

Hiding Behind The SWOT: Gender Equality and COVID-19

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Abstract

Purpose: The Covid-19 pandemic has undeniably posed unexpected challenges causing social and economic disruptions even for the most adaptive and dynamic organizations. The effects of this crisis are not gender-neutral. The focus of our study is to identify the devastating impacts of the pandemic on gender equality in the Covid-19 era. The present study examines the impact of the pandemic on society through the gender perspective and the role of the firm's innovative practices and responses towards maintaining a positive work-life balance of working mothers. **Approach:** This study highlights the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) caused due to the COVID-19 crisis with distinct reference to women and the inequalities encountered by them during the Covid-19 outbreak.

Findings: The study found that the promotion of gender equality can bring multiple benefits. Work from home options might also generate employment opportunities for women, who had taken a career break to reboot their careers.

Implication: The study adds new dimensions to the notion of gender equality and paves way for future research. Empirical studies can be undertaken on the basis of our research

Originality: Covid-19 has forced organizations to consider more fluid workforce models and explore options like Flexi-working, part-time working, and more opportunities for female workforce and gig workers. The growing gig economy has opened up new job opportunities for women and organizations should consider more such prospects for the future. This paper contributes in identifying challenges and opportunities Poised by COVID-19 for women employees.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, SWOT, work-life balance, women, gender equality.

INTRODUCTION

This unprecedented crisis of COVID-19 has transformed the organizations and challenged them to acclimatize with the nationwide lockdowns and social distancing norms. Although the pandemic has disturbed the life of every individual, it has severely impacted the

professional and personal lives of working women and girls. It is now a serious concern for the organizations and management to understand the changes and challenges faced by women employees and to frame and re-frame organizational policies accordingly. The world is struggling with this unprecedented challenge

and looking for strategies to pull through the repercussions brought in by this pandemic.

On 30th January 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 as a public health emergency of International Concern, and since then the consequences of this global catastrophe are reverberating globally in every aspect of development be it economic or social. Several restrictions were announced by the Government to control the spread of the virus, thereby paralyzing the economy. Unprecedented Covid-19 has triggered a global health crisis leading to the deepest recession since Second World War (World Bank, 2020). Such situations have the double burden of paid and unpaid work for women. Additionally, work from home has intensified the burden turning it into a triple burden on working women (Beheshti, 2022). The coronavirus pandemic had devastating impacts on the social and economic development of women and consequently has deepened the gender inequalities. As per the report launched by UN Secretary, it is speculated that COVID-19 can reverse the advancements made on gender equality and women's rights (Adikaram et al., 2021)

The global pandemic has adversely affected everyone's life, shattering the economic status and social security all over the world. Among all the sectors, the employment sector is the one that has faced major threats and challenges. Due to the restrictions imposed by the government, people were required to work from their homes and remote working was encouraged. However, it was even more challenging to decide about those jobs which could not be done remotely. For example jobs of frontline workers, community health workers, social workers, etc. wherein many were bound to perform their jobs while many employees were at the urge of quitting. The pandemic has deeply worsened the condition of girls and women and they were the hardest hit as homemakers, caregivers, and working mothers. While on one hand, Covid-19 has threatened the employment opportunities for women, it has also promoted self-employment opportunities on the other. Another positive aspect of this pandemic is that it has forced

organizations to frame policies that can overcome the negative consequences of such a crisis in the future.

Organizations worldwide had to undertake various measures for social distancing forcing the societies, companies, and individuals to rethink and revamp their lives and working styles. Till date organizations around the globe are grappling with re-strategizing their policies and re-structuring their work culture. Businesses around the world are striving to adopt revolutionary labour-related strategies like remote work and hybrid work structures through innovative work trends and optimistically that will be considered a new normal amid the ongoing uncertainty. This health crisis has impacted socially and economically aggravating gender inequalities. Hence organizations need to be gender-sensitive and leverage the unique expertise and capabilities of women and girls while responding to the Covid-19 crisis. The chapter provides recommendations to the policymakers for formulating and implementing successful policy decisions, during and after the post-Covid-19 scenario.

