



History News

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The Whole is Greater

BY HEIDI LUNG AND JOAN BALDWIN

Gender Equity in Museums During COVID-19

Working in the museum field during the COVID-19 pandemic is a surreal experience. As museums closed their doors and visitor engagement moved online, many professionals began uncomfortably working from the comfort of their own homes. But some never made the transition. Nationally, a pink wave of unemployment hit women hard, outnumbering their male counterparts in almost all sectors of the economy.¹ Leisure and hospitality, both sectors employing many more women than men, experienced all-time unemployment highs. Museums did not go untouched. Like the national job market, museums were beset with employment losses disproportionately impacting women who serve as frontline staff.

The COVID-19 Impact on Gender in Museums

From layoffs and furloughs to balancing childcare and remote work, COVID-19 has intensified gender power inequality both professionally and at home. Shutdowns amplify existing workplace disparity while increasing the imbalance of household tasks and childcare. 70 percent of all single parents acting as primary caregivers are mothers. This group is especially burdened both economically and socially. Each morning we hear statistics describing the number of jobs lost, the number of new COVID-19 cases, and the number of deaths. Numbers don't paint a true-to-life picture of how the crisis forces women to change how they work, live, and engage with each other. The fact of the matter is gender bias has a real and damaging impact on women's workload, pay, mental, and physical health.

On the surface, museums are gender-balanced with women accounting for 51 percent of all staff, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Closer inspection reveals an employment landscape emulating broader economic trends where women cluster in departments like education and human resources. AAM's 2017 National Museum Salary

Survey found that in museums, women outnumber men in 44 of the 52 full-time positions and dominate the areas of public programming, collections, and visitor services. The Gender Equity in Museums Movement (GEMM) 2019 white paper, "Museums as a Pink-Collar Profession: The Consequences and How to Address Them," identifies similarities between museums and other pink-collar fields like nursing or libraries. These kinds of professions are historically rooted in men's employment, but like museums, are now culturally associated with "women's work" and consequently looked on as less valuable. Seeing our field as a pink-collar industry brings awareness to existing gender bias and engages us in courageous conversations about inequities around equal pay, parental leave, diversity, and sexual harassment in the workplace.

In museums, pink-collar doesn't only apply to paid staff; it also applies to volunteers who are overwhelmingly women. AAM found that museum volunteers are the majority of museum workers. Volunteers outnumber full time staff six to one, and in museums with budgets under \$250,000 the ratio is eighteen to one. Volunteers serve an essential role in our field and many small, local museums are completely run by volunteers. Concern about whether volunteers will

return to work as museums reopen is valid, especially since volunteers are primarily women, many who fall within virus at-risk age groups and are now engaged in additional home and care responsibilities. Museum volunteers are essential gears in the museum system: how will museums respond if they don't return?

Bringing Gender Equity to the Museum Workplace

Economist Katica Roy has a novel approach to solving this crisis. She recommends we first consider the specific economic needs of women. Roy explains, "gender-ignorant policies inadvertently leave out 51 percent of our population (women) and as a result, constrict the economy."² Identifying and differentiating women's economic needs from those of men is a critical first step to rebuilding economic good health. Consider the gender pay gap: eliminating the pay gap increases salaries and in turn increases national GDP. Eliminating the pay gap does more than simply benefit women; it lifts everyone.

Taking that approach a bit further, what would it look like if museums applied a gendered lens to address inequities in the museum workplace? A working paper by the National Bureau of Economic Research titled "The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equity" explains the pandemic acts as a catalyst pushing gender equity issues to the forefront, necessitating museums (and other fields) to adopt change. Museum employers adjusted to shutdowns by investing time and resources in remote work infrastructures. This adaptation permitted those employees whose tasks could be completed remotely to continue to work. Not all museum jobs translate to a remote setting, but for those that do, either in part or in full, this new insight presents options for

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5 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO SUPPORT GENDER EQUITY DURING COVID-19

1

LISTEN TO AND SHARE STORIES.

COVID-19 amplifies pre-existing disparities. Listening to each other's stories expands our understanding about how we each experience the crisis differently and supports us in feeling heard.

CO-CREATE SOLUTIONS.

There is no "one-size-fits-all" solution to working during a pandemic. Ask employees and volunteers to identify their needs, and then collaboratively develop strategies that are mutually beneficial.

3

ADJUST WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE.

Success looks different during COVID-19 than it did before. Consider adjusting your professional and personal metrics to fit the current situation.

BUILD SOCIAL CONNECTIONS.

Isolation is hard, personally and professionally. Use this time to put a group of colleagues together to support one another. Meet virtually or actually to talk through the issues the virus presents.

5

BE KIND TO YOURSELF.

COVID-19 has increased our responsibilities at work and home. Don't fall into the trap of overlooking your own needs. Make time to take care of yourself!



future employee flexibility. While this shift supports working parents in general, its impact on women is enormous.

Research shows that prior to COVID-19, women did three times more household and childcare work than men. Many women struggle with inflexible work schedules or pay so low it doesn't cover the cost of childcare. These kinds of challenges force women to move in and out of the field, negatively impacting their lifetime earnings. As museums reopen and employees return to onsite work, employers' investment in remote work may become a part of the museum's new normal. Flexible working hours and working from home benefit all, but these adaptations meet the specific needs of women

striving to attain work life balance. Is this one example of how museums can apply the gendered lens to address the specific needs of women while strengthening and equalizing the museum workforce?

Conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion were energized prior to COVID-19. Is this crisis hindering whatever progress was underway? It's clear that layoffs around the country impacted women as a group, and emerging museum staff and women of color in particular, as they often occupy frontline positions as educators, greeters, and paid interns. They were among the first furloughed by organizations who may not hire them back for months. Some professionals may be forced to take their valued skills and diverse perspectives to another field altogether. Will the failure to rehire send the museum world back to an earlier, whiter, more privileged version of itself? And if that happens, how will museums desperate to engage with communities reset the clock?

Taking Care of Ourselves During the Crisis

In April, a survey by Lean In exploring the impacts of COVID-19 found fewer than half of the 3,117 respondents reported their employer had made changes or new policies that promote flexibility or accommodate increased home and care work. In fact, the study found that when it comes to workload, women are 50 percent more likely than men to feel overwhelmed, a fact that likely plays a significant role in the 25 percent of women (compared to just 11 percent of men) who report experiencing physical symptoms of severe anxiety. Most notably, the survey details the key finding that single mothers and women of color are feeling the negative impacts of COVID-19 greater than partnered parents or white women.

In an online conversation asking museum professionals "How are you coping with these additional responsibilities during COVID-19?" one follower responded, "By not doing anything 100

percent, by constantly having my brain split between homeschooling, new/shifted remote work responsibilities, and new household responsibilities. My spouse is an essential employee and so basically I have absorbed all of the tasks usually outsourced to teachers, cleaners, take-out, etc. It is completely unsustainable, and I have no idea how the state thinks it might reopen without childcare options, as most summer programs are cancelled." Another responded, "It's a dance," adding that she and her husband recently discussed his "responsibility to back me up by adjusting a demanding schedule so I don't get sidelined in my career during these eighteen months." One working museum professional parent put it this way: "the 'normal' schedule incorporates so much guilt as is—the feeling of not being your best at either your work or with your kids because there is always the other on your mind, right? I think it's just even more compounded in our current situation. Everyone's worlds have gotten completely rocked, but a kid's comprehension of it is slim. But, finding the patience and humor in it as they walk through our video meetings, or interrupt phone calls, has to be there. I guess, the best thing I've begun to accept as of last week and fully this week, there is no way to operate at 100 percent and to be okay with it and letting go of certain things."

How Do We Get Through This Difficult Time?

First, advocate and take care of yourself. Each of us has experienced challenges and more than our fair share of stress. Whether you are laid off, furloughed, or working from home while caring for your children, we are resigned to the idea that life will not simply go back to normal any time soon. Things are changing so fast it is hard to know what to anticipate. Maybe the more appropriate question is: how will we sustain ourselves for as long as it takes to see this through?

One strategy that doesn't always come naturally is to say "no" to any extra professional tasks or projects. It is known

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that women are asked and volunteer more often than men when it comes to taking on extra work. Having the ability to say “no” to extra service, administrative, or mentoring work that supports the institution but is in addition to your usual duties is more important now than ever.³ This strategy can be applied both ways. Museums have the ability to shift organizational priorities to provide space and reduce the workload, even if it is tempo-

rary, for employees who are overworked both professionally and at home.

Another approach is to recognize working the way we always have is simply not attainable in our current situation. In his article “Your Only Goal Is to Arrive,” Paul Ollinger writes, “because our reality has changed, we also need to change the metrics by which we judge our success.” Just like tools used to measure institutional strategic goals, our own metrics

of professional success are relative to the situation at hand and should be calibrated accordingly. We currently live lives in which so much is out of our control. An appropriately scaled success might simply be surviving and getting through this to the other side. One survey respondent wrote that COVID-19 and her return to the museum world post-childbirth coincided. “I accepted I would probably have to take a more ‘foot in the door’ job, but

Gender Equity Resources

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now with layoffs and potentially museums closing permanently it feels almost hopeless in thinking of competing in an even more crowded competitive field. My gut tells me it's time to move on, and that has been a hard pill to swallow.”

At an organizational level, museum leaders need to think long and hard about how furloughs—however necessary at the height of the crisis—will impact the future of museums, their ability to engage communities, and their ability to attract and maintain diverse staff. Museum leaders need to understand how gender impacts their work environment, and how to support flexible work schedules.

Last, despite all the physical isolation and increased demands we are experiencing, we must take time to connect with each other. The Gender Equity in Museums Movement is asking professionals to contribute to “You Are Not Alone,” a project aimed at connecting through stories and strategies about navigating the current crisis. You can participate in the project through GEMM’s Facebook page and during a live virtual event to be announced soon. Stay strong and stay tuned!



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¹ Institute for Women’s Policy Research, “Women Lost More Jobs Than Men in Almost All Sectors of the Economy,” April 6, 2020, iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/QF-Jobs-Day-April-FINAL.pdf.

² “Gender Economist Katia Roy: If we don’t act fast, women will bear the brunt of the financial crisis caused by coronavirus,” *Know Your Value*, March 23, 2020, nbcnews.com/know-your-value/feature/gender-economist-katica-roy-if-we-don-t-act-fast-ncna1166771.

³ Tanya Tarr, “Why Saying No to ‘Thankless Tasks’ Can Close the Gender Gap,” *Forbes*, April 18, 2018, forbes.com/sites/tanyatarr/2018/04/18/why-saying-no-to-thankless-tasks-closes-gender-gap/#6c61dbf57c21.

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