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Article

The Impact of COVID-19 on Women and Work: Career Advancement Challenges

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic upended countless lives all over the world. Considerable research has shown that women's career progression has been more negatively impacted by the pandemic than men's, especially in the wake of school closures and increased childcare responsibilities. In order to understand more deeply the impact of the pandemic on women's careers, a large mixed-method survey was conducted in Idaho, a western state in the United States. This article reports on the responses of 2564 respondents to one of three open-ended questions taken from the overall survey, namely: "How has the pandemic impacted your career advancement experiences and opportunities over the short term and longer term?" The article frames the findings of this question by outlining workplace conditions and structures that contributed to women not advancing prior to the pandemic and applies the lenses of identity theory and systems psychodynamic theory to illustrate tendencies for workers and organizations to maintain the gendered dynamics that impede women's career advancement. Findings included 59.1 percent of respondents who described a negative effect on their career advancement caused by the pandemic. Overarching themes and sub-themes were identified from these negative effects. Overarching themes included: (1) "Everything is on hold"; (2) "Lost or relinquished opportunity"; (3) "Reevaluation of Career"; and (4) "Experiences by Characteristics." The latter theme highlighted unique experiences women faced versus men and manifested the gendered dynamics identified by identity and psychodynamic theories. Findings highlighted the importance of making workplace changes such as more flexible work and/or hybrid work arrangements, improved leave policies, the provision of childcare and other support services, and government policies that eliminate gendered barriers to women's career advancement.

Keywords: gender roles; identity theory; systems psychodynamic theory

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the global community in significant ways since its inception in 2020. The United Nations [1] asserted that the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened preexisting inequalities across every sphere, including the global economy. Research has also found that the pandemic has more negatively impacted women than men. For example, Cerullo [2] stated that nearly three million American women left the labor force during the first year of the pandemic, and many have not returned [3]. While a number of pre-pandemic studies discussed pervasive gender inequality in the division of household labor and childcare when both partners were employed full-time [4–6], more recent studies have reported that during the pandemic the burden of household labor and childcare has fallen even more disproportionately on women [7–9]. More specific to women's management of work–life balance during the pandemic, The Institute for Women's Policy Research reported that women, and particularly women of color, have experienced even greater struggles with managing paid work, caregiving responsibilities, and other types of

unpaid obligations during the pandemic than prior to it [10]. Rogers [11] found early in the pandemic that working remotely, which many workers were forced to do during the lockdown, benefited men's careers but halted women's advancement [11]. Even though the long-term repercussions of the pandemic on women's careers remain to be seen, many findings thus far published support the notion that the pandemic could make women's professional advancement more challenging than it was prior to 2020.

To facilitate a more equitable recovery in the aftermath of the full-scale pandemic—which persists at some level in nearly all parts of the world—it is important to more deeply understand the negative effects of the pandemic on women's careers. Understanding women's experience is foundational to creating environments where women can thrive. To meet this need, this article shares the results of one open-ended question that was included in a large mixed-method research study designed to explore the impact of COVID-19 on women at work. The open-ended question, responded to by 2564 survey participants, was: "How has the pandemic impacted your career advancement experiences and opportunities over the short term and longer term?" [12]. The objective of the overall mixed-method survey was to understand the impact of the pandemic on women from different demographics in Utah, identified by age, education, race/ethnicity, marital status, socioeconomic status, county/region, job type, sector/industry, hours worked per week, employment status, and workplace situation. The survey results were provided to Utah leaders and state residents so that they could better develop and design related public policies, organizational procedures, training and development programs, and other responsive interventions to help entities better support women's work and professional advancement in a post-COVID-19 environment.

2. Literature Review

To better understand the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on women's career trajectories, it is important to examine the conditions and structures that shaped their careers before the pandemic. Even though women have made strides from generations past, they still face many obstacles in developing careers, and especially in moving into career roles with increased compensation and prominence. It is not true that no woman can ever be granted a top position in an organization. Rather, it is more the case that women generally experience more barriers to advancement than men. Eagly and Carli [13] likened this scenario to navigating a labyrinth: women are trying to advance, but they constantly run into blockages along the way. Thus, while women are not overtly blocked from career advancement, not many women surmount the barriers and advance to higher positions [14–16].

Research has shown that women have made career strides in recent generations and that more women are in positions of leadership than in previous generations. There is also evidence that women make effective leaders [17,18] and that their leadership approaches tend to be more transformational in nature than men's. Yet, despite the gains that women have made in career development and their occupation of more leadership positions, there has been consistent discussion of the barriers they face in career advancement [19,20]. In fact, many authors [21] have written about how professional cultures often do not support women at the level that they need in order to rise in responsibility and leadership. Women face many barriers to their career development [13,22,23]. One key barrier is women's socialization to traditional gender roles, which encourages them to focus more on family caretaking—and encourages others to expect that of them—than on career and professional development outside the home. In addition to gender role socialization into family caretaking, women also face a potential bias against them in that they are often viewed as less competent than men. Years of theoretical development and research have supported the notion of gendered status value beliefs, where in mixed-sex interactions, women are often perceived and treated, albeit often unconsciously, as less competent than men [24–26]. Thus, not only are women more socialized to see themselves in the home and family sphere, but they also may be perceived to be generally less competent than men.

These perceptions and practices may somewhat explain why women are not often seen as leaders by decision makers in organizations—most often by men—which leads to women being overlooked for promotions and increased compensation opportunities in the workplace [27,28]. The literature on gender roles and leadership has consistently argued that leadership is often seen as a gendered concept [13,16,22,29,30] and that leadership roles have been normatively filled by men [31,32]. Biases against seeing women in leadership roles may explain why many women face challenges as they attempt to progress in their careers [22,33].

Among other evidence supporting the notion of gendered leadership is the lack of programs targeted towards helping women advance to higher ranks and greater leadership responsibilities [27,34]. Some of the literature has also argued that leadership training is often targeted and designed to cater to men, and not as helpful in helping women advance [35]. Other researchers cited shortages of networks and sponsorship opportunities for women [21–23,36]. These barriers, along with bias in hiring, compensation, and promotion opportunities, may stymie women's advances towards greater levels of career success.

