

## GENDER EQUITY IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

Last year, women of color accounted for 89% of the more than 1,800 new women-owned businesses started every day in the U.S., employing 9.4 million workers and generating revenues of \$1.9 trillion.<sup>1</sup>

Today, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, they have gone largely ignored, with many in the hardest-hit communities still awaiting small business dollars from federal relief packages, or joining the unemployed, of which 60% already are women.<sup>2</sup>

Others continue to risk their lives and the health of their families by working in low paying jobs now deemed “essential” to survive.

In fact, women now represent more than 65% of frontline workers<sup>3</sup> – a statistic many black and brown communities already are familiar with, as most discussions of women in the workforce largely ignore the fact that women of color entered in advance of their white sisters.

Still, research continues to show that, on average, women earn less than 82% of what white men do in the same roles despite similar backgrounds. If black, that number drops to 68%, and if Latina, 62%.<sup>4</sup>

Add in COVID-19 and the resulting high rates of economic insecurity become disastrous.

Due to the racial and class disparities already present in both the testing and treatment of this virus, gender inequity must also be brought to attention as having a compounding effect on the outcomes, especially within black and brown communities.

With more than 60% of jobs in the U.S. paying less than \$20 an hour, nearly 40% of the population already is at or below the ALICE (Asset, Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) threshold, based on the minimum costs of housing, childcare, food, transportation, and healthcare nationwide.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, it is women – 40% of whom are non-white – that make up two-thirds of the nearly 23.8 million workers in the 40 lowest paying jobs in America, including “essential” roles such as

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<sup>1</sup> [American Express' 2019 State of Women-Owned Businesses Report](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Harvard Business Review](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Center for Economic and Policy Research](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Catalyst](#)

<sup>5</sup> [UnitedForAlice.org](#)

childcare and social services (85%), cashiers (72%), and fast food and restaurant counter workers (67%).<sup>6</sup>

This no doubt contributes to the fact that nearly 79% of single female-headed households with children are at or below the ALICE threshold, in comparison to nearly 60% of single male-headed households with children and just 21% of married households.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the wage gap for mothers is larger than for women overall, with mothers working in full-time, year-round jobs with even white women earning just 71 cents on average for every dollar paid to fathers.<sup>8</sup>

Because 80% of black mothers and more than half of Latina mothers work as the main breadwinners for their households,<sup>9</sup> this further impacts their families' abilities to afford necessities, let alone consider the costs to their overall health and well-being.

Today, women comprise 75% of health care practitioners, 87% of health care support staff, and 90% of nurses, with countless others cleaning hospital rooms, working in warehouses to deliver necessary supplies, and operating public transit to get essential employees to work.<sup>10</sup>

These are women directly in contact with and working to overcome COVID-19.

Yet, nationally, 47% of nursing, psychiatric and home health aides do not earn paid sick leave,<sup>11</sup> and a million front-line health care workers lack their own health coverage.<sup>12</sup>

These compounding factors are devastating enough. Then, there is the extreme reality that not only is the fatality rate of COVID-19 for men nearly double that of women, but also that in areas of this country in which black and brown communities are the minority, the overall fatality rate is nearly more than half for African-Americans alone.

Imagine needing to concurrently navigate both the financial and psychological impacts of losing a partner, a father, a son, and an important piece of one's family foundation.

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<sup>6</sup> [Center for Economic and Policy Research](#)

<sup>7</sup> [UnitedForAlice.org](#)

<sup>8</sup> [National Women's Law Center](#)

<sup>9</sup> [National Partnership for Women and Families](#)

<sup>10</sup> [PayScale's 2020 Gender Pay Gap Report](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Institute for Women's Policy Research](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Center for Economic and Policy Research](#)

How many more homes in black and brown communities will now be newly female led? What will it take to address the severe wage gaps driven largely in part by continued job segregation, implicit bias, and lack of workplace policies that support women and families? How much more do they need to be exacerbated by crisis?

I would love to say there is simply a lack of understanding of what is required to ensure an equitable society, but unfortunately, I cannot. The statistics are straightforward and widely disseminated.

Instead, we continue to fail to acknowledge and change the systems and structures that have been created to further the proliferation of a permanent underclass. Speaking truth to power requires us to not be okay with that, with or without a pandemic.

However, while ensuring women receive equal pay for equal work should not be controversial nor negotiable, perhaps this final statement may help to amplify the issue:

If we do not specifically address the economic impact of COVID-19 on women, and especially women of color, our economy will never effectively rebound.

Lest our society be set back decades in terms of gender parity, economic recovery efforts must be designed to be inclusive of the disparate status affecting women, and especially, black and brown women.

These conversations must include but not be limited to discussions on enforcing livable wages, paid parental and sick leave policies, increased flexibility for working families, and more equitable hiring and promotional practices within corporate America.

I have yet to hear one logical reason against making such actions immediate business imperatives, but the time has come and gone for debate – with COVID-19 in our world, gender equality is simply now or never.