In May 2020, the United Kingdom welcomed the 50th anniversary of the *Equal Pay Act 1970*, which was enacted to ensure the equal treatment of men and women in terms of pay and the conditions of employment. However, in recent months, research has revealed that women have suffered a larger fall in earnings in the United Kingdom and are losing their jobs in greater numbers than men during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this article, we consider how women in the workplace are being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and how the gender pay gap may worsen across all employment sectors as a result.

**Female Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

According to a recent report from the Resolution Foundation, a think tank that works on economic issues facing low earners, only 10 percent of lower earners—defined as “those in the bottom half of the earnings distribution”—are able to work from home, and according to the UK Women’s Budget Group, 69 percent of those lower earners are women. Therefore working from home may not be a useful solution to many of the women whose jobs have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.
In the United Kingdom, 77 percent of frontline workers are female, with women working in essential sectors such as healthcare, education, and food production. Lockdown and social distancing measures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic are affecting the service sectors that involve frequent interaction between customers and providers, in which women tend to be overrepresented in the workforce. Also, women on average do 60 percent more unpaid care work than men, leaving them with less time for paid work, meaning they are more likely to rely on public services and social security and are more likely to be at risk of poverty. As Dr. Sara Reis, the head of research and policy at the UK Women's Budget Group said, “[w]omen started this crisis from a position of economic disadvantage.” She added that her organisation is “worried the impact on women’s earnings and employment prospects will widen existing gender inequalities, not least the gender wage gap.”

**Effects of COVID-19 on the Gender Pay Gap**

Just two weeks before the annual 4 April 2020 deadline for private-sector businesses to publish their gender pay gap statistics, the UK government announced that, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there would be no mandatory requirement to report gender pay gap data in 2020. In a joint statement, the minister for Women and Equalities, Liz Truss, and David Isaac, the chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, said they felt “it [was] only right to suspend enforcement of gender pay gap reporting this year.” Although mandatory reporting has been suspended for the reporting year 2019/2020, the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) found in 2019 that there was a 17.3 percent pay gap between men and women in the United Kingdom when considering part- and full-time employees together. The results were based on ONS’s 2019 Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, which calculates the gender pay gap by measuring “the difference between average hourly earnings (excluding overtime) of men and women as a proportion of average hourly earnings (excluding overtime) of men’s earnings . . . across all jobs in the UK[.]”

According to Business in the Community (BITC), which describes itself as “the oldest and largest business-led membership organisation dedicated to responsible business,” the number of organisations that reported their gender pay gap in the 2019/2020 reporting period was 50 percent of those required to report. BITC warns that the COVID-19 pandemic could “set back women’s equality a generation.” By 24 March 2020, the day the government announced the suspension of the 4 April 2020 reporting deadline, only 26 percent of companies compelled to report (including Financial Times Stock Exchange 100 organisations) had done so, BITC said in a press announcement on 29 May 2020.

Charlotte Woodworth, the gender equality campaign director at BITC, said:

Pay gap reporting is a vital tool in understanding and tackling gender inequality at work. If we don’t have a clear picture of women’s status at work entering the crisis, we won’t be able to take the right steps going forward. It is hugely disappointing to see so many opted out when the legal requirement was lifted—and a worrying sign of attitudes towards gender equality during the crisis.

In these difficult times, businesses that choose to put equality and inclusion at the heart of their response will end up better placed to flourish in the future.
As businesses reopen, organisations can take steps to ensure that efforts to remodel workforces and working practices in the coming months do not disproportionately impact women. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that employers can adapt and offer remote and flexible working arrangements, which may support both men and women in a manner that promotes greater equality across their working practices. If handled well, these measures could have a positive impact in reducing the gender pay gap going forward.