A related challenge that women face in advancing their careers is the difficulty of balancing the expectations of their professional lives with family responsibilities, particularly with the continued lack of family-friendly policies and practices in organizations today. Some of the literature has discussed the incompatibility of work expectations with family life [37–40]. Further, Deming [37] found that women often face a penalty for having families because they feel a need to cut back on hours to meet family obligations, which prevents them from career progression. There is also a perceived “flexibility stigma” against workers who need flexible or part-time work arrangements to balance family obligations, which has been demonstrated to hold such workers back from promotion and advancement opportunities [41–43]. Thus, the conscious and unconscious notion of what an “ideal worker” looks like continues to permeate organizational cultures around the world, and caretakers, who are more often women, cannot easily fulfill this preferred workplace role expectation [44].

Barriers have been well documented in the literature for years, indicating that the norms of organizations that employ women have been slow to shift. It is important to consider deeply the potential reasons for continued impediments. While some organizations have made changes in order to help advance women, the question remains as to why such barriers remain pervasive. Two psychological theories may help illuminate the answer.

Identity theory, especially as Stryker conceptualizes it, addresses the question regarding systemic inequalities for women in the workplace [38,45,46]. Identity theory suggests that people have complex identities and that a single person can often identify with multiple roles. For example, a person may maintain the roles of a friend, a parent, a spouse, and a worker. Stryker's identity theory suggests that the social expectations and social networks surrounding individuals may make some identity roles more salient [38,45,46]. In considering systemic gender inequality in the workplace, one could infer that many working mothers might be drawn to identify more closely with the parent role over the worker role, both because of how they have been socialized and because of the present expectations of their social networks. Men, as a whole, due to similar reasons, may be more drawn to the worker role than the parent role. Thus, without large-scale changes to these social expectations and reinforcement of those changes, men may tend to focus singularly on work roles more than women do, which can translate into greater advancement and compensation opportunities for men in the longer term. In contrast, women who have children may feel less inclined to focus on the worker role because of the social expectations and networks that reinforce their connection to parenting roles [38].

Another relevant psychological theory is the systems psychodynamic approach [47–49]. While traditional psychodynamic theory focuses on the unconscious desires and motivations that shape the behavior of individuals, systems psychodynamic theory brings this conceptualization from the microsphere into the mesosphere, where unconscious desires and motivations shape the behaviors of people within organizations. Systems psychodynamic theory has offered explanations of how and why gender inequality might persist in the

workplace [48]. For example, it has long been a norm in many professional organizations to value workers who are willing to place a singular focus on work tasks and devote themselves to their professional lives, putting in long hours without interference from family or other outside issues. This model of a desirable ‘ideal worker’ [44] fits with men’s general socialization into a traditional gender role of provider, which, as noted in the discussion of identity theory above, might be a more salient role for them than other roles. Thus, men may generally feel more comfortable in the worker role and have unconscious desires to maintain the system as is, with organizational structures that favor men’s success as the status quo [48].

Organizations that have been more traditionally developed and led by men socialized into a traditional gender role and ‘ideal worker model’ often recognize the need to retain women and may institute some family-friendly work-life balance policies, such as flexible schedules, job sharing, and/or reduced hours to help women succeed, but yet maintain norms, such as the previously mentioned ‘flexibility stigma’ [41–43], that prevent this from happening. Indeed, systems psychodynamic theory suggests that because of potential unconscious fear of disrupting the status quo, bias exists against such flexible policies, meaning that those who do not use them (i.e., mostly men) would more likely be rewarded over those who do [48,50], which helps explain the persistence of a ‘flexibility stigma’. For example, an organization could offer flexible schedules as a family-friendly policy, but their utilization is dependent on a gender’s socialized role. Women use flexible scheduling to fulfil their socialized parent role while men choose not to utilize flexible scheduling to fulfil their socialized worker role. An unconscious bias that values the singular focus toward work (which more men fulfil by opting out of a flexible scheduling policy) means less promotion of women who choose to take advantage of the flexible scheduling policy, thus promoting the continuation of a ‘flexibility stigma’, and further enshrining inequality [15,38,48].

Even when men take advantage of flexible work policies, they may be more inclined to use them towards fitting into the optimal worker role rather than truly moving towards work–life balance. Indeed, a study from the United Kingdom [51] found that when schedule control was given as an option, men and unmarried women used the schedule control option to work more, while women with families used it more for work–life balance. Even though these biases may exist at an individual level, the collection of individuals that make up organizations can shape the policies and practices that continue them. Thus, without individuals recognizing these biases and collectively working to push for an overall change in the culture and expectation of what it means to be an optimal worker, flexible policies may continue to exacerbate workplace gender inequalities.

Overall, though policies may be in place ostensibly to help women succeed and balance work–family life, factors such as entrenched social identities and potential unconscious dynamics may urge actors to maintain the status quo, and result in persisting gender inequality in the workplace [42,48]. Despite efforts to facilitate women’s success, an overarching system endures—informed by a collection of biases on the individual level—in which discrimination against women may not be overt in professional settings, yet barriers remain that prevent too many women from advancing in their careers. Some have suggested that the larger culture, again made up collectively of individuals, that reinforces socialization tendencies is the element that needs to change [33]. Unfortunately, not enough traction has been made thus far to make significant inroads in this endeavor.

The aforementioned barriers and dynamics informed existing workplace structures when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020. Suddenly, workers were being asked to stay home. Schools were closed, and there was an extensive blurring of lines between work and home responsibilities. Multiple studies have indicated that women have, by and large, borne more of the brunt of this sudden shift than men [11,37,40,52]. Women covered more of the childcare and attended to more of the parenting roles during the pandemic, which pulled their focus and attention from work responsibilities. In contrast, men’s careers were not as strongly impacted by remote work. The implication was that remote work actually enabled men to see greater success [11].

