

Women, leadership, and missed opportunities

Why organizations' good intentions are not good enough



Executive Point of View



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The shock rippled into virtually every corner of the globe—a sudden jolt and then a year of unfolding upheaval. Since the start of 2020, the pandemic has disrupted the world economy and the lives of countless people. It did so with a force of historic proportion, though not in equal measure.

A particularly withering blow was dealt to working women, with millions cleaved from the global labor force over a single year. In the US alone, more than 5 million women were pushed from their jobs, putting female participation in the workforce at its lowest rate since 1988.¹

In this report, we examined leadership ranks across 10 industries and 9 geographic regions. What we found should set off alarm bells. Advancing women is not a top priority for the majority of global organizations. Employees feel “gender equity” fatigue over ineffective programmatic efforts to address the problem. And there is a clear need for new models of empathetic leadership.

For years, studies—including our own—have called attention to the systemic barriers to career advancement facing women. Still, the percentage of women in top leadership roles has not budged. There are fewer women in the pipeline today than in 2019, a situation made worse by the pandemic.

We are releasing the findings of this report on International Women's Day 2021. Though it is my hope that in the future we will not need designated days to raise awareness about the importance of women in the workforce. Rather, they will represent moments to celebrate women's achievements.

As organizations become more serious about achieving gender equity among their leadership teams, they will realize good intentions are not good enough. The time to act is now. This is the year organizations must commit to moving from talk to action, from action to accountability, and from accountability to results.

Without a doubt, the events of the past year exacerbated existing gender and diversity inequities in leadership ranks. But they also present businesses with a golden opportunity to course correct and deliver exponential impact. Doing so will carve a brighter path for women, for men, and for a recovering global economy now and far into the future.

Download the full report

<https://ibm.co/women-leadership-2021>

¹ McGrath, Maggie. “American Women Lost More Than 5 Million Jobs in 2020.” *Forbes*. January 12, 2021. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/maggiemcgrath/2021/01/12/american-women-lost-more-than-5-million-jobs-in-2020/?sh=700af14b2857>