The Covid -19 pandemic has heavily impacted women globally and almost 60 percent of them have fallen prey to poverty. The female workforce in the informal economy is more vulnerable in particular. Due to a lack of gender-sensitive measures towards health and economic security several inequalities are faced by women in their workplace, including unequal pay structure, lower job quality, and lack of power and autonomy. Women are double burdened because they have to perform their personal as well as professional commitments simultaneously and their burden has increased due to work for home and work from home.

Furthermore, loss of financial security due to quitting of jobs, school closures, and increased needs of elderly and children has aggravated their burden. Domestic violence at home has further increased the problems for women. They are forced to work under mental and physical stress and have no other option but to quit their jobs for undertaking their household

responsibilities the multitude of problems has increased gender inequalities rolling back the limited progress of women and girls. The effects of this crisis are likely to be persistent on working mothers and hence there is a need for organizations to promote gender equality in their structures and strategies. Covid-19 has forced organizations to consider more fluid workforce models and explore options like Flexi-working, part-time working, and more opportunities for female workforce and gig workers. The growing gig economy has opened up new job opportunities for women and organizations should consider more such prospects for the future.

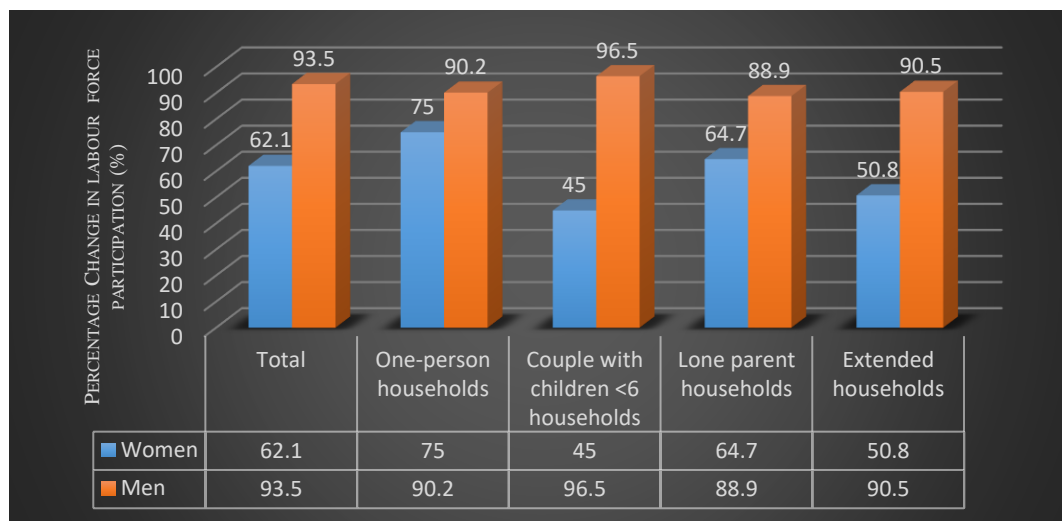
Hence, it becomes imperative to understand what are the challenges faced by women employees and how organizations can help them maintain their well-being and work-life balance. This paper intends to understand gender equality in the context of COVID-19 through SWOT analysis. Information from organizations like ILO, The Conference Board, Bureau of Labour Sciences, McKinsey, and Forbes is retrieved to answer the research question. We analyze gender equality in terms of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. The study put forward the policy implications and suggestions to uplift gender equality during and post-pandemic.

Gender Inequality and Covid-19: An overview

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to substantial implications for the women workforce, the

restrictions placed by Government largely impacted the sectors with high women employment shares. While the pandemic has majorly affected the women's labour market opportunities, informal employment tends to increase during the crisis. As the informal sector is the only default option left for earning and meeting survival needs, globally around 76 percent of informal workers are worst affected due to lockdown measures. This in turn has exposed their families to income losses falling prey to poverty. In 2020 due to pandemic, the employment loss of women was greater at 5 percent as compared to men at 3.9 percent.

This economic downturn has further widened the inequalities restraining the progress of women. In addition to this, the closure of schools and daycare centers has aggravated their burden. Women are likely to quit their jobs to provide care to their children and elders leading to an increase in gender inequalities in terms of employment. The below chart shows the labour force participation rate for the age group between 25 yrs to 54 yrs. Before the pandemic recession, in the year 2019, the labour force participation rate of prime-age men was 93.5percent as compared to lower participation by prime-age women at 62.1 percent. However, after the pandemic the labour force participation rate of women has further degraded.