One explanation for the gendered pattern of professional workplace experience during the pandemic could be that women, consistent with identity theory, prioritized the parenting role over the work role, consistent with what their socialization and social networks expected of them [38,45,46] and what they expect of themselves. In contrast, men may have utilized remote work to prioritize the worker role. Thus, as was described previously, even with flexible policies that may have been in place, unconscious motivations to maintain the status quo and current identity socialization practices may have reinforced men and women in prioritizing worker and parenting roles, respectively, which may have exacerbated conditions of workplace gender inequality during the pandemic [47–49]. The study described in this report will dig deeper into the phenomena highlighted in this literature review with a goal of investigating and illuminating how the pandemic affected women's career advancement experiences and opportunities during the pandemic.

3. Research Methods

To deepen the understanding of women's experiences and to explore the possibility that the pandemic conditions may have reinforced and possibly widened systemic social inequalities and biases as explained by identity and psychodynamic theories, researchers conducted an extensive, in-depth mixed-method survey focusing on the impacts of COVID-19 on women and work [12]. The online survey was opened for data collection between January and February 2021 to all Utah women aged 20 or older who were either currently employed or unemployed due to the pandemic. During this timeframe, vaccines for COVID-19 were still not widely available, school closures were still common, older people (such as grandparents) were more at-risk for more serious illness and thus more likely to be cautious, and it was still the norm that jobs were performed at home if applicable [53]. Women (or those who identify as women) in the state of Utah were chosen as the sample due to interest by Utah stakeholders in understanding their experiences amid school closures and work-from-home mandates. Selection criteria included individuals of any education level, race/ethnicity, marital status, household income, or position or former position and level within their place of employment. Criteria included women in any sector or industry who worked for pay for any number of hours, and women who were not currently working for pay for a variety of reasons related to the pandemic, but who worked for pay as the pandemic began in March 2020.

The aim was to include a wide variety of perspectives to understand the experiences of women as they navigated paid work during the pandemic or previously employed women who were unemployed because of the pandemic. The aim was also to explore the possibility that the pandemic added extreme—and sometimes untenable—stress to the already difficult experiences that many women have had while balancing their paid work with other aspects of their lives that feel the press of overt and implicit systemic barriers. This comprehensive study included the collection of data on a wide variety of topic areas, including homelife, work life, school, and mental and physical health. The mixed-method survey utilized both quantitative and open-ended qualitative questions to capture participants' perceptions and experiences. This article highlights the qualitative analysis results of the open-ended question from the survey related to the impacts of COVID-19 specifically related to career advancement. A qualitative approach to this study helps best understand how participants experience events, situations, and the context in which they live, aligning with Maxwell's [54] interactive model of research design. In that design, qualitative research includes the development of research questions while considering how those questions relate to goals, theoretical frameworks, analysis methods, and concerns with validity [54].

The online survey instrument was pre-tested among the research team, adopting all possible identities to ensure accurate survey flow and clarity. The survey was then administered to a non-probability sample of Utah women representing different settings, backgrounds, and situations (i.e., age, education, race/ethnicity, marital status, socioeconomic status, county/region, job type, sector/industry, hours worked per week, em-

ployment status, and workplace situation). A call for participants was announced in Utah through newsletters, social media platforms, nonprofit organizations, chambers of commerce, government agencies, municipalities and counties, women's networks and associations, multicultural groups, businesses, universities, churches, and volunteers who assisted in disseminating the survey to their employees and contacts. Although targeted recruitment efforts were made to improve statewide representation from women of diverse demographics, there were still limitations in the sample with most participants being White, middle to upper class, and educated. The survey was distributed in both English and Spanish [12].

Overall, 3542 women completed the survey, with 2744 responding to at least one of the four open-ended questions. A total of 2564 survey participants responded to the open-ended question that is the focus of this article, "How has the pandemic impacted your career advancement experiences and opportunities over the short term and longer term?" A modified reflective thematic analysis influenced by Braun's and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis framework [55,56] was utilized to analyze the 2564 open-ended responses, which were coded and analyzed in the qualitative analysis software Dedoose (v 9.0.17) to reveal major themes and subthemes. These 2564 open-ended comments were read by three researchers; the first researcher established and applied codes. The second researcher validated code creation and code application. The third researcher was a final check that all applicable codes were considered when evaluating comments for sentiment. The code creation and application process was documented and regularly discussed and evaluated among researchers to ensure no sentiment duplication and correct application. Altogether, codes were organized under three categories: COVID Experience, COVID Career Advancement, and COVID Benefits. Under those categories, codes were separated by positive or negative sentiment, where the final major themes and subthemes reported in the next section emerged. Codes were then quantified into percentages among those who answered the question, and analyzed by parental status, age, and race/ethnicity. Because more than one code could be applied to the same comment, percentages reported to not add up to 100. Select comments are included that exemplify themes [12]. The demographics of the study participants are included in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Qualitative Participant Demographics.

Demographic	Details
Age	20–29 (16.8%)
	30–39 (28.7%)
	40–49 (27.6%)
	50–59 (18.6%)
	60–69 (7.4%)
	70+ (0.9%)
Marital Status	Married (69.5%)
	Single (15.4%)
	Separated/Divorced (8.9%)
	Domestic partner (5.1%)
	Widowed (1.0%)
Education	Some high school or less (0.2%)
	High school diploma (2.8%)
	Some college (14.5%)
	Associate degree (6.1%)
	Bachelor's degree (35.8%)
	Graduate degree (40.6%)

Table 1. Cont.

Demographic	Details
Race/Ethnicity	White (87.5%)
	Hispanic/Latina (4.3%)
	More than One Race (4.3%)
	Asian (1.2%)
	American Indian (0.8%)
	Other (0.8%)
	Black (0.7%)
	Pacific Islander (0.4%)
Industry	Education (33.6%)
	Nonprofit (11.6%)
	Government (10.8%)
	Healthcare (10.2%)
	Other (7.1%)
	Professional Services (6.8%)
	Information Technology (6.7%)
	Financial Services (4.3%)
	Sales (2.8%)
	Construction (1.5%)
	Food Services (1.2%)
	Hospitality and Tourism (1.2%)
	Manufacturing (1.2%)
Transportation (1.0%)	
Job Type	Front Line (31.6%)
	Team Lead/Supervisor (14.9%)
	Professional (27.7%)
	Manager/Director (20.0%)
	Executive (5.8%)

Note: Percentages in some categories do not equal 100% due to decimal rounding or individuals indicating more than one ethnic or race identity.

