

COVID-19 and its Implications for Women In Gaming: Move Towards Regulation, Policies, and Culture Changes in the United States

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Abstract

COVID-19 exposes structural inequalities within American society which can no longer be ignored. Here, we highlight the structural inequalities women and women of color face that are glaringly apparent or exacerbated in the pandemic. Inequalities that play a role in the unemployment, insufficient workplace protection, and increased work-life demands of women and women of color in the gaming industry. Instead of returning to “normal” business post-pandemic, we urge gaming leaders to reflect on these inequities within their workplaces. We offer that guaranteed paid leave and permanent flexible work arrangements could improve the life of gaming women employees and their families.

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COVID-19 exposes many structural inequalities within American society we — as educators, researchers, and women — continue to fight tirelessly against. From a public healthcare system that disproportionately disadvantages communities of color (Artiga et al., 2017; Artiga et al., 2020a; Artiga et al., 2020b; Community Change, 2020; Escarce et al., 1993; Mayberry et al., 2000; McBean & Gornick, 1994) to public school systems where low-income students suffer without access to basic distance learning needs (Strauss, 2020), widening the divide between them and their middle and upper-class peers (Anderson and Perrin, 2018; Dorn et al., 2020). But to us, one fundamental inequality within our society is the lack of support for women, women of color, and families. At the UNLV International Gaming Institute, we aim to address these inequities and close gaming’s gender leadership gap through our “Leaderverse” initiative.

Women disproportionately experience the negative impacts of this public health emergency. Impacts such as: the increased burden of caregiving on working mothers, pregnant women at higher risks of contracting COVID-19 (Collin et al., 2020; Wadman, 2020), women at higher risks of sexual exploitation and gender-based domestic violence and abuse (Community Change, 2020; National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2020; Taub, 2020; United Nations Population Fund, 2020), and the staggering number of women unemployed due to shutdowns (Horsley & Gordemer, 2020; Hegewisch, 2020). As the United States enters 2021 — with a new administration and vaccine — gaming business leaders can rewrite their practices and policies to address some of these underlying issues. We recommend paid leave and permanent flexible work arrangements here.

In March 2020, the U.S. Labor Department reported 701,000 workers were laid off due to COVID-19 — almost 60 percent of whom were women (Horsley & Gordemer, 2020). May 2020 reopenings looked promising. But by the end of the year, December marked job loss. Women accounted for 100% of jobs lost in December 2020 (Ewing-Nelson, 2021). The seasonally-adjusted December 2020 unemployment rate was highest for Hispanic/Latina women at 9.1 percent, followed by Black women at 8.4 percent, and White women at 5.7 percent (BLS, 2021d; BLS 2021c). Overall, women represented more than half (55%) of the 9.6 million net jobs lost in 2020 (Ewing-Nelson, 2021).

In the gaming-hospitality industry, women are at extreme risk. In April 2020, women lost more than 4.1 million hospitality and leisure jobs, 54 percent of total job loss in the sector (Ewing-Nelson, 2020). Women made up 52 percent of the hospitality and leisure workforce at the time (Ewing-Nelson, 2020). By December 2020, women accounted for 57 percent of the half a million (498,000) leisure and hospitality job losses (Ewing-Nelson, 2021; BLS, 2021d). They made up 53 percent of the December 2020 workforce (Ewing-Nelson, 2021; BLS, 2021d). In the U.S. amusements, gambling, and recreation sector, women’s employment dropped by 30 percent year-over-year, from 889,300 women employees in November 2019 (BLS, 2020a) to 622,000 women employees in November 2020 (BLS, 2021b). In November 2019, women represented 49.2 percent of the amusement, gambling, and recreation workforce (BLS, 2020a) and 46.7 percent of its workforce in November 2020 (BLS, 2021b).

In the U.S., women make up 52 percent of essential workers (Robertson & Gebeloff, 2020). The majority represent social workers (78 percent), health care workers (77 percent), and critical retail (53 percent) (Robertson & Gebeloff, 2020). Women of color are more likely to hold these jobs than any other demographic (Frye, 2020; Rho et al., 2020). Among the top ten jobs occupied by women of color are cashiers (4.5 percent), maid and housekeeping cleaners (3.5 percent), registered nurses (3.0 percent), customer service representatives (3.0 percent), nursing assistants (2.8 percent), and retail salespeople (2.6 percent). Many of these occupations belong to industries directly impacted by COVID-19 (Frye, 2020).

