding working from home and switching the technological infrastructure. Managing virtual teams, reviewing performance, investing

in technological infrastructure and training the old demographics have emerged as challenges for organizations.

Further, discussions pertaining to gender inequality have been put forth. Issues such as unpaid labour, unequal distribution of household work, workplace considerations for women have been elaborated. Intervention pertaining to revision of perspectives governing women at work has been discussed.

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