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Workplace gender equality in the post-pandemic era: Where to next?

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and accelerated many gendered labour market inequalities in Australia and around the world. In this introduction to our special issue, 'Workplace Gender Equality: Where are we now and where to next?', we examine the impact of the pandemic on women's employment, labour force participation, earnings, unpaid care work and experience of gendered violence. We identify five key areas where action is urgently required to create a more equitable post-pandemic recovery: addressing gender-based labour market segregations and discrimination; building access to mutually beneficial flexibility; ensuring a more gender-equitable distribution of unpaid care; confronting gender-based violence at work and beyond; and mobilising union action through gender equality bargaining.

Keywords
COVID-19, equality bargaining, flexibility, gender equality, gender pay gap, gender segregation

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and, in many cases exacerbated, longstanding gendered inequalities at work and at home. Around the world, women were

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disproportionately exposed to the virus at work, as frontline workers in 'essential' industries and occupations. Women also experienced greater job losses as workers in industries most affected by business closures and government-mandated lockdowns. With schools and early childhood education centres closed for weeks or months, women also shouldered a larger burden of unpaid domestic duties at home, and experienced greater risk of domestic violence (Boxall et al., 2020; Cooper and Mosseri, 2020; Craig and Churchill, 2020; Foley and Williamson, 2021; Hill, 2020). Far from being unpredictable, these outcomes reflected decades of gendered inequality. Feminist scholars have long asserted the need to recognise the gendered nature of employment relations (Pocock, 1998; Rubery, 2015); specifically, the way in which gender-based inequality is 'institutionalised in the labour market' (Wajcman, 2000: 184). From the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, there arises an opportunity to establish new directions in workplace gender equality. However, doing so requires explicit recognition that economic crises have gendered impacts that necessitate gender sensitive institutional responses (Bahn et al., 2020; Blanton et al., 2019; Fortier, 2020; Rubery and Rafferty, 2013).

In this introduction to our special issue, 'Workplace Gender Equality: Where are we now and where to next?', we begin by discussing how the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed longstanding gender inequality in the labour market, especially women's concentration in more flexible – and therefore precarious – jobs which attract lower rates of pay. We also discuss how the pandemic intensified the disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic work – and, in some cases, violence – experienced by women at home. Building from this discussion of 'where we are now' in terms of workplace gender inequality, we move to an analysis of 'where to next', drawing on the insights from the articles included in this special issue.

Workplace gender equality: Where are we now?

Women's employment and labour force participation

Unlike previous recessions, which have affected men more severely than women, the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic hit women harder than men (Foley and Williamson, 2021; Hill, 2020). In the early months of the pandemic in Australia, between March and May 2020, more than 800,000 workers lost their jobs. Women accounted for 54% of that number (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a). On account of their overrepresentation in part-time and casual employment in service sectors hardest hit by business closures and pandemic-related shutdowns (such as retail, accommodation and food services, and other professional services), women experienced much sharper drops in their working hours and pay than men. In the 3 months to May 2020, women experienced a 10.8% drop in their working hours, compared to 7.5% for men (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b). Consequently, women's underutilisation rate – a combined measure of unemployment and underemployment, which is usually higher for women than

men (Birch and Preston, 2020) – hit a record 21% in May 2020, compared to 19% for men (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021c). During this period, with schools and early childhood education centres closed across Australia, women were also more likely than men to withdraw from the workforce completely. The number of women participating in the labour force fell by 5.9% between March and May 2020, compared to 4% for men (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a). Breaks in labour force participation have long been shown to have lasting wage-scarring effects, a phenomenon that is particularly acute for women (Borland, 2020; Chalmers and Hill, 2007), suggesting that these pandemic-related interruptions could have significant long-term consequences and compound existing inequalities.

