



BUILDING BACK BETTER FOR WOMEN:
YOUNG WOMEN

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Covid-19 has disproportionately impacted the lives and livelihoods of women – but the pandemic presents an opportunity to build back a more gender-equal global economy.

In the build-up to the G20 Leaders' Summit in Saudi Arabia, the official women's empowerment engagement group to the G20. The Women 20 (W20) Saudi Arabia has partnered with Accenture Research on a series of articles highlighting specific areas in which it is vital we take action to empower women.

A full report building on these articles will be delivered ahead of the G20 Summit in November 2020.

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OUR FUTURE AT RISK

Today's young women are essential for tomorrow's economic growth. But are policymakers aware of how their potential labour market participation has been affected by Covid-19, and are they listening to their views on how we can Build Back Better?

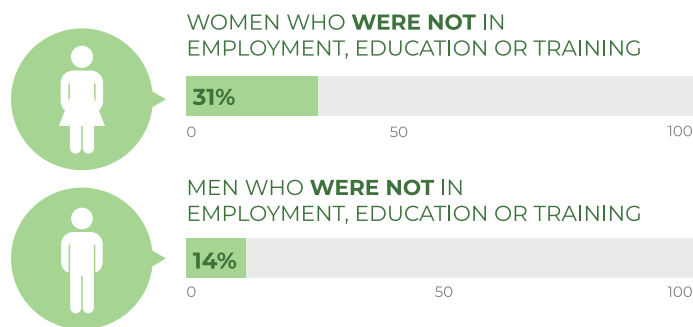
The answer, according to them, is 'no, not enough'. We invited the 2020 G(irls)20 Summit Delegates, a group of insightful young female leaders, to a virtual brainstorm to hear their views on the challenges that young women face around the world; and why we must listen to their experiences as we rebuild more resilient, equitable and sustainable economies. This article, a collaboration between the W20 and G(irls)20, aims to shine a spotlight on these issues.



YOUNG WOMEN FACED MANY CHALLENGES PRE-PANDEMIC

The struggle to get education and find a fairly paid, rewarding job is a persistent one for millions of young women across the world.

Prior to the crisis, 31 percent of young women worldwide were not in employment, education or training, compared with 14 percent of young men¹. These disparities carried on during their lifecycle, with women less likely to be in employment or looking for a job.



Globally, the labour force participation rate of prime age women (i.e. the proportion of women aged 25 to 54 who were employed or looking for employment) is 52 percent, whereas it is 95 percent for men².

The gender gap is also reflected in pay: on average, women are paid about 20 percent less than men around the world, and in some countries it is as high as 45 percent³. Beyond their paid work, globally, young women perform almost three times as much unpaid care and domestic work, including caring for elderly and ill family members, than young men⁴. This additional responsibility, a product of social norms and cultural expectations, limits their job opportunities, while the lack of pay limits their financial independence.



FAULT LINES COULD DEEPEN FURTHER

These pre-existing fault lines are being exacerbated, as the impact of the pandemic and ensuing economic recession is disproportionately felt by young women, across multiple dimensions.

At the start of 2020, 132 million young girls worldwide were not in school.⁵ Now, Unesco estimates that an additional 11.2 million girls are at risk of not returning to education following school closures during the pandemic.⁶ Factors that could prevent them from going back include taking on care responsibilities and having to financially support their families. The risk is highest in some regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia, but also exists in developed economies. For instance, 1.2 million of the girls-at-risk are in North America and West Europe⁷. It also extends across all education levels:

32 percent of the young women at risk of not returning are at the tertiary level, equivalent to 3.6 million⁸. This issue is a priority for the G(irls)20 delegates. Miren Aguirre Salazar, aged 23, a post graduate Spanish student in Paris, worries that many of the young women she knows are not registering for academic courses this year as the pandemic has placed severe strain on funds, in their families and institutions.