Validity and reliability are fundamental to successful research designs [54]. Researchers utilized four established criteria for validity and reliability in qualitative research [57–59] to address validity and reliability in this study: credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability.

Credibility in qualitative research pertains to a community's confidence in the accuracy of the research findings and relevancy of the research to both the research community and the community being studied [57–60]. A commonly used method to ensure credibility is triangulation [57,59] where multiple data analysts with varied perspectives review the findings; in this case, this related to reviewing the development of codes, and whether established codes were adequately applied to each open-ended comment, and to the development of overall study themes and subthemes. This inter-rater reliability means possible biases are checked and addressed.

Similarly, confirmability refers to reliability in qualitative research, particularly the level of neutrality, where the study participant's perceptions shape the results rather than the researchers' motivations or biases [57,60]. While data analysts were Utah women themselves possibly experiencing similar issues as study participants, they also had varying lived experiences and perspectives. Additionally, triangulation was utilized to ensure each of these different perspectives checked the same comments, codes, and resulting themes. Sophisticated coding software allows for comprehensive record keeping, where each code is attributable to the parent comment, and vice versa. The development of codes was regularly discussed and documented among researchers to avoid oversaturation but allow for nuance.

Transferability is another term for external validity. External validity seeks to ensure research findings can be applied to other contexts [57,59]. During COVID-19 lockdowns

and school closings, Utah women were experiencing similar issues to women around the world, but similarly to women in the United States with similar policy contexts. The method of thick description [57,59] ensures transferability wherein both the individual micro and broader macro contexts were considered when analyzing the data and reporting the findings.

4. Results

For some respondents (13.4%), the pandemic afforded opportunities for advancement that otherwise would not have existed, and others (27.5%) said the pandemic did not affect their career advancement at all. Yet, that did not necessarily mean the pandemic had been easy to endure. The data shared in this report cover the 59.1% of respondents who described a negative effect on their career advancement. The effects ranged from mild to severe, and they may yet have long-term implications on women's career advancement. The women described missing out on pay raises, declining promotions, being fearful of looking for a better fitting job, and reevaluating their current career, mostly due to unsupportive employers and being employed in strongly affected industries. Other women faced more severe effects, such as enduring job loss and having to restart from the ground up because of minimal opportunity in their various fields. Although some of these effects were likely not gender specific and could have been experienced by anyone, national research [61] found that women were more likely to be in industries negatively affected by the pandemic and more likely to have made career sacrifices to focus on caregiving responsibilities. The analysis of the data yielded four primary themes: Everything Is on Hold, Lost or Relinquished Opportunity, Reevaluation of Career, and Experiences by Various Characteristics. When reading this section, keep in mind that the data were collected in January of 2021 [12].

4.1. Theme #1: "Everything Is on Hold"

For the women who experienced a negative effect on their career advancement, the most oft-cited negative sentiment (61.4%) was that any opportunity to advance their career was put on hold because of the pandemic. In fact, 21.9% of these respondents specifically mentioned that the pandemic felt like a "wasted year" with less opportunity for career advancement. Another 7.6% cited the uncertainty having everything on hold brings. As one woman stated, "It feels as though the pandemic has been a large 'HOLD' button on career advancement. Until it is over, it feels like survival". Another participant reflected, "I'm so focused on dealing with the daily upheaval that I can't even comprehend what career advancement experiences would look like. Everything seems to be on hold". The corresponding implications mentioned by respondents revealed four subthemes: the impact of lack of face-to-face time, increased work responsibility without increased pay, no raises or opportunity for advancement, and that women want change, but feel it is too risky.

4.1.1. Impact of Lack of Face-to-Face Time

First, for 9.9% of the respondents, in-person interactions were critical to advancement opportunities, whether they consisted of networking, brainstorming, learning from or cultivating relationships with supervisors and colleagues, fostering mentorships, being seen as available and willing to take on projects, or having the opportunity to impress with current work. Women respondents believed their career advancement had suffered because of these missing opportunities, as working from home meant an inability to "shine" and impress. They lacked the networking opportunities that come with more in-person interaction. For example, one participant stated, "I can't get the one-on-one mentoring that would speed advancement up". Another explained, "The lack of informal connection with colleagues across the organization has hampered my ability to network, explore new areas of the company, and facilitate growth". In addition, one woman indicated, "I felt that out of sight, out of mind was very evident. I feel that I am very behind now in positioning myself for any sort of advancement". A fourth clarified, "Being remote full time, it feels like I am

not seen or heard, leading me to feel less valued and less likely to be considered for any other opportunities". A final respondent concluded, "I have to jump at every opportunity to prove my worth and value, which is making me feel burned out".

4.1.2. Increased Work Responsibility without Increased Pay

Many respondents (8.4%) noted increased responsibility and expectations without increased compensation to match their output. This was especially true for teachers, who often had to prepare both in-person and online lesson plans, engage in more one-on-one oversight of their students, and foster closer relationships with parents. Some of the most telling quotations include the following. One woman stated, "A few employees had quit at my company, and, due to financial concerns, my company chose not to rehire for those positions and instead asked me to absorb their jobs without an increase in pay". Another said, "I feel as though when the pandemic hit, the school district I work for decided to use that as an excuse to 'assign' more duties without asking and just expecting that 'people need a job' so much they'll do anything. If anything, it has made me want to quit and change career paths beyond anything I can explain". One respondent noted that "it has essentially tripled my workload by having to have in-person classes, curate an online course for the same classes that can be done at home and hybridize my classes to make them possible to do regardless of situation, with no pay increase". A final participant exclaimed, "Honestly, it's been awful! I probably work twice as much as I did before. My entire job has changed. I now have to take care of all COVID-related issues first before I can complete my typical work tasks. I have been working late hours and all weekends just to do the bare minimum. I'm barely surviving". Additionally, some respondents mentioned being able to secure a promised improved title change at their company but without the usual expected increased compensation. Hence, they were working harder without additional compensation to match output.