Similar trends were observed elsewhere. In the United States, women accounted for 55% of jobs lost between March and April, owing to their disproportionate employment in service industries such as leisure and hospitality, education and training, and retail (Ewing-Nelson, 2020). The impact was particularly acute for women with children. Using panel data from the U.S. Current Population Survey, Collins et al. (2021a) found that employed women with children reduced their working hours by four to five times more than men with children in the period from February through April 2020. Women with children were also more likely to drop out of the labour market than men with children. In a separate study, Collins et al. (2021b) found that the gap between mothers' and fathers' labour force participation rates grew by 5 percentage points over 2019 levels in jurisdictions where schools had shifted mainly to online instruction. These studies demonstrate that schools and childcare centres are not only vital sites of education and care for children but are also essential workforce supports for women.

Although many of the worst labour market effects seen during the early months of the pandemic had eased by early 2021, once schools and childhood centres were fully reopened and businesses had largely returned to normal operations, the pandemic nonetheless highlighted persistent structural inequalities in women's employment and labour force participation.

The (under)valuation of feminised industries and occupations

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed chronic gender segregations in the workforce, with women overrepresented among many of the industries and occupations deemed 'essential' to the functioning of the economy and society through the crisis. In Australia, as elsewhere, women comprised a significant majority of the workers risking their lives to provide health care, early childhood care and education, retail labour and other essential services. At the onset of the pandemic, women accounted for 88% of registered nurses and midwives, 85% of aged care workers, 96% of early childhood educators and 55% of retail and food and accommodation services workers in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020; Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2020; Social Research Centre, 2017; Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2019). Similarly, in the United States, women workers – and women of colour, in particular – were disproportionately

represented in frontline roles. Women accounted for about one-half of all workers in the United States in 2020, but comprised nearly two-thirds (64.4%) of frontline workers, of which 41.2% were from non-white backgrounds (Rho et al., 2020). Many of these low-wage workers had no choice but to continue working even though they were at greater risk of contracting COVID-19.

The disproportionate exposure of women to the risks associated with frontline work also underlined the persistent undervaluation of feminised industries and occupations. In Australia, women are disproportionately represented among workers earning the national minimum wage or modern award minima (Birch and Preston, 2020), which are 10% lower, on average, in industries and occupations where women predominate (Broadway and Wilkins, 2017). Feminist scholars have long argued that the gender pay gap is not only the result of human capital differences between individual women and men, but is also the product of gendered interpretations of the 'appropriate' wages for work performed by women and men (Grimshaw and Rubery, 2007). These unstated, invisible assumptions about the relative value of women's and men's work are reproduced through regulatory frameworks and wage-setting systems that do not explicitly account for undervaluation as a contributor to pay inequality (for an excellent discussion, see Whitehouse and Smith, 2020). Other scholars have pointed to the way in which hours regulation and 'voice gaps' contribute to the low quality of jobs in feminised sectors (Charlesworth and Heron, 2012; Cooper et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 crisis has raised questions about whether and to what extent the pandemic will force a re-evaluation of the way in which we assess the value of highly feminised industries and occupations. For example, a nationally representative survey of more than 1000 Australians found that 80% of respondents believed that aged care workers should be paid more, and 50% of respondents said they would be willing to pay extra taxes to improve wages and conditions for aged care workers (Ratcliffe and Milte, 2021). A June 2020 poll of 1085 respondents in Australia found that more than half (54%) believed that nurses are underpaid, while 45% said that early childhood teachers are underpaid (Essential Research, 2020). Such findings suggest a potential shift in the societal valuation of care work, but it remains to be seen whether the state can be persuaded to regulate for better pay and conditions in these vital sectors, and whether the public would support the additional costs of such measures.