Figure: 1 *Labour Force Participation Rate (persons aged 25yrs to 54yrs)*

Source: ILO Modelled Estimates. 2019 (Totals are ILO Modelled Estimates for 2019 and breakdowns are population-weighted aggregates based on the latest available data for 108 countries)

Figure 1 shows the gender disparities in labour participation for the year 2019 before the pandemic, however, after the pandemic, the gender inequalities were further exacerbated when women were underrepresented in managerial positions. According to the data by International Labour Organisation, globally the share of women in managerial positions has been sluggish, even though in 2019 women occupied 39 percent of the labour force, only 28 percent of managerial positions were occupied by them. This data puts forward that the glass ceiling persists in organizations with men dominating managerial positions (Sodergren, 2021).

As per the report by The Conference Board, Bureau of Labour Statistics, pandemic's impact on working women has reversed their limited progress. In April 2020 the women's employment rate fell to the lowest level since the 1990s. According to International Labour Organization's report the employment status of women at the global level, is at 5 percent, as compared to men at 3.9 percent (ILO, 2020). The Covid-19 crisis has largely hit the women's unemployment rate as compared to men and roughly resulted in a loss of \$ 560 billion in U.S. GDP from January to November 2020 (Brief, 2020). Thus there is a need to counteract the impacts of Covid-19 on working

women and revive business operations towards their vital progress.

The pandemic has crippled the labour markets and economies drastically. It has transformed the functioning of global businesses and impacted them positively as well as negatively. A SWOT analysis of these impacts serves as a strategic tool to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities encountered by businesses. In SWOT analysis, the concept of Strengths (S) includes the situations favorable for the organization and helps organizations achieve their objectives and attain competitive advantage. the concept of Weakness (W) includes inconsistencies that hinder the realization of organizational objectives. Threats (T) are the situations in the business environment that are not favourable for the organizations. Opportunities (O) refer to those circumstances that are potentially favorable for the organization. Organizations through SWOT analysis can identify the strengths and opportunities that can upraise the women workforce and recognize the weaknesses and threats that hinder gender equality. To build up fair employment policies, organizations must put gender equality at the vanguard of recovery efforts.

Strengths:

To tackle the crisis and reduce inequality, there is a need to deepen our understanding of the relationship between Covid-19 and gender equality. Managers need to formulate and reframe the existing policies with special reference to women. Focusing on strengths will help organizations to reduce barriers to women's success and promote equality and workplace inclusivity.

- As India is emerging out of this unpredicted crisis, there is a need to consider the women's workforce as an important element of society. The organizations are now focussing on generating employment opportunities for them. If organizations promote gender equality in their workplace culture, India's GDP may rise to 18 percent by 2025. Covid-19 has forced organizations to consider more fluid workforce models and explore Flexi-working, part-time working and generate more opportunities for gig workers.
- Organizations are focusing on female participation in the workforce by hiring more women, raising more women in leadership positions, and stimulating them for their career progression by providing various innovative work options (Sarkar, 2022).
- Working from home with flexible work structures is proving beneficial in generating employment opportunities for women who had taken a career break to reboot their careers.
- The growing gig economy has opened up new job opportunities for women and organizations can consider more such opportunities in the future.
- Women in the corporate sector have borne the burden of the pandemic as caregivers and homemakers while balancing the work pressures. However since organizations are considering and extending work from home options, the future seems bright for the women workforce (Sarkar, 2022).
- According to a report women in corporate America are more burned out as compared to men. Despite this, women in leadership positions are taking initiatives to

support and promote employee well-being and stimulate diversity, equity, and inclusivity of other female employees. (Burns, 2021).

- Due to the collaborative efforts by management, working women are managing work from home and work for home effectively by proper time management and by prioritizing their roles at home and work(Committee on Women in Psychology,2020)

Weaknesses:

The unprecedented crisis has reversed the partial progress made in the past and has worsened the condition of women in every sphere from health to economic, from social protection to security thus deepening the inequalities. Identifying weaknesses will help organizations in taking quick decisions and prompt actions for attaining a competitive advantage in the dynamic milieu.