4.1.3. No Raises or Opportunities for Advancement

According to 6.7% of the respondents, many employers paused planned raises and promotions because of the economic uncertainty of the pandemic. Instead, employers focused on navigating the changing market and economy. Some women described opportunities for advancement that vanished though they were up for a promotion or role switch. Women described the long-term effects this will have on their career paths and even their retirement plans. For instance, one woman said, "Due to the pandemic and remote work, expected promotions were postponed indefinitely along with the pay increase that was expected with it. I have experienced a disconnect with my employer on many levels". A second stated, "Advancement opportunities for both short and long term in my current job are no longer an option because of expected budget cuts, hiring freezes, and freezes on new job creations. I was a very good candidate for a job that would be created in the next year that will not be created any time soon". Another simply responded, "No wage increases will impact my long-term retirement benefits", while another reflected that she had "worked very hard producing new things the year before and would have received a merit raise. Due to the pandemic, [I] was told you're lucky you have a job." Finally, one participant exclaimed, "My request for a raise was rejected. I get paid \$1700 a month with a master's degree, and every time I try to advocate for myself, I hear 'be happy you have a job these days'".

4.1.4. Want Change, but Too Risky

Finally, 4.3% of the respondents were unhappy in their position but felt stuck because of the uncertainty of the economy and the potential risk of leaving solid employment. This means women were delaying the pursuit of beneficial career changes. Some wanted to change jobs because they were disappointed in how their employer had approached the pandemic, they felt overworked, or they had a plan pre-pandemic that was delayed. For example, one participant stated, "I had started thinking about looking for other career

opportunities, but since the pandemic started, I have felt a need to be 'safe' and keep my current job instead of 'risking' losing what I have and not finding anything". Another simply stated, "I feel I am trying to get through the uncertainties of the pandemic before I try exploring new professional endeavors". A third responded, "I feel very stuck right now. Because of my increased childcare and schooling responsibilities, I feel lucky to just keep up with my increased workload. I don't feel like it's safe to pursue new opportunities right now". Another woman explained, "I'm so burned out with trying to care for my baby and work from home that I'm considering quitting entirely, which was not the plan before. I would like to find a better job at some point, but I feel stuck where I am thanks to the uncertain economy."

A sense of fear also emerged from this respondent: "I want to look for a job that will help me advance my career. I am afraid to make any moves and not being able to pay my bills. This impacts my long-term career goals." Finally, a study participant concluded, "I have been contemplating moving on to a higher-paying job for a while, but the pandemic has put all those ideas on hold".

4.2. Theme #2: "Lost or Relinquished Opportunity"

The second major theme that emerged focused on women who had lost work, pay, or their business, or who had sacrificed opportunities to advance their career (29.7% of those who experienced a negative effect to career advancement). In some cases, this was because of the precarious economy. For others, increased responsibility at home meant less time and bandwidth for new responsibilities, opportunities, and expectations. Some women described a decline in mental health as the barrier to advancement, while others said these losses left them starting from scratch. As one participant noted, "I have had to give up advancement opportunities because I can barely manage what I am doing already". In all, the following six subthemes emerged: losing work, sacrificing advancement for family, forgoing planned education, being able to perform only the bare minimum, experiencing mental health barriers to advancement, and moving backwards.

4.2.1. Losing Work

Overall, 10.8% of respondents saw their businesses suffer or close, lost their jobs, or lost work or pay. For those who felt fortunate enough to find another means of income, doing so sometimes meant finding a potentially irrelevant or lower-paying job and thus constituted a definite career disruption. In terms of business impacts, one woman simply stated, "I had to shut down my business completely and find a full-time job". Another said, "I own my own business. I now work at least twice as hard for half or less of the previous yield. I often work without pay to ensure I can pay others who help with our business and keep our program running". A third woman noted, "I had to lay off half the company. I asked employees to take pay cuts as well, including myself. We had to change how we do business to survive". One respondent explained that "the salon industry has lost at least 50% of their business, and we are low on labor hours because so many women left the industry". A childcare provider shared, "I do in-home childcare, and I lost almost all of my kids. Parents are working from home and keeping their kids home. I cannot work outside the home because I am raising three grandchildren and can't afford outside care".

Other participants discussed their transitions. One stated, "In the job I lost because of the pandemic, I was about to be promoted and moved to a new position, but never got the chance". Another said, "I lost contracts with clients and went back to a full-time job working for someone else". A third shared, "My long-term goal had been to move my preschool out of my home and into a commercial building. The pandemic stopped my preschool and made us more financially unstable, decreasing my chances of starting my own business. It's made me wary of starting my own business and inheriting those risks".

Finally, another woman stated, "I won't be able to last another year in my consulting, event, and speaking business if COVID-19 closures remain throughout the year".

4.2.2. Sacrificing Advancement for Family

Many women who responded to our survey mentioned the challenge of working while having children at home and/or having the additional responsibility of homeschooling while also keeping up with work responsibilities. One participant noted that the additional burden could “stunt my career growth for a few years”. Another mother stated, “COVID has not changed [career advancement] for me. Caregiving has”.

In terms of participants who experienced a negative effect on their career advancement specifically, 7.5% gave up promotions, raises, and other opportunities that would have furthered their careers. As one woman stated, “I’m more focused on the flexibility offered by my employer than opportunities for advancement. I was a director but took a manager position because I needed to be available more to my children”. Another shared, “I am hesitant to accept opportunities for advancement due to concern that I won’t be able to manage increased responsibilities at work in addition to family responsibilities”. Another explained, “I believe it has greatly impacted my career goals. I find myself taking on less technically complex projects as my coworkers because I hesitate to pile on too much work given the uncertainty of our daycare situation. I also can’t be as available as my coworkers, which makes me feel like I will be passed over when promotions are available”.