The distribution of unpaid care work

Feminist scholars have long observed how the 'invisible hand' of modern economic activity is utterly reliant upon the 'invisible heart' of unpaid care work (Folbre, 2001), and that the burden of this unpaid labour is disproportionately borne by women. Long before the pandemic, inflexible workplaces and persistent 'ideal worker' (Williams, 2000) norms have limited women's ability to participate equally in the labour market, with devastating consequences to their long-term economic security, and restricted men's capacity to participate equally in family

life (Charlesworth et al., 2011; Pocock, 2005). The struggle to fit paid work around unpaid child care, elder care and other caring responsibilities has affected women's choice of jobs – pushing them towards lower-paid, more flexible and precarious forms of employment –and their ability to scale the career ladder at the same rate as men (Durbin and Tomlinson, 2014; Goldin and Mitchell, 2017; Rubery, 2015; Tomlinson et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic revealed this longstanding dynamic in stark fashion. With many dual-earner families working from home while caring for children, the burden of unpaid care work was at last rendered 'visible' to many families and some policy makers.

Prior to the pandemic, women in heterosexual households did twice as much unpaid domestic work as men (Wilkins and Lass, 2018). Research suggests that the gender gap in unpaid work at home widened during the pandemic, with schools and childcare centres in many countries closed for weeks or months (Peck, 2020). In Australia, at the height of the nationwide lockdown in 2020, both mothers and fathers increased the amount of time spent on unpaid housework and childcare but, consistent with pre-pandemic patterns, women spent more time on these activities overall (Craig and Churchill, 2020). The additional burden of unpaid care work at home had significant consequences for women's employment. In the United States, Petts et al. (2020) found that when dual-earner parent couples went from having full-time childcare to no childcare at all during the early stages of the pandemic, it was mothers who experienced a greater risk of job loss while fathers' employment remained largely unaffected.

Other studies have pointed to the potential for pandemic-related lockdowns, and the massive shift towards working from home, to disrupt seemingly intractable gender norms regarding the distribution of work and care. Studies conducted in the United Kingdom found that among couples with children, mothers continued to perform the majority of unpaid housework and childcare tasks during the pandemic. However, many of these households also reported that fathers were performing more of these tasks than they were before the pandemic (Chung et al., 2021; Sevilla and Smith, 2020). These studies suggest that greater availability of flexible working, though useful, is not sufficient to disrupt gendered norms regarding the 'appropriate' allocation of paid and unpaid labour in households. Regulations to incentivise and support the involvement of fathers in unpaid caregiving – such as dedicated parental leaves for fathers – are needed to produce lasting change. The introduction of 'fathers' quotas' in Sweden, for example, has increased the use of leave among fathers and boosted their involvement in childcare during the preschool years (Duvander and Johansson, 2012, 2019).

The impact of gendered violence

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the risks and vulnerabilities women face from gender-based violence. Various analyses have revealed a sharp rise in the incidence of domestic violence following the introduction of stay-at-home orders and lockdowns around the world (Arenas-Arroyo et al., 2020; Boserup et al., 2020;

Mittal and Singh, 2020; UN Women, 2020). In Australia, a survey of 15,000 women conducted in May 2020 found that 4.6% of respondents had experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former cohabiting partner in the 3 months from the onset of the pandemic (Boxall et al., 2020). Of those respondents, two-thirds said that the violence had either started or intensified during that time. Many respondents also reported that safety concerns were a barrier to seeking help during the pandemic (Boxall et al., 2020). Studies attempting to parse the cause of this increase in domestic violence have found that financial stress and social isolation – made more acute by social distancing and work from home mandates – were primary contributors to the reported escalation in domestic violence (Beland et al., 2020; Morgan and Boxall, 2020). The relationship between economic dependency and domestic violence is well established (Aizer, 2010; Conner, 2014; Farmer and Tiefenthaler, 1997). Although recent years have seen increased recognition of domestic violence as a workplace issue, in particular with the enactments of new leave entitlements for employees experiencing family and domestic violence in Australia and New Zealand (Williamson et al., 2019), regulatory coverage remains relatively thin.

Workplace gender equality: Where to next?