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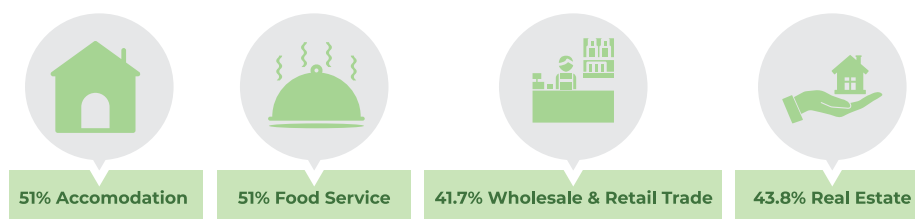
This is very concerning as educational achievement is a major enabler of women finding good quality, well paid jobs. The potential economic impact is staggering. The loss in human capital wealth incurred today because many adult women did not benefit in their youth from universal secondary education⁹ is estimated to range between US\$15 trillion to US\$30 trillion globally¹⁰.

Meanwhile, **Navya Baradi**, a 19-year old business economics and law student in Canada, fears that rising unemployment and fewer job opportunities will likely crowd out women, and "it will be even worse for young women from minority groups."

Her fears are not unfounded.

In a new W20 survey conducted by Accenture, 41 percent of young women believed their personal earnings would be negatively affected as a result of the current crisis, reflecting their concerns about job prospects and security. For young men this was 33 percent. Additionally, 7.7 percent of young women in the survey that were in employment pre-pandemic have been made redundant, compared with 4.6 percent of all women¹¹.

One reason for this impact could be that young women are more likely to be over-represented in service-based sectors, that were particularly vulnerable to pandemic-driven economic shocks. Globally, while young women account for less than 39 percent of global youth employment, they make up almost 51 percent of youth employment in accommodation and food services, 41.7 percent in wholesale and retail trade, and 43.8 percent in real estate and other services activities¹². These are three of the four sectors that the ILO has identified as high-risk, i.e. hit by an economic output fall as a result of pandemic-related lockdowns and social distancing measures¹³.



Disruptions to supply chains had devastating consequences for employment in manufacturing sectors such as the garment industry, which employ young women in low- and middle-income countries¹⁴. And young women are more likely to be part of the informal economy, with little economic protection and poorer working conditions. Among the G20, 59 percent of women aged 15-24 are in informal employment, working as, for example, farm laborers, domestic workers and street vendors¹⁵, compared with 48 percent of women aged 25 and above.¹⁶

There is also a risk that the targets that many businesses set to promote women in the workplace, from hiring young talent to career progression into more senior decision-making roles, will be quietly ignored.

Some organizations will recognize that working towards gender-equality in the future will be impossible if we ignore the young women of today. But according to Professor Linda Scott, author of 'The Double X Economy', business leaders who are less committed, or less informed, about the importance of gender equality for their organization may argue for gender programs to be set aside in light of a difficult business environment¹⁷. Already some worrying signs are emerging. The W20-Accenture survey found that the proportion of young women who feel fully included in their workplace has dropped from 33 percent pre-pandemic, to 21 percent today¹⁸.

Alongside the dire consequences on their education and job prospects, the crisis is having a severe impact on young women's mental health. A recent ILO study, based on a survey of young men and women across more than 100 countries, found that average mental well being was lower for young women than young men, owing to the socio-economic impact of the pandemic¹⁹.

In the W20-Accenture survey, conducted across seven countries, 61 percent of young women said the pandemic had a negative impact on their mental health, whereas 45 percent of their male peers said so²⁰. And according to ongoing, long-term research in the UK, 35.2 percent of women aged 16 to 24 reported at least one mental health problem post-Covid19, compared with 29.6 percent of young men. This is nearly double the prevalence rates in the pre-Covid 19 period, when the equivalent figures were 17.7 percent for young women and 14.4 percent for young men²¹.

The shocking rise could be linked to several issues, such as eating disorders, domestic physical and verbal abuse, cyber-bullying, which disproportionately affect young women, but are under-reported. And as Sanah Jivani, aged 23 and a Truman scholar at the University of Pennsylvania in the US argues,



“we need to have good quality data and awareness of the issues: they are the first steps to creating powerful policies”.



AN OPPORTUNITY AMID A CRISIS

The world's decision makers are faced with an unprecedented opportunity: to build back from the crisis better and fairer—and young women's contribution could be an essential pillar of this rebuilding effort.