Finally, one mother reflected, “I was planning on leaving my current employer to pursue a career change as an analyst. That is no longer an option because I need more flexibility in my work schedule with all the changes to school schedules for my children”.

Other participants discussed how they believe their opportunities for advancement have been impacted. For example, one respondent explained, “I think that [the pandemic] puts me into a vulnerable position to be overlooked as childcare needs are always a concern for management”. Another stated, “I have had to work part time instead of full time to avoid putting my kids in childcare, which means I don’t have another option for health insurance, tuition benefits, retirement, insurance, or other benefits. It’s hard to be promoted when you can only work part time”.

Another woman shared that “decreasing my work hours to care for my children meant sacrificing the eligibility I was working toward for health and dental insurance and the company 401 k program”. A final respondent summed up her experience in this way: “I have put career goals entirely on hold. My focus right now is one day at a time, making sure my kids pass their current grade”.

4.2.3. Forgoing Planned Education

Some 7.3% of respondents reported delaying their education for reasons ranging from economic uncertainty, mental health concerns, increased responsibility at home, and costs related to acquiring further education. For many, continuing their education was key to future career advancement. For example, one woman stated, “I was thinking of going back to school for a graduate degree, but with the increased stress and uncertainty of the pandemic, I placed this goal on the back burner”. Another explained, “I cannot attend classes to start my career, and I estimate I will be 2–4 years behind my planned start date because of the pandemic”. A third said, “The pandemic has made it impossible for me to be able to do night classes due to the fact I have to stay home with my children. We used to have grandparents watch them after school, but it is now too risky”.

One simply stated, “I decided to take spring semester off because I was burnt out and won’t be able to finish school until later”. Another participant noted, “I was planning on applying for graduate school this fall but have put that on hold indefinitely”.

4.2.4. Being Able to Perform Only the Bare Minimum

In our overall sample of respondents who participated in all open-ended questions, more than one in three women felt that COVID-19 caused a mental health toll or increased stress, with about one in five saying it was harder to do their job during the pandemic and about one in nine specifically mentioning fatigue, exhaustion, and burnout. In terms of those who experienced a negative effect to career advancement specifically, 4.2% mentioned

being able to meet only the bare minimum standards of their position because of additional stress and responsibility at home. For instance, one woman said, "This has been probably the year of my life where I've had the least energetic output of all time". Another stated, "Most of 2020 was spent in survival mode. I feel like I'm starting to recover, but it will take time before I'm fully thriving again". A third mentioned that "working from home is very difficult with small children, so the quality of my work has suffered a lot. It has affected my self-image as a mother and worker. I feel like I'm not doing a sufficient job in either area, and that has impacted my mental health".

Another respondent shared, "Honestly, I don't have the mental space to think beyond the present. I find myself uninterested in trying to advance or come up with the next step". A final woman exclaimed, "Advancement? Ha. I'm lucky to have the motivation to make it to work in the morning. I don't have the energy to think about change".

4.2.5. Experiencing Mental Health Barriers to Advancement

The next subtheme in the "Lost or Forgone Opportunity" category focused on declining mental health as a barrier to advancement. Although we saw this theme emerge in other areas, we felt it was important to highlight as it indicates the impact increased stress may have on women's career advancement. For example, one stated, "I felt that I had to choose between my career or my mental/physical health during the pandemic", while another questioned whether the money was worth the emotional stress she dealt with every day: "I was not thinking of opportunities. I was only thinking of surviving every day". Another example from one participant included this statement,

"Before March 2020 I was feeling energetic about my work and eagerly looking forward to future projects. I have completely changed to the opposite: when this project is done, I am going to take a long break from working, as long as we can afford it."

Hopelessness was also a concern, as one woman stated, "Due to stress and uncertainty in general, I stopped considering any career advancement, and now no longer care about long-term advancement either. It'd have been an uphill battle at the best of times, and I don't have the strength to fight what I perceive as a lost cause".

4.2.6. Moving Backwards

Some respondents described the barriers to career advancement in extreme terms, feeling as if they were moving backwards or had even been forced to start their careers over. As one stated, "I had to completely start over at an entry-level job". Another participant explained, "I had to start over at the bottom of a new company. My trajectory to office manager was completely cut off". One woman simply stated, "Advancement came to a dead stop and in fact I have gone 10 steps backwards". This theme showed up in another statement: "Due to homeschooling demands and childcare issues, I had to postpone my plans to pursue a full-time position. I now work at the same position I held before starting my studies and work on weekends so that I can support my family both financially and academically". Finally, one survey respondent proclaimed, "The pandemic has halted any progress or sense of fulfillment from my role. Many roles I believed to have 'moved past' have now become my responsibility again due to decreased staffing".

4.3. Theme #3: "Reevaluation of Career"

According to 18% of the respondents who experienced a negative effect to career advancement, the COVID-19 pandemic caused them to reevaluate their current position and career path, which they may not have without the pandemic experience. No matter the reason, reevaluation may result in career disruptions and have financial implications. One respondent stated simply, "Significant burnout has led me to consider changing careers". The analysis of the data showed that 10.4% of respondents indicated the pandemic had prompted them to reevaluate their current situation, while 9.4% said either they had already or have now planned to switch industries or careers. For some, the reasons

were because of how their specific industry had fared in the pandemic; others wanted to find more supportive employers. Some participants realized they wanted to go back to school, while others decided to leave the workforce altogether. Overall, the three subthemes presented here included changes that were industry-specific, changes that were sparked by unsupportive employers, and changes that resulted from general reflection and reevaluation.