When we issued a 'call for articles' for this special issue in mid-2019, we had no way to anticipate the challenges that would soon unfold because of COVID-19. Throughout 2020 and 2021, businesses, governments, social partners and workers across the globe were profoundly affected by the socio-economic and healthcare consequences of the pandemic. In this section we briefly overview the findings of the articles in this collection and point to the ways in which they might inform the task of post-pandemic recovery. As we have seen, the labour market impact of COVID-19 was profoundly gendered as it exposed and exacerbated existing inequalities and potentially opened up new ones. From these articles, we identify five key themes to inform a more gender-equitable post-pandemic labour market: addressing gender-based labour market segregations and discrimination; building access to mutually beneficial flexibility; ensuring a more gender-equitable distribution of unpaid care; confronting gender-based violence at work and beyond; and mobilising union agency through gender equality bargaining.

Addressing gender-based segregation and discrimination

As noted above, gender-based labour market segregation has long been recognised as a key driver of inequality. Highly feminised jobs are undervalued and underpaid, and women struggle to access and progress within more lucrative, male-dominated spheres (see Cooper et al., 2020; Foley et al., 2020). Fiona Macdonald and Sara Charlesworth (2021) investigate how decent work might be constructed in the highly feminised sector of social and community services. They show that this is an urgent task; jobs in these sectors are growing faster than in any

other, and are marked by precarity, low wages, weak career paths, and low levels of union or other forms of workplace voice. They argue that governments are 'increasingly at a distance' (2021: see in this issue) from marketised employment relationships that suppress wages and conditions, even though they are also the principle architects, funders and managers of public health systems. The COVID-19 crisis exposed the inefficiencies and inequalities in this system, creating an opportunity to 'bring the state back in' to the sector to rebuild accountability, restore public trust and to build and sustain good jobs.

Mark Westcott (2021) examines another persistent feature of labour market segregation: women's underrepresentation in management roles. Echoing broader labour market dynamics, Westcott finds that women tend to dominate particular sectors and specialisations – such as education, health and welfare services – and are relatively absent in others, such as construction, distribution and production management. Using Australian Tax Office data, Westcott shows that men are higher earners in each of the specialist management groups studied, including those that are highly feminised. Noting the intransigence of vertical and horizontal segregation, the article calls for stronger workplace policies and action to facilitate women's progression into management roles, and for more 'rigorous requirements on companies to audit and report on gender pay gaps' (Westcott, 2021: see in this issue). These were important suggestions before the COVID-19 pandemic, and as we attempt to recover from the shocks of 2020 and 2021 it is arguably even more important that women are present at the decision-making tables of organisations.

Building mutually beneficial flexibility

Workers in contingent, flexible employment relationships were among those most profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Birch and Preston, 2021). Building access to mutually-beneficial flexibility, which assists employers to meet their operational requirements while enabling employees to balance work and non-work activities, has been identified by scholars as a foundation for sustainable careers and gender equality at work (see, for example, Tomlinson et al., 2018). Tracey Warren (2021) argues that the mainstream 'work–life balance' agenda, and much of the academic writing on this theme, over-emphasises the 'time squeezes reported by financially secure middle-class workers' (2021: see in this issue) and neglects the challenges of financial insecurity, underemployment and precarity of working-class men and women. Warren investigates the work and life interface of gig work, which is heavily promoted by platform businesses as facilitating access to flexibility and choice for those who engage in it. She argues that the form of flexibility available to working class gig workers is far from balanced and mutually beneficial. Rather, it is performed without the protections of minimum standards, is unpredictable and often unreasonably intense. She reminds us that gender equality intersects with and is enmeshed with other forms of inequality, including class, and that this must be understood both to move research forward and to improve working lives.