- The women performing work from home and working for home are under an increased mental and physical burden. The gender biases in terms of household responsibilities, child care, and lack of proper nutrition have aggravated the mental and physical condition of women.
- According to a study conducted by the University of Pennsylvania, working mothers had to bear the burden at the workplace as well as assist their children's learning due to school closures. Due to these perceived roles and responsibilities, many women were forced to quit their jobs during the pandemic. A similar study by McKinsey revealed that working mothers had three times more demand for housework and caregiving during the pandemic crisis as compared to fathers (Baker,2021).
- A study undertaken by the University of British Columbia found that women going through stress were more likely to suffer from hypertension. Another study by the University of Texas revealed that there was an increase in binge drinking by 69 percent of women for each week in lockdown.
- Despite the stress and exhaustion, American women in the corporate sector are emerging as strong leaders, supporting their

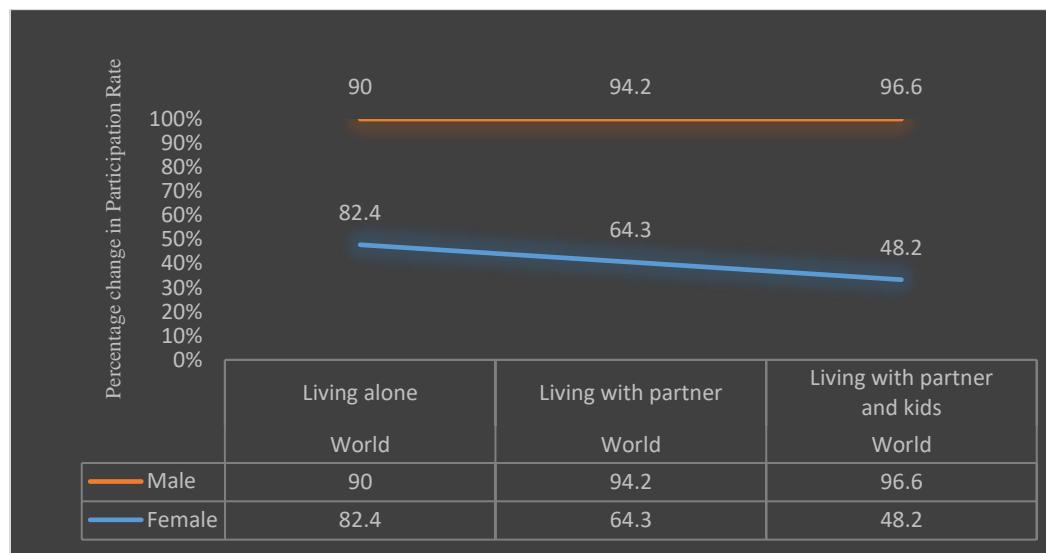
teams and taking on the additional work as compared to men at the same level, however, their significant contribution is going unrecognized and unrewarded by most companies, which is a matter of great concern and should be immediately considered (Burns, 2021).

- There is a lack of commitment by organizations towards racial equity and it becomes critical for organizations to take actions against racial discrimination and channel the capabilities of employees at all levels irrespective of their colour and gender.
- Organizations have accustomed to remote work, however, according to research conducted by Misty Heggeness, in U.S. Census

Bureau, many women working remotely are quitting their jobs as they have to juggle between childcare and office work (World Bank, 2020). Due to this multitasking working mothers experience burnout and are deprived of the freedom to work remotely.

- According to the data by International Labour Organization having kids leads to a significant decline in women's labour force participation, while the male labour force participation has upsurged. Figure 2 depicts the world labour force participation from living alone, to living with a partner, to living with the partner and children. The pattern of decline in women's participation in the labour force is seen in almost all regions (Gammarano, 2020).

Figure 2: Labour Force Participation Rate by Family Situation.



Source: ILOSTAT, ILO Modelled Estimates, 2021

The chart depicts that having kids in the household increases women's roles and keeps them from entering the labour force, however, more participation of male counterparts is found. Contrary to this, the situation for lone parents particularly women is different as they have a higher labour force participation rate at 82.4 percent as compared to women living with a partner and living with a partner and kids which stands at 64.3 percent and 48.2 percent respectively. This situation arises likely due to the economic insecurity related to being a lone parent (Gammarano, 2020).