4.3.1. Industry-Specific Concerns

Of those reevaluating respondents, 19.8% did or wanted to switch industries because of how their industry fared or handled the pandemic. For instance, one woman stated, "I had to change my career path completely. The hospitality world will not recover from the pandemic for a long time, and I could not wait for it to bounce back to start working again". Another participant explained, "The unpredictability of the public from low to extreme this past year has made me think about moving out of retail due to burnout even though I've been doing it for 30 years". A few simply stated, "I'm not sure if I want to continue being in education with all this stress", and "It just makes me want to get out of healthcare faster". Finally, one educator shared, "Honestly, it has made me want to quit. My local school board has not prioritized the safety of teachers at all. I feel like I'm part of an experiment, being thrown back into a classroom with little precautions".

4.3.2. Unsupportive Employers

Reevaluating respondents (16.1%) also mentioned they had decided to make a change because they did not feel supported by their employers, either resulting from a lack of family-friendly policies or unrealistic expectations during a challenging year. For example, one woman said, "I don't expect to advance within my company because I intend to find an arrangement that will allow me to work the large majority of the time from home. I don't see my current leadership being on board with this plan, so I will likely have to change companies to get the position that allows for this arrangement".

A second explained, "I am considering taking a step back at this time to better support my child's education and emotional needs. This has been a very difficult decision. when I am on a great path, but unfortunately my employer does not provide support for me as a mother to grow in my career and support the needs of my family".

Finally, one participant stated, "Because of the pandemic and my employer's response, I am actively seeking new work in a less demanding environment. I anticipate taking a significant pay cut, immediately and over the course of my career as a result".

4.3.3. General Reevaluation

Additional reasons for career reevaluation varied. Some respondents realized they should pursue additional education, others saw a holistic shift of priorities in their lives, while additional participants realized they no longer wanted to work. One woman plainly stated, "I realize I need to get higher education". Another explained, "I find myself questioning if my short- and long-term goals are even an option anymore. I don't know what to expect in the coming year, let alone the next five". A third said that "it has encouraged me to think outside the box and try to pursue other opportunities in order to advance my career", while another participant explained, "I felt often that the pandemic made me question priorities when it came to work, finances, and family". A final example included, "I'm thinking of quitting and just staying home in the future if that becomes a viable option".

4.4. Theme #4: "Experiences by Characteristics"

The final primary theme that emerged from the analysis related to unique experiences women faced. The subthemes revolved around the following areas: women facing different challenges at work from those of their male counterparts, women of color facing different

challenges from their white female or male colleagues, and the differences in challenges between women starting out in their careers and women in later career stages.

4.4.1. Women Face Different Challenges

Although it may be obvious from previous sections, many women specifically noted that they faced different challenges from those of their male counterparts at work. For example, one respondent stated, “If you’re a female you have to do your job 10,000%, plus figure out who is going to teach your kids and do all the things at home”. Another explained, “I watched as a coworker with less experience and seniority was promoted over me because he is married and can devote “more time” to his job, even though I work more hours and have taken on extra responsibilities, and he has not”.

In terms of remote working, one woman said, “Children at home default to asking Mom for everything even though Dad is also working from home and able (and willing!) to help. I feel guilty most of the day telling my child that “Mom needs to work right now”.

Three additional participants shared insights that represent many women’s experiences. First, one said, “The worry that male peers can take on more while I am barely sustaining creates concern about future growth opportunities. I worry about short- and long-term opportunities being lost, and it impacts how I feel about my current role”. Second, one woman noted, “If it becomes safe to have childcare for our son, then I may be able to carve out more time for meetings, networking opportunities, conferences and symposia. It is already evident that my male counterparts are much better able to manage their time and submit proposals at a faster rate than I am able to”.

Yet another respondent shared her experience at length: “My work anxiety with regard to being “seen” and included as a female has risen significantly since the pandemic. I have always felt marginalized, but now this feeling is compacted with a physical distance from leadership as well as the immense need to juggle homeschooling, chores, and the mental health needs of my children with work. I have rarely felt understood by my male bosses, but this gap in empathy is huge right now”.

4.4.2. Women of Color

Research has clearly found that women of color have been disproportionately impacted in many ways by the pandemic. For example, one participant stated, “Women of color continue to have to work 10 times harder in the workplace to be considered for promotion. I am hopeful that one day the playing field will be more leveled, and I am committed to be a role model for change especially in a white male- dominated workforce”.

Another simply said, “The pandemic continues to impact the lack of opportunities that my company offers for women of color”, while a third plans to move from the state altogether: “Due to the pandemic and the resulting schism caused by the election, I have made the choice to move out of Utah. I do not feel safe living in Utah, nor do I feel that the state or the community in which I live can support me or anyone that identifies as “other.” I know leaving Utah and its tech-hub industry can and will negatively impact the trajectory of my career”.

Two additional quotations also described the specific impacts for women of color. One woman explained, “I found that my supervisor was less supportive of me, as a woman of color, compared to my peers. I was being overworked, under-valued, and minimized. I was repeatedly told that I should be more positive and optimistic regarding the pandemic and gaslighted when I brought up concerns over my safety and the safety of [my team]. After 6 months of struggling to stand my ground, I chose to resign from my position and switched to a temporary position working from home”.

The second woman described her situation as follows: “Since some of my family members are undocumented, they were left without work, and I had to step in to support them financially. I took care of my father and brother with disabilities through a great portion of the year. Since both are in high-risk, vulnerable populations, the challenges presented to me at work were made to be even more significant. This financial stress,

concern over my family's health, mixed in with the poor work environment, led me to make the difficult decision to leave my professional field for temporary work in an adjacent field. I worry that this could have significant impact on my career goals".

4.4.3. Emerging-Versus Later-Career Differences

Finally, there were some differences in the impact of COVID-19 on women's early-versus later-career advancement challenges. In terms of early-career observations, three statements were instructive: First, one woman stated, "I'm very worried about my chances at finding an internship this summer, which could impact my future career. I also think I'm getting less information about organizations/events/career fairs I should be attending because I spend less time on campus". Another said, "Unfortunately, I was hoping to gain experience in my chosen field through internships, but the opportunities I applied for were cancelled". A final individual entering the job market with a Ph.D. explained, "I graduated with a Ph.D. in STEM in 2019 and took a temporary job substitute teaching K-12 while applying for something more long term. Since then, hiring has severely slowed in an already over-crowded field. I'm now pursuing employment in an area outside the field I have spent the last decade training in".

