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Women's Professional Growth Trajectory in California

in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree
Doctor of Business Administration

LaShan M. Epperson

Division of Online Professional Studies

Department of Business Administration – Management

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has been approved by the Dr. Robert K Jabs School of Business in partial fulfillment of the

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Sandra J. Romo, Ph.D., Committee Chair

Beth Groves, DPA., Committee Member

Christina Maria Gonzalez, Ed.D., Committee Member

Tim Gramling, LPD., FACHE, Dean, Jabs School of Business

Abstract

The economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic has substantial implications for gender equality and subsequent recovery. Compared to all other recent recessions, which have historically affected men's employment more severely than women's employment, the employment disruption related to social distancing protocols primarily impacted sectors with a high count of women in the employment sector. In addition, closures of schools and daycare centers increased childcare needs, which significantly impacted working mothers. The effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on working mothers are likely to continue. Because of the current volatility in the labor market, opposing forces may ultimately cause gender inequality in the labor market. Business leaders are strategizing ways to adopt flexible work arrangements quickly. Diversity, equity, and inclusion will also be a significant focus to ensure that women are included in the workforce. Many fathers have now had to take primary responsibility for childcare, which may erode existing social norms. This may ultimately lead to a redistribution in the division of labor.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, recessions, women, unemployment, equality, social norms, diversity, inclusion

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Dedication

Papa, when you spoke, we all listened. You instilled the value of family in all of us. You worked hard to ensure our needs were met and our desires fulfilled. Your steadfast leadership assembled greatness in my life and our family's line-up:

Momo, my dear Grandmother, always believed in me.

Uncle James encouraged me.

Bell, my beloved Mother, continues to inspire me.

Uncle Ollie is always there for me.

Big Brother Robert reminds me to believe in the impossible.

Brother Kenny, I embrace being a "Big Dummy" because it is our term of endearment. I miss you every day.

Papa, I feel accomplished because I worked hard, and I listened to you. Before your passing, you told me to get my education. I promised you I would, and I did! So, it seems most befitting that I dedicate my dissertation to you. With endless love.

Your Granddaughter,

Dr. LaShan Marie Epperson

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Chapter 1: Overview of Study

In early 2020, SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes the novel 2019 Coronavirus (COVID- 19), began to spread across the United States, causing significant alarm in public health sectors. By mid-March 2020, the World Health Organization had declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, and many states mandated lockdowns and shutdowns (Fang et al., 2020). This ultimately resulted in substantial job losses, and many "non-essential" professions began to work from home as an alternative.

California was the first state in the United States to order residents to stay home, with the exception of going to essential jobs or shopping for essential needs (Bruine de Bruin et al., 2020). Services vital to working parents, such as schools and childcare facilities, were closed.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has had worldwide impacts, affecting all professions and age groups (Balabantaray & Sireesha, 2021). Although the measures mentioned above were deemed necessary for public safety, specific segments of society have been more impacted by the pandemic's disruptions than others, including parents of young children, which disproportionately affected women's careers (Fang et al., 2020).

Prior to the pandemic, companies had made slow but steady progress toward increasing diversity and equality in the workplace (Fang et al., 2020). Because of the pandemic, companies may need to escalate intervention in order to keep women who work in California continuing their upward career progression. The effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic crisis on women at work and the crossroads at which California-based companies now find themselves is becoming more amplified (Del Boca et al., 2020).

Even before the pandemic, women tended to need to work harder and longer hours than their male colleagues. Now women are burning out at a higher rate than their male counterparts. As a result of the increased demand for women to fulfill multifaceted roles in and out of the workplace, many senior-level women are now thinking about dialing back their job responsibilities (Zamarro & Prados, 2021). Consideration is also being given to this dilemma by reducing hours worked, transitioning to part-time roles, transitioning to less demanding roles, taking leaves of absence, or leaving the workforce altogether. If women leave senior-level positions, fewer women will be in leadership roles or on track to become leaders (Dworkin et al., 2018). Years of gradual progress toward gender diversity in organizational leadership may be at risk.

The 1918 Spanish Flu Pandemic was previously the disease event that caused the most significant loss of life in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that 675,000 Americans died during that pandemic, in waves of illness that lasted approximately two years in the United States (Balabantaray & Sireesha, 2021). The Spanish Flu never went extinct and became a mild seasonal bug over the years. Some people assume this will be the fate of the COVID-19 Pandemic. As with the Spanish Flu, some health practitioners predict that many people will continue to struggle with the COVID-19 Pandemic's aftermath.

More than a century after the Spanish Flu Pandemic, there are many parallels. Lessons learned can still be applied to the COVID-19 Pandemic to mitigate more tragedy. Responses to historical lessons and adherence to the 21st-Century tools of advanced vaccine development have provided a promising means to end the COVID-19 Pandemic. In the United States, a highly politicized response, including an extended period of

inconsistent and uncoordinated oversight of testing, supply distribution, and public health guidance, has contributed to a patchwork of widely variable approaches from state to state (Balabantaray & Sireesha, 2021).