In the past decade there has been increasing recognition that educating and employing women doesn't benefit them alone; it also has broader and powerful socio-economic effects. According to the World Bank, US\$160 trillion is being lost globally due to the differences in lifetime earnings between women and men²².

The benefits of employing women are also clear at the organization level. At companies that successfully harness key cultural drivers, such as diverse leadership teams and family-friendly policies, both women and men are given a greater chance to succeed and there is generally more advancement for everyone.

An Accenture study, based on a survey of 22,000 working men and women in 34 countries, found that in firms with a workforce culture that fosters equality women are 35 percent more likely to advance to manager level. Men also benefit, as they are 23 percent more likely to advance to management positions²³.

And in government, women are bringing renewed attention to certain issues. For example, in Argentina, President Fernández has included more women in his administration in important positions, who are bringing the power of the national feminist Ni una Menos movement to Congress. Sabina Frederic is heading the Security Ministry, Marcela Losardo the Justice Ministry and a prominent feminist lawyer, Elizabeth Gómez Alcorta, heads a new Ministry of Women, Genders and Diversity.

This refocused attention on women's rights, with a new abortion bill being introduced to Congress earlier this year²⁴. "We have the opportunity to change pre-established cultural norms", Alisson Yheraldin Onzueta Caballero, aged 20 and an Indigenous student in Biotechnology and International Studies from Peru, pointed out. In her experience, an increasing number of Indigenous men are realising the value and the economic contribution that young Indigenous females bring to the household. This is a story that goes beyond Peru's Indigenous population.

Nurses, teachers, social carers, cleaners, all key workers that kept our economies running during the pandemic, are predominantly female occupations in many countries²⁵—and their unrecognised contribution to our economies is increasingly an issue of public debate.



The media is also helping to change perceptions of what women can achieve. Yushi Chen, a 21-year old International Economics and Trade student in China, was encouraged to see that on social media, female medical workers were praised for their medical expertise in fighting the pandemic, whereas in the past they've been cast in more supportive roles.



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Alisson Yheraldin Onzueta Caballero, aged 20 and an Indigenous student in Biotechnology and International Studies from Peru

EMPOWERING YOUNG WOMEN IS ESSENTIAL, IF WE ARE TO BUILD BACK BETTER

Achieving the economic and political empowerment of young women cannot be an issue that we return to once we've dealt with the aftermath of the pandemic. By then, it will be too late, and we will have lost the opportunity to actually channel their potential contribution into our economies. This will require a comprehensive solution, but three areas are worth highlighting as a starting point.

Educational achievement. "It is imperative that our educational system does not abandon young women", Bernadita Camano, 24, a Physics university student from Argentina, stresses. Decision-makers must work to limit the negative impact of school closures and prioritise getting all students back to school, but young girls even more so, given their increased likelihood of not returning. They can also make increasing use of technology for remote learning.



"It is imperative that our educational system does not abandon young women"

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Entry-level job creation. Many young women work in insecure roles and industries decimated by the pandemic. To avoid the risk that more young women drop out of the labour market altogether, there must be a sharper focus on entry-level roles, graduate schemes and training programs. As companies are cutting jobs the junior roles and female-focused talent programs might be the first to go. Yet these positions are essential in cultivating future talent.



Inclusive decision making. Young women need to be more included in decision making and we must tackle the harassment of women in politics that marginalises them. Young activists such as Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai demonstrate the need for fresh perspectives on global challenges. Issues such as domestic violence, physical and verbal abuse, eating disorders, mental health difficulties, are not problems that affect only young women. But they are issues that women could bring more attention to, and new perspectives on, if included in the conversation.

The worries of the G(irls)20 delegates underscore how COVID-19 threatens to upend the education and employment prospects of a whole generation of young women. Their potential could be an essential pillar of our rebuilding efforts post-pandemic, and though there are some encouraging signs there is also much more to do.

As Bailey Greenspon, acting co-CEO of G(irls)20, stresses:



“Without action today, we are putting not just their future at risk, but that of our economies and societies. We can all gain from including more young women in decision making”.



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