Since women of color are overrepresented in these frontline industries, they experience higher rates of unemployment compared to White women (Frye, 2020). They are usually the “first casualties” when companies downsize, restructure, and implement layoffs, as they disproportionality fill marginal, low-authority positions with short tenures (Rao 2020;

Kalev, 2020). Many workers in these professions are exploited through low wages (Rho et al., 2020) and, until the federal stimulus COVID-19 package or CARES Act (2020), lack of basic labor protections (Frye, 2020; Ranji et al., 2020; Robertson & Gebeloff, 2020). While traditional “women’s work” as caregivers, teachers, and domestic workers is historically underpaid and undervalued (Baron & Newman, 1990; Cohen & Huffman, 2003; Frye, 2020; Shaw et al., 2020), this essential labor force is our COVID-19 lifeline.

The United States is in a service sector recession that disproportionately impacts women and women of color (Mason as cited in Isidore, 2020). Latina and Black women are overrepresented in the hotel and foodservice workforce which both saw significant layoffs in 2020 (Frye, 2020; Isidore 2020; Kalev, 2020; Kochhar, 2020a; Kochhar, 2020b). Hispanic/Latino employees (27 percent) and Black employees (14 percent) made up 41 percent of the total 2020 accommodation and food service workforce (BLS, 2021a). From a socio-economic standpoint, women from low-income backgrounds are more likely impacted by the gaming-hospitality shutdowns as they are overrepresented in service industries (Owen, 2020). The staggering number of women laid off in the pandemic exposes how significant the gender wage and opportunity gap in the United States is — particularly in the gaming, restaurant, hospitality, and leisure sectors.

COVID-19 showcases the demanding reality of working parents and their changing needs and values. Caregiving responsibilities of newborns, children, spouses, elderly, and disabled adult family members unequally falls on women’s shoulders (LeanIn.Org & SurveyMonkey, 2020). Half the world’s student population is now at home (Porterfield, 2020), which means work-from-home mothers juggle work, teaching, and caretaking all at once (Bennett, 2020; Hutzler, 2020; Savage, 2020; Thomas, 2020). Working mothers face increased bias (Ogden, 2019), stigma, and are more likely to experience burnout and anxiety (LeanIn.Org & SurveyMonkey, 2020).

COVID-19 shutdowns greatly impact families with breadwinning mothers. In 2017, 41 percent of working mothers were the main income providers for their households (Glynn, 2019). Women of color were more likely the main source of income for their families, led by Black mothers (67.5 percent), Hispanic mothers (41.4 percent), then White mothers (37 percent) (Glynn, 2019; Frye, 2020). Amongst these households, economically-disadvantaged mothers of color tended to be the primary breadwinners (Frye, 2020).

There is no guaranteed paid sick time, paid family leave, comprehensive, affordable child care, or federal protections for pregnant workers in the United States. Thus, women’s access to employer-offered, job-protected paid family and emergency leave is essential during COVID-19 and beyond. The CARES Act temporarily extends unemployment insurance benefits and provides unemployment assistance, but it does not create any permanent right to paid family leave or expand coverage for emergency paid leave benefits (Long & Rae, 2020; Ranji et al., 2020). Sufficient paid leave, along with affordable child-care, helps women remain in the labor force (National Partnership for Women & Families, 2020). It allows women to advance their careers when faced with caregiving challenges throughout the lifecourse (National Partnership for Women & Families, 2020). It increases parent-child bonding time (Chzhen et al., 2019; Unicef, 2019) and leads to positive health outcomes for mothers and children. For example, a lowered risk for maternal depression (Chatterji et al., 2013), reduced infant mortality rates (Chen & Rogan, 2004), and infant protection against infectious diseases (Heinig, 2001). Paid leave can equalize the division of caregiving responsibility between men and women in two-parent, heterosexual households (National Partnership for Women & Families, 2020). It reduces the potential for stereotyping, discrimination, and bias against women who take leave (Hideg et al., 2018).

If all gaming employers offer paid family and sick leave — and follow tech’s lead and extend their benefits during the pandemic — the industry will see a boost in working parents’ morale, commitment, and well-being. In 2007, Google increased the twelve-week paid parental leave to five months with full pay and full benefits and found the attrition rate of new mothers dropped by 50 percent (Manjoo, 2013). It dropped to the same attrition rate as the average Google employee (Manjoo, 2013). In February 2020, Google extended

its caregiver leave (two weeks of paid leave with the option to take four additional weeks) and implemented elastic work accommodations to better serve their working parents (Iyengar, 2020). By April 2020, Google announced they would give eight extra weeks of paid leave and fourteen weeks of additional leave for families affected by COVID-19 school shutdowns (Iyengar, 2020). Microsoft U.S. enacted twelve weeks of paid parental leave in 2020 on top of their existing 150 hours of emergency childcare/elderly care (Thiele, 2020).