Inconsistent measures similarly impacted control measures in 1918 when the lack of a vaccine or even antibiotics to treat secondary infections necessitated ad hoc steps, such as masking up, keeping surfaces clean, and avoiding crowds (Balabantaray & Sireesha, 2021). Governments relied on isolation, disinfection, and essentially personal protection equipment. In fact, in 1918, some towns had to impose quarantines and affixed cards to the windows of homes with quarantined residents. Many ads and public health directives from 1918 shared remarkably similar advice to the public of 2020. In contrast to 1918, researchers have procured vaccines that are deemed more effective. However, just as with the 1918 flu pandemic, it is highly likely that COVID-19 Pandemic will not be the last pandemic. Other infectious diseases are very likely to emerge or reemerge with deadly force (Balabantaray & Sireesha, 2021). The new or reemerging infections will likely bring new lessons and undoubtedly reinforce old ones.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has killed as many Americans as the 1918 Spanish Flu (Balabantaray & Sireesha, 2021). A century ago, the United States population was just one-third of what it is today, meaning the Spanish flu affected a considerable portion of the country. But the COVID-19 Pandemic is relatively a colossal tragedy, especially given the advances in scientific knowledge that have emerged over the past one-hundred years and the emergence of vaccinations (Akter, 2021). Unfortunately, the coronavirus may never entirely disappear. Instead, scientists hope it becomes a mild seasonal bug as

human immunity strengthens through vaccinations and repeated infections (De Henau & Himmelweit, 2021).

Background and Context

From a historical perspective, there is a comparison premise: the Spanish Flu of 1918 occurred over one hundred years ago. Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Spanish Flu was considered the deadliest pandemic. The Spanish Flu infected an estimated 500 million people worldwide — about one-third of the planet's population. At the time, there were no vaccines to treat the Spanish Flu virus. Citizens were ordered to wear masks, schools and businesses were closed, and the global death count rose exponentially, killing almost three quarters of a million people. Likewise, and worth noting, the Spanish Flu was previously the disease event that caused the most significant loss of life in the United States. The Spanish flu never went extinct and became a mild seasonal bug over the years. Some people assume this will be the fate of the COVID-19 Pandemic (Balabantaray & Sireesha, 2021).

The COVID-19 Pandemic has become the deadliest disease outbreak in recent American history, with deaths surpassing the estimated deaths of the 1918 Spanish Flu (Balabantaray & Sireesha, 2021). Many health experts suspect that the COVID-19 Pandemic's high death rates resulted from the United States of America's delayed response to control the pandemic early on, despite the modern advancement in scientific and medical advances (De Henau & Himmelweit, 2021). The scientific advancements that have been made over the last century led to the faster development of COVID-19 vaccines. However, new variants are still manifesting, and the efficacy of these vaccines could be in doubt as they become less potent. Like the Spanish Flu, many people will

struggle with COVID-19 Pandemic's aftermath for many years into the future (Balabantaray & Sireesha, 2021).

The COVID-19 Pandemic is one of the most severe economic crises humankind has experienced since the Spanish Flu pandemic over one hundred years ago (Balabantaray & Sireesha, 2021). It affects the behavior of policymakers, firms, and individual households equally (Moos, 2021). Because of the health threat of the crisis, policymakers implemented measures, such as curfews, lockdowns, and health practices, most of which eradicated employment relationships. The spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic quickly necessitated a change in social norms.

Corporate America is facing a critical moment. Women, especially mothers and senior-level women have largely left the workforce during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Companies have lost women in leadership, strained the prospect of women's upward movement into leadership, and turned back years of progress toward gender pay equity (Thomason & Macias, 2020). Hence, the COVID-19 Pandemic will cause a deepening in gender economic inequality in Corporate America, and it could take over a century to reverse these effects.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has changed many aspects of our lives, including the way we work. Women, who have traditionally assumed primary caregiving duties, have been significantly challenged with added duties and responsibilities and are dealing with new challenges to their work-life balance. In California, lockdowns and shutdowns due to the pandemic have resulted in many women shifting to working from home or becoming underemployed, or unemployed. Women have also had to deal with added responsibilities because commuting and travel routines have also been disrupted during

these times. Some women appreciate the ability to work anywhere at any time.

However, the shift to a virtual office has blurred the lines between work and home, where

family obligations are more likely to intrude on work, and more women than men feel

additional pressure.

The demand for women's time and shifts in daily routines to deal with or without

caregiving responsibilities has disrupted their career trajectories in the short and long

term. Given the most recent women's labor regression trends; little action has been taken

to counter these regressive effects. It is estimated that global Gross Domestic Product

(GDP) growth could be $1 trillion lower in 2030 if women's underemployment or

unemployment continues to trend up (Moos, 2021). It is also important to note that the

California economy adds significant value to the overall GDP. Likewise, women's

professional growth trajectories could be more severely damaged than imagined. Factors

such as increased childcare and elder-care burdens, gender bias, or reduced public and

private spending on services such as education or childcare will continue to push women

out of the labor force.

Overall, to avoid losing more women currently in the workforce, companies may

need to intervene in ways that build a more diverse and equitable environment quickly.

Companies have taken steps to support employees emotionally during the pandemic by

expanding mental health counseling, providing more paid leave, offering additional

financial incentives to pay for the costs of working from home and/or giving emergency

loans. However, few companies have addressed the underlying causes of the core

challenges women are being forced to navigate.

Companies must seek ways to offer more significant support to women and embrace the diversity and inclusion of women by designing and implementing structures, processes, and systems that provide