- As stated by Mr. Sijbrandij, the CEO of Gitlab, "if the Hybrid Model is inadequately planned, it would neither have face to face interaction nor the egalitarianism that fully remote workplaces aspire to have" he further added that hybrid remote work is "the worst of both worlds" because due to disproportionate distribution of power, the employees regularly visiting work will have an advantage over the employees working from (PTI, 2022).

- Despite the advantages, Hybrid work proves to be detrimental as it is considered as a mixed blessing. It leads to enormous socio-economic and racial inequality between who

can work from home and who is not able to, it simultaneously creates an additional burden on women employees.

- According to an article by New York Times, many negatively impacted jobs are filled by single mothers, low income, and minority women. Working in these essential jobs makes them more prone to the risk of exposure to the virus. According to a study conducted by McKinsey, industries where women are over-represented including retail, education, manufacturing, hospitality, and food service suffered great declines due to the pandemic (Baker,2021).
- The unexpected crisis has further exacerbated the pre-existing gender disparities limiting the progress of women. According to a Forbes article, the Covid -19 pandemic has impacted women's overall health and well-being. Unfortunately, women have to face the brunt of domestic violence due to social isolation with their abusers, thereby causing stress and hypertension and increasing health issues for women. A study by the University of California Davis, proves that domestic violence against women has increased significantly (Brower,2021).

Opportunities:

The Covid-19 scenario has brought an unchangeable change in the lives of women, be it working women or women who play the 24*7 role of homemakers. The lockdown imposed all over the world had adversely affected the work-life balance of working people especially the female workforce. But as we know every coin has two sides, this unrestrained outbreak situation to has two sides. If there are negative effects of this novel virus, there are the positive effects too and in the form of opportunities, this pandemic has brought to people a rapid transformation in working styles.

The forced restrictions during lockdown paralyzed our economy but at the same time gave rise to the gig economy and a work culture that focuses on increasing and maintaining employees' well-being and work-life balance. Innovative and inclusive

workplace cultures brought the following opportunities for the workforce.

- According to a recent survey women are 26 percent more likely to apply for remote work as compared to men, creating more opportunities for organizations to create innovative work practices in the new normal(Beheshti,2022).
- The work trend that is likely to survive is Hybrid work, "it is a work structure wherein the employee is given the autonomy to work in the office and remotely". This independence and flexibility are considered a boon for women, as it allows them to structure their work and at the same time maintain a work-life balance.
- Hybrid work grants autonomy to employees around when and where to work. This work trend is a win-win situation as it involves the choice to balance work with personal life on one hand and independence and flexibility on the other.
- According to statistics, more than 60 percent of employees are satisfied with their work-life balance and 31 percent of employees stated that the hybrid approach increased their productivity (PTI, 2022).
- To promote gender equality, organizations can offer child care assistance, daycare facility, or remote flexibility to support the women workforce, this work culture will encourage women in their pursuit of growth and development (Baker,2021).
- To generate opportunities for women, leaders can elevate the women workforce and provide them fair representation through programs that cultivate female talent and encourage women to pursue career advancement
- Telecommuting, Hybrid working, and remote work opportunities should be provided to women and parents trying to balance work from home and work for home.

The workplace trends followed in 2020 and 2021 will continue in 2022 too, as the new variants are reminding us that uncertainties

may be encountered by organisations and it has become imperative for them to upgrade their policies and strategies in this rapidly transforming milieu.

Threats:

The tumultuous pandemic has impacted men and women differently and has led to disparities by increasing the burden and financial insecurity on women. If we talk about the negative consequences of this sudden lockdown, the working life of women employees has changed radically. Office responsibilities and family commitments created stress in their lives and now they have to work from home and work for home concurrently.

Before the pandemic, working women were generally seen struggling to maintain their work-life integration and this sudden outbreak has further added to their stress and exhaustion. According to World Economic Forum, the global agenda should be having a gender perspective towards economic opportunities, education, and domestic norms (Burns et al, 2021). To overcome the intimidations and attain a competitive advantage in the business environment, organizations should emphasize on the following threats to accomplish the above-mentioned global agenda.