COVID-19 forces organizations and employees alike to realize the benefits (Cramer & Zaveri, 2020; Loubier, 2017) of work-from-home and flexible work arrangements. Now, more than 20 percent of the workforce in advanced economies can work remote three-to-five days a week (Lund et al., 2020). Besides access to paid sick days, family leave, and on-site child care and/or childcare support, alternative and flexible work schedules and telecommuting are solutions gaming leaders can take to support women and their families—and help all employees achieve healthy work-life balance (Cadigan, 2006; Durst, 1999; Facer & Wadsworth, 2008; Lee & Hong, 2011; Su et al., 2016; Wadsworth & Facer, 2016).

Flexible work arrangements can mitigate commutes, support workers with urgent caregiving responsibilities, and boost productivity and morale (Rao, 2020). In 2018, New Zealand firm Perpetual Guardian adopted a permanent four-day workweek with unchanged wages and work conditions (Harris, 2018). They saw a 20 percent increase in employee productivity and lower levels of employee burnout after eight weeks (Harris, 2018). Microsoft Japan conducted a four-day workweek trial in 2019—with unchanged wages—and reported a 40 percent increase in productivity (Chappell, 2019). A 2020 McKinsey & Company international survey found 41 percent of telecommuting employees felt they were more productive working from home. By May 2020, this increased to 45 percent of employees (Lund et al., 2020). Recognizing its benefits, Twitter and other tech giants are allowing employees to work from home permanently post-pandemic (Friedman, 2020).

Gaming companies can redesign their flexible work arrangements. This gives employees the autonomy to decide “when, where, and how” they work during and after the pandemic (Kelly & Moen, 2013). Companies can cut back on unnecessary meetings or allow permanent work-from-home arrangements, instead of only ‘accommodating’ certain employees (Kelly & Moen, 2013). A flexible work practice will reduce turnover (Moen et al., 2011b) and lead to positive health behaviors for employees like stress reduction, adequate sleep, less tobacco use, and increased exercise (Moen et al., 2011a). Gaming-hospitality employees with traditional workweeks can benefit from permanent flexible arrangements, but shift workers can too (Kelly & Moen, 2013). Transparent, employee-engaged scheduling gives shift workers’ stable, predictable hours (Kelly & Moen, 2013). It boosts their morale, commitment, and well-being.

Undeterred by the multitude of challenges women face on all fronts, it is powerful women leaders who came into the 2020 spotlight. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, German Prime Minister Angela Merkel, Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen, and San Francisco Mayor London Breed are praised as trustworthy, empathic, rational, and resilient leaders (Berman, 2020; Chamorro-Premuzic & Wittenberg-Cox, 2020). Based on these extraordinary role models, many media outlets speculate when women lead, the COVID-19 cases remain low and proactive measures to keep communities safe and socially distant are effective (Wittenberg-Cox, 2020). It is too soon to tell the pandemic’s lasting effect on public health policy and there are too few women-led countries to draw conclusive data on. Yet we remain optimistic the attention on Ardern, Merkel, Ing-wen, and Breed in 2020 will reshape the narrative of what society thinks competent leadership should look like in 2021 and beyond—empathic, compassionate, collaborative, data-driven, and women-led (White, 2020).

Dave Hollis (2020) said, “In the rush to return to normal, use this time to consider which parts of normal are worth rushing back to.” We challenge gaming leaders to consider how existing practices and protections for women are insufficient—and a “part of normal” the industry should not return to. It is time for gaming to recognize women’s capability

as exemplary leaders and promote more of them. As COVID-19 shows, in order to do so, means addressing structural inequities within federal, state, and organizational policies. While the debate for universal healthcare and comprehensive, affordable childcare in the United States continues, gaming business leaders can reshape their own internal policies and work cultures. Redesigned policies and cultures will improve quality of life and increase healthy work-life balance. Offer paid family and emergency leave. Maintain the telecommuting and flexible schedule arrangements. Institute child and elderly care support. Promote employment development through tuition assistance and formal mentorship. Make pay and scheduling open and transparent. Support the flexibility, autonomy, and advancement of women through formal organizational policies and supportive work cultures and all employees will benefit.

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