Ensuring more gender equal sharing of unpaid work

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the chasm between men's and women's contribution to unpaid care work, and the obstacle that such work presents to women's full and equal participation in the labour market. As noted earlier, various studies have found that fathers in dual-earner households increased their share of domestic tasks while working from home during the pandemic, but still performed fewer hours overall than the women family members (Chung et al., 2021; Craig and Churchill, 2020; Sevilla and Smith, 2020). Gender norms in relation to who works and who cares remain surprisingly sticky and are unlikely to shift without regulatory intervention. Writing in 2020, on the 10th anniversary of the introduction of the national paid parental leave system in Australia, Baird et al. (2021) argue that the current Australian system contemplates fathers as 'supporters' of mother carers rather than as substantive carers themselves. To build fathers' access, and to break down normative standards of mothers as (ideal) carers and fathers as (ideal) breadwinners, they recommend extending the period of parental leave available to couples and adding features to incentivise couples to share the leave to care for children more equally.

Confronting gender-based violence at work and beyond

It is difficult to avoid discussing the pervasive and pernicious problem of gender-based violence in work, community and society in 2021 in Australia. In March 2021, tens of thousands of Australian women and men joined the national 'March 4 Justice' protests decrying sexual violence in Australia workplaces, including some of the most prestigious institutions in the country (Ferrier, 2021; Nally, 2021). This followed the release of the Australian Human Right Commission's (AHRC) comprehensive report on sexual harassment, *Respect@Work* (AHRC, 2020). Weatherall et al. (2021) examine domestic violence and its intersection with national regulation and workplace policies and practices. They present a case study of innovative international action in Aotearoa New Zealand in the form of the Domestic Violence Victims Protection Act, 2018, which increased the responsibility of employers to safeguard employees. They argue that in order to reduce the threat of gendered violence, this issue must be moved from a 'private' framing into the public and workplace sphere.

Mobilising union action through gender equality bargaining

Despite some trouble and 'strife' (Colgan and Ledwith, 2000; Kirton and Healy, 2012; Pocock, 1997) trade unions and collective bargaining have been powerful forces for positive change for working women. For some time in many national contexts, including Australia, women have formed the majority of union members, they have been more highly unionised than are men, and organisations with highly feminised memberships have been among the fastest growing (or the least quickly shrinking) unions (Cooper, 2012). During the pandemic, national and

international unions were at the forefront of campaigns to highlight the gendered impact of the pandemic and in leading the push for a gendered lens on the recovery (Australian Council of Trade Unions, 2020; Industriall Global Union, 2021; Shop Distributive and Allied Union, 2020). Two articles in this special issue investigate union action towards gender equality.

Gill Kirton (2021) investigates why equality bargaining, long recognised as a key mechanism to build gender equality at work, remains an underdeveloped union activity. She argues that, in the UK, union Equality Officers have for decades sought to shift gender equality 'from the margins to the centre of union bargaining activity' (Kirton, 2021: see in this issue). Kirton argues that their success has been limited by resistance from among the ranks of paid officials and members and by the chilly climate for union bargaining. She calls for a creative and inclusive reworking of union 'framing' to include gender equality in notions of broader union solidarity. Proctor-Thomson et al. (2021) also investigate union equality bargaining as a mechanism to pursue gender equality. Analysing trends in bargaining over flexible working provisions in Aotearoa New Zealand, they demonstrate a modest growth in the scope and coverage of these provisions, especially in the public sector. Union action, including collective bargaining, will be critical to build gender equality into the post-pandemic future of work.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and accentuated many longstanding gendered inequalities in the labour market. In this introduction to the special issue, we highlight five key areas that will be crucial to achieving workplace gender equality in the post-pandemic era. These themes, which echo the findings of the extant research on the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, include: addressing gender-based labour market segregations and discrimination; building access to mutually beneficial flexibility; ensuring a more gender-equitable distribution of unpaid care; confronting gender-based violence at work and beyond; and mobilising union action through gender equality bargaining.

The authors of the articles in this special issue wrote their contributions through the period of COVID-19. All did so in the face of the challenges of the pandemic, and some suffered significant losses and upheavals in their families and their working lives through this time. We thank them for persevering to contribute interesting and insightful articles that offer fresh insights on the enduring challenge of gender inequality in the labour market and beyond.

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