- Organizations need to be intentional while structuring the workplace culture and rebuilding their systems. Management should eliminate gender disparities and leverage the skills, capacities, agility, and capabilities of female employees by providing appropriate remote and Flexi work hours.
- The covid-19 crisis led to joblessness and loss of incomes for many, in times of such crisis organizations should undertake policies and strategies to meet the needs of all the employees irrespective of gender and colour.
- Organizations should provide, emergency and stimulus packages, access to equal pay, financial services, unemployment benefits, paid sick leaves, emergency healthcare, childcare facilities, etc. to protect women employees' financial security.

- Women as caregivers are more prone to infections from sick family members which upsets their mental and physical well-being. Thus there is a need to formulate and implement policies on paternity leaves to stimulate male engagement in household activities and promote gender equality.

- Due to the increase in domestic violence, there is a crucial requirement of centres and shelters for women, domestic violence helplines, and legal aids to respond to gender-based abuses.

- The pandemic has impeded equal access to education in urban and rural areas, the students should be provided with access to online facilities and e-resources to keep them engaged in learning. Similarly, the organizations adopting work from home culture should provide employees with proper facilities for their efficient and effective working.

- Minervini, an organizational design researcher asserted that a hybrid model can entrench a divide between the employees working in the office and those working from home, thus augmenting the gender gap and disproportionate share of power (PTI, 2022)

Finding and Conclusion:

The pandemic has been a devastating experience and at the same time, it cautions of a greater crisis waiting over the horizon. The need of the hour is to completely transform the conventional work practices and adopt an appropriate organizational culture in the contemporary scenario. The organizations can utilize the following recommendations for mitigating the consequences and facing the challenges encountered during such unanticipated situations. Our study has tried to identify how COVID-19 has posed a challenge as well as an opportunity for women. We have examined that recognition and reward should be given to the women leaders who are dynamic and contribute towards the progress of other women and organizations. There should be a mix of synchronous and asynchronous communication methods for geographically

distant teams' effective working. It is advisable to have flexibility at the workplace to maintain wellbeing and work-life balance (PTI, 2022). Organizations should ensure equitable promotions and reduce bias in the hiring and performance review process (Burns et al., 2021). Minervini and organizational design researchers suggest that organizations need to divide work into tasks that can be completed independently and employees can take quick decisions, without requiring the employees to be available online simultaneously.

Organizations should communicate and set clear guidelines on what is expected of their employees and what is the purpose of inclusive culture adopted by companies. The organizations need to develop a work culture of commitment to equality, empowerment, and inclusivity to create a workplace where all the women employees feel valued and comfortable, this, in turn, will make the women workforce happy and feel connected to co-workers. The inclusivity and equality approach should be adopted by organizations and should ensure the health and safety of all employees, thereby promoting equality and well-being through community initiatives. Organizations can create more positive options for women by imparting education and training and promoting the professional development of women. In addition, organizations should adopt talent management practices such as recruitment, selection, placement, and promotion of employees intentionally with a gender perspective to stimulate the progress of the women workforce.

Organizations should encourage and give recognition to those employees who have significantly contributed during the pandemic and should invest in their career development. Organizations can adopt a holistic approach towards the well-being of their employees, investment should be made for emergency childcare, flexible work structures, physical fitness or wellness programs, and policies for financial security. According to Kathryn Harrison-Thomas, CRS EMEA Region Head for Citicorp, mentoring is a powerful way to reinforce positive experiences, assisting in uplifting women in the workplace. It would be

impressive to see women mentors boosting other women's confidence, encouraging them to realize their potential and pursue various opportunities. Without mentors, the statistics showing women's advancement would be disappointing (Brower, 2021).

In response to Covid-19 preparation and efforts for recovery, the Government, the Private sector, and multilateral organizations should accept this unparalleled situation as a challenge and convert the threats into opportunities by focusing on well-being, dignity and decent work for all. Though the pandemic crisis had been tough, particularly for women employees. Organizations can utilize it as an opportunity and influence the structures and systems to provide more provisions for the women workforce. Organizations all over the world should take this Covid-19 era as an alarming signal to remind themselves that one should be self-dependent and self-reliant and only with this approach a nation can grow. The demoralizing pandemic reveals that any inaction by organizations will further exacerbate financial insecurity, poverty, and inequality. The policymakers should take lessons from this unprecedented crisis and use the opportunity to build a robust safety net, increase investments, provide fair wages to all employees and promote a positive and inclusive work culture (Boesch and Phadke, 2021)

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