In terms of later-stage career challenges, one woman replied, "Industries are even more hesitant to hire workers over 50 now". Another said, "I had been with my employer over 10 years and planned to retire from there [but was laid off]. I now am struggling to be hired as an 'older' woman in the workforce". A third stated, "I don't ever expect to move forward in my career after this. I am 58. I see no opportunities to recover the lost time. I have been passed over repeatedly for jobs I was qualified for because of my age and gender".

Yet another participant shared her situation as follows: "At 58, my options for finding new suitable employment are slim when unemployment is high because of the pandemic. For me, the pandemic has impacted my income for the rest of my life, not just the duration of the pandemic. It has effectively ended my employment status for the future".

A final participant added this view, "I am 64 years old, loved my job, and wanted to work 1-2 more years. But with the pandemic, I wanted to minimize my risks and felt I needed to retire. I will now pay for my health insurance until I am 65 and my income has decreased. I will get by but am sad to have left a job I had for over 20 years."

5. Discussion

The findings of this study support the large body of literature that highlights structural barriers and systemic gender inequality in professional workplaces [13,15,21,23,33,36]. The findings further support the assertion that known barriers that have been in place for many years were exacerbated by the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic [11,37,40,52]. The major themes identified in the study—Everything Is on Hold, Lost or Relinquished Opportunity, Reevaluation of Career, and Experiences by Various Characteristics—confirm a system that is already precarious, but the added stressors of the pandemic made many women's circumstances untenable. While ostensibly there are paths for women to advance in the workplace, and many women do reach the pinnacles of leadership roles in their careers, there are also many barriers, and the path for many women is quite narrow.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed dynamics that lay just below the surface. It highlighted an overall professional system that is barely functional in terms of gender equality and one that is not set up to truly facilitate women's advancement. The findings are analogous to a power grid that is old and dilapidated: it seems functional until it is faced with a stressor, such as a series of very hot days, then it goes awry and malfunctions spectacularly. During the COVID-19 pandemic, basic supports (such as childcare) that had allowed women with families to succeed in the workplace were stripped away. Women shouldered the professional setbacks that happened when children suddenly needed full-time care at home [62-64]. The pandemic laid bare the dynamics of a culture that is still not set up to help women as a whole succeed in the workplace. As the literature reviewed earlier in this

paper suggests, some of the processes in professional organizations may be entrenched due to the pervasive and hegemonic traditional gender socialization of individuals [27,30,37]. It may also result from the unconscious desires on the part of actors in systems to maintain the status quo [48].

6. Limitations

The most prominent limitation of the study is that it did not use a randomized sample of Utah women, but instead a non-probability sample relying on the outreach of extensive networks. While this method exceeded the initial goal for responses, the final sample underrepresents non-white women and women in lower income categories. The implication of this underrepresentation is that the experiences of those who worked low-wage “essential” jobs (not able to work from home) during the pre-vaccine COVID-19 pandemic, jobs more likely to be held by Utah women of color, are underrepresented in the data. The study could have also been designed to obtain more elaboration from the women on their life circumstances, including the work circumstances of their partners. Overall, while the findings from the study are useful as a starting point from which to consider the experiences of women, and particularly women from Utah in the COVID-19 pandemic, these limitations should be addressed when designing future studies on this topic.

7. Conclusions and Implications

Overall, the study findings indicate that many of the women who responded emphasized that, for numerous reasons, they believe their career advancement trajectories were negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. For some, the setbacks were employer-related, such as paused raises and promotions because of economic uncertainty. For others, the stall was related to limitations imposed by remote work, such as the lack of networking and inability to impress. Others felt they could not pursue opportunities such as a promotion, a better job elsewhere, or furthering their education because of increased responsibility at home or declining mental health. Still others lost work, hours, and many reported that their businesses suffered. Clearly, the pandemic has had a profound impact on women at work, the effects of which may be felt for years to come. Yet there are many actions that can happen now to mitigate unequal outcomes moving forward.

First, there is ample room for improvement in the support that organizations offer their employees. For example, flexible work arrangements, leave policies, and childcare support could be especially useful to many employees experiencing increased family responsibilities. The need for these policies did not start with the pandemic, but COVID-19 has heightened their utility, especially moving forward, to ensure women can effectively rebound and thrive. Research shows that offering family-friendly policies has a positive economic impact for the entire community, and it increases diversity, productivity, and job satisfaction for employees [65,66]. Organizations can also actively recruit women who left the workplace during the pandemic and implement long-term strategies for recruiting women who are returning to the workplace after career breaks.

Second, federal, state, and local governments can implement policies that can continue to benefit women’s recovery from the negative impacts of COVID-19 and positively affect women (and men) in the future. These include implementing public policies that focus on narrowing the gender pay gap; increasing investment in training and upskilling opportunities that support women, including return-to-work initiatives; offering incentives that encourage businesses to implement family-friendly and inclusive policies; and providing more support for childcare offices and programs.

The aforementioned practical supports would be very important for women, as there should be systems and contingencies in place to help them succeed when unexpected events such as a worldwide pandemic happen. However, implementing these supports is essential regardless of potential global catastrophes; the need for cultural and systemic shifts persists. As long as women are primarily socialized to see themselves as needing to prioritize parenting roles, and men are socialized to eschew the parenting role, women

will likely continue to bear the brunt of the professional penalties when unexpected events happen, and systems go awry. In the course of individual lives, many unexpected needs arise, most often related to health or family obligations. It is important that organizational leaders recognize the need to put supportive policies in place. These leaders should also incentivize all workers to take advantage of these policies that allow them to participate equally in the multiple roles that they are engaged in. This problem of systemic gender inequality, exacerbated by identity socialization and unconscious bias, can be solved through education and active training to increase awareness. Creating additional supports will allow workers to succeed in the unexpected individual and collective circumstances that they may encounter throughout their professional lives.

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