By Sofia Ouzzine

COVID-19 has disrupted our lives (including workplaces) more than we could have imagined, worsening women inclusion further and intensifying the challenges they are facing

2020 has been a roller coaster year that turned our lives upside down and put us, humans, into very difficult challenges : from lockdown across the world , travel restrictions to shutting down restaurants and non-essential businesses , limiting social contacts and making the silver lining between home and work non-existent with home schooling and working from home…Worries, anxiety, pressure and even loneliness rose leading us to being overworked, stressed-out and getting closer to nervous breakdown, burnout for some and even bore-out for some others.

2020 has been a crazy and even more, a serious and dangerous roller coaster for working women. With the increased need of being available for work at all hours, the anxiety of performance being judged negatively, the arise of caregiving responsibilities on top of health, and financial worries, many women are struggling heavily with self-doubt and loss of confidence, especially Women of colour: reported to be more likely laid-off and furloughed during 2020 jeopardising their financial securities. This goes without mentioning the emotional instability and lack of inclusivity that those women live continuously due to racial discrimination and injustice.

Women, mainly women of colour, remain dramatically underrepresented and encounter many barriers to access corporate leadership and executive positions. Progress has been seen in the last decade but is it a solid lasting change? Until the pandemic, the percentage of women in senior business leadership positions was as its high, a five-percentage-point jump in senior vice president roles and a record-breaking number of Fortune 500 companies with female CEOs. Is the COVID crisis threatening to wipe out all this progress?

The workforce, since the start of the pandemic, has lost 2 million women. The risk of losing women leaders and future leaders is significantly increasing, unwinding years of painful progress toward gender equality and diversity. Today, more than ever, companies need to step-up and turn this crisis into a great opportunity by making significant investments toward creating a more inclusive and flexible workplace for women. The decisions taken by the companies and their respective leaders will not only impact their organizations but also will shape our societies in future. What does need to change and how can we turn this crisis into an opportunity?

It all starts with a flexible workplace and empathic leaders capable of offering adequate support:

It is time to move out from the rigid 8:00am to 5:00pm working hours to more flexible working hours and allow more control over time off. The need for a flexible workplace started before the pandemic, led by millennials and working mothers. The urge of it just got confirmed with the COVID crisis. Flexibility means being a modern employer adjusting its policies upon the needs of its employees and the overall running of the business.

But adjusting and making new rules and policies are not enough, leaders inside the companies need to promote the positive effect of flexible working and make it a general rule not just exceptional case. A great leader in general is a great empathic person who has the genuine curiosity and the cleverness to understand the world of its employees: his main job after all is to

create the right environment that empowers and engages them not only to deliver but also to push them to do more and reach fulfilment at work. If that means providing a flexible, more inclusive work environment where each woman should be considered for her real value, feel supported and treated fairly, well then it should be.

More than ever, with the COVID pandemic, companies should take serious steps to support their employees. Expanding mental health support and well-being services is key to deal with this unprecedented crisis and would be a quick win. It is also

important to address the real sources of work stress and mental meltdown: communicating quickly and clearly on potential structural changes, cascading reasonable achievable objectives, and applying less pressure would be some aspects to consider…

There is not a « one fit for all » solution: It is more about having a flexible organisation with leaders understanding its women's needs, providing the right support and making the right adjustments for a fair, respectful, judgment free and inclusive workspace. A universal key success factor would be then: Hire and train caring Managers!!!

It is still about challenging and eliminating the Biases

Gender bias, prejudices and racial discriminations are still one of the big Women leadership barriers in the workplace. Women still face many discounts for roles because employers are concerned that they will leave to start a family or would not be very available as she needs to take care of it. Many rejections happen because we believe that some specific roles are not suited for the females. Micro-aggressions are lived continuously because a strong woman who dare to challenge and speak-up is seen as emotional and very aggressive … or the one who asks for help and is brave to show her vulnerability is seen as incompetent. Unfortunately, with the COVID crisis, those bias and injustices increased.

Admitting that gender biases exist is the first step to overcome them. It is important to start bringing the unconscious to the conscious by educating all employees and bringing awareness on the topic, making sure they understand what biases are and how they can avoid them.

Reviewing internal processes is also key for every company. By processes, I mean an effective recruitment process encouraging diversity in all departments and empowering women taking over more responsibilities, put in place ratio targets and a plan to reach them. Reviewing processes also mean reviewing performance and pay policies ensuring equal gender pay, flexible and fair performance reviews.

Finally, each leader in the organisation has a big role to play. Leaders must lead by example and show the way. They are the first to be educated and act on their unconscious biases. Also, when a gender bias happens, it is critical to call it out and stand up to it, whether it's a behaviour, an opinion or even a small joke during the coffee break.

Gender diversity and inclusion are with no doubts essential factors for companies to be more innovative, productive, performing, and trusted. So let's not waste the good progress, we should challenge ourselves, our workplace processes and our culture and really step-up toward a more inclusive environment for all.