Opinion – COVID-19's War on Feminism in the U.S.

In August of 1920, the 19th Amendment of the American Constitution was ratified, granting suffrage to women in the United States. It must be noted that, at the time, Jim Crow laws and anti-immigrant policies such as the Chinese Exclusion Act continued to deprive communities of color from exercising their rights. This new freedom endowed upon White women in America was a crucial step towards achieving gender equality. During the early 20th century, only 20 percent of women were categorized as 'gainful workers,' a term which referred to women who partook in the labor force outside the home. Of these women, only 5 percent were married. Men were traditionally accepted as the breadwinners of society, whereas the role of the woman was child-rearing. Professions like teaching, nursing, and childcare have historically been predominantly occupied by women, thus being labeled as 'feminine' occupations.

Despite the many changes which have occurred since the first wave of feminism, institutional sexism is still present in the U.S. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the prevalence of gender and racial disparities in this nation. Broadly, women in the workforce have been negatively impacted by COVID-19. Women of color have arguably been hit the hardest; unemployment rates among communities of color have exponentially increased and women have suffered the brunt of the blow. Feminists fear this pandemic will have an adverse effect on the progress that has been achieved by the movement in the last 100 years.

In a March article from The Atlantic, the COVID-19 pandemic was described as 'a disaster for feminism'. As the pandemic continues its rampage in the United States, the gender disparities in the American labor force have become more evident. According to a report from the National Women's Law Center, 'there were… nearly 2.2 million fewer women in the labor force in October than there were in February, before the pandemic.' At the beginning of 2020, the majority of the American workforce was comprised of women for the first time in nearly a decade. This victory for feminism was short-lived as the pandemic would soon deal a staggering blow to the diversity of the workforce. The childcare sector has been devastated by the pandemic, leaving thousands of families without options other than having at least one parent stay home with the children. As one could have guessed based on historical trends, the majority of parents who left their jobs to be at home with their children were women. During September, four times as many women left the workforce compared to their male counterparts.

The unemployment rate among both men and women increased due to the pandemic. According to the Department of Labor, during the third quarter this year, the unemployment rate for all individuals 16 years and older rose from 3.7 to 8.9 percent. For men specifically, unemployment rose from 3.5 percent to 8.4 percent. For women, unemployment rose from 3.9 percent to 9.5 percent. Superficially, these statistics do not show an overwhelming disparity between men and women in the workforce. However, a closer examination of varying demographics reveals that women of color have been proportionally more impacted by unemployment during the pandemic.

Comparing the third quarter of 2019 to the third of 2020, unemployment among White women increased from 3.7 percent to 8.6 percent, compared to an estimated unemployment rate of 7.4 percent among their male counterparts. The unemployment rate among Asian women increased from 2.5 percent in 2019 to a staggering 11.6 percent in 2020. As of the third quarter of 2020, Asian males had an unemployment rate of 9.6 percent. Unemployment rates among Latina women increased from 4.8 percent to 12.5 percent, whereas Latino men reported an unemployment rate of 10.2 percent for the third quarter of 2020. Interestingly, Black women were the only demographic that reported a lower unemployment rate for the third quarter (12.7%) than their male counterparts (13.8%). This statistic is not

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meant to suggest that Black women have been less impacted by COVID-19 than other races. In fact, Black women reported the highest unemployment rate among women. Rather, this statistic highlights the extent to which the pandemic has affected the Black community as a whole.

The above data serves as evidence of the gender disparities still present in the American labor force. These statistics also speak to a larger issue, in that a significant number of women who left their jobs during the pandemic reported doing so to care for their children. During September of 2020, 63 percent of working mothers reported being 'primarily responsible for childcare during the spring shutdown' compared to 43 percent of their male counterparts. According to the same survey, 80 percent of working mothers reported being primarily responsible for assisting their children with online learning; only 31 percent of surveyed working fathers reported their assumption of this responsibility. Since the start of the pandemic, an estimated 17 percent of working mothers quit their jobs versus 10 percent of working fathers. One possible explanation for this disparity is a difference in income between men and women. According to data from the National Women's Law Center, working mothers earn about 70 cents for every dollar working fathers earn. From a purely economic standpoint, it seems logical that families would assign childcare responsibilities during the pandemic to the parent with the lowest income. However, an essay from Janet Yellen, the former chairwoman of the American Federal Reserve, suggests that equal participation in the labor force by both genders would increase U.S. GDP by 5 percent.

An additional explanation for the gender disparities within the labor force is pre-existing gender stereotypes. The pressures of adhering to gender stereotypes are not unique to women; according to Scott Melzer, author of *Manhood Impossible*, 'men rank [breadwinner status plus bodily strength and control] as the most important aspects of their identities as men.' Feminism serves to benefit both men and women. Diversifying the labor force and closing the income gap between men and women would substantially reduce the stereotypes within the labor force. Society places a great deal of pressure on men to be the breadwinners for their families. However, spouses have different interests and goals, and should subsequently not feel ashamed of pursuing their dreams, even if it means challenging stereotypical gender roles. Men who enter fields such as nursing, education, and childcare often face scrutiny for pursuing an 'unmanly' career. Similarly, women in fields like engineering and law face discrimination and stereotyping at the hands of their male colleagues. Gender stereotyping in the workplace not only contributes to lower productivity but can negatively impact the mental health of workers.

Senator Elizabeth Warren proposes a policy that would have a profoundly positive impact on the percentage of women who pursue an education or are part of the labor force: universal childcare. Senator Warren's proposal calls for the creation of a new government subsidy that will 'provide grants to states, cities, nonprofits, schools, and other local partners to "create a network of child care options that would be available to every family."' Senator Warren's plan calls for increasing the taxes of upper income families in order to reduce the cost of childcare for lower income families. This measure would effectively raise wages for childcare workers and reduce the burden of childcare costs on families. From a historical perspective, affordable childcare could effectively increase the rate of participation in the labor force among women.

In an article from U.C. Berkeley, Tamara Straus blames the high costs of childcare for '[stalling] the gender revolution].' According to Straus, many women in the 60s and 70s could not afford both an education and childcare, and consequently had no choice but to abandon their educational aspirations. A plan such as Senator Warren's could alleviate this burden and increase college attendance rates, increase the number of women in the workforce, and decrease stereotyping against both men and women. Another effective policy includes paternity leave, which is said to improve the relationship between spouses as well as the bond between parent and child. Combatting gender inequality will not only require shattering gender stereotypes but will also require feminist-based legislation.

The pandemic has shone a light on the reality that institutionalized sexism is still prevalent in the United States and around the world. Gender equality will not be achieved through inaction. With a record number of both Democratic and Republican women in political positions, the shattering of gender stereotypes feels more possible than ever. However, female conservative representatives who stand steadfastly against feminism may be the feminist movement's biggest threat following the pandemic. Nonetheless, the steady increase of women in the workforce is reassuring and expected to grow as the pandemic nears its end. However, the lesson learned from the pandemic

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must not be ignored. It is time that lawmakers prioritize policies that will reduce disparities between men and women in all aspects of life.

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