



Perspective Women and COVID-19: Minding the Gap

by Libby Ellinas, MD

The MCW community is (and should be) focused on the very important work of the pandemic, and the Center for the Advancement of Women in Science and Medicine (AWSM) hopes for everyone's good health. As the crisis persists into its second month, the AWSM team is worrying about the effect of the pandemic on women.

Nearly half of the faculty and the vast majority of MCW staff, advanced practice providers (APPs), and hospital-affiliated nurses are women, putting them at the forefront of both our fight against COVID-19 and the resulting economic fallout. At home, women have simultaneously acquired greater caring responsibilities for children and elders, adding "substitute teacher" to their resumes, and worrying about whether the groceries are sufficiently sanitized. Complicating the problem, there are fewer supports for these extra duties: limited daycare, fewer convenient meal options, and no cleaning services.

The personal risks to women are twofold:

First, women might burn themselves out entirely.

Second, they will lose hard-gained equity at home and work.

In fact, both seem likely.

I suggest we keep three things in mind during the pandemic:

Quarantine is Hard Work

Relative to men in the US, women spend an additional 1.5 hours per day on unpaid care work. Those estimates were pre-pandemic. Now, kids

aren't occupied after school, grandparents can't go shopping, and family members – in irritating proximity – are making more dirt than ever.

Instead of accommodating to the increased workload, women sometimes raise the bar even higher – as if they should be able to do more simply because they are physically present. At home, there is much pressure to engage in traditionally female things, from catering for the in-laws to baking bread from scratch. The result? Yeast is in nearly as short supply as toilet paper, and even Thoughts-of-Dog knows there's too much bread. It's time to stop.

As the pressures to overachieve increase, the “care” women can forget is *self*-care. At 10:00 pm, after finishing their new “flexible” work schedule, many fall into bed exhausted. How long can that be sustained?

“Working From Home” Must Be Redefined

I was on a video call early in quarantine with a colleague who was clearly experienced in “work from home.” Her background was her lovely home-office loft, and she was wearing clothes. *Real* ones. Meanwhile, most colleagues are searching for video angles that don’t reveal the clutter or too much of their hair over WebEx. Aiming for video perfection is futile. We are not “working from home.” We are *at home*, in the middle of a pandemic, trying to work.

And just when a self-actualized video truce is achieved, the photobombers appear – the dog, the kids, the partner in gym shorts. Pre-pandemic, work-from-home women hid in closets to keep their kids from being heard on work-related calls. “Working from home” meant *hiding*. Now, people are forced to admit that they actually have lives. I’ve seen a plethora of interesting dining rooms and happily goggled at toddlers on video chats. This seems like one effect of quarantine worth keeping.

“Minding the Gap” is Critical

Who is so prepared that they are always available when the sitter is sick or the dog *must* go to the vet? Within working couples, someone is usually designated to say “no” to the boss: *“No, I can’t take that assignment. No, I can’t work past 5:00 pm. No, I can’t be continuously available to you.”* I need to be continuously available to *them*, whether “them” is an aging parent or a young child. Amanda Taub refers to this as the “infrastructure of no.”

That gap between careers – whose is negotiable and whose isn’t – usually leaves the woman behind. Even before COVID-19, that need for “no” led women to pursue part-time or less ambitious work and acquire fewer opportunities for advancement. With quarantine, the strain only increases, and the career that has already taken a back seat could get put in the trunk. This is already evidenced in academic output: journal editors have noticed a recent decrease in submissions from women, and we have been quarantined a mere two months. What happens if even relative quarantine endures for two years?

The pandemic, and its effects – direct and indirect – won’t resolve quickly. The effect on women could be exhaustion, career setbacks, and a wider equity gap.

That doesn’t have to be. The pandemic could provide opportunities to illuminate and reduce gender inequities. AWSM sought those opportunities before COVID-19, and certainly seeks them now. Let’s look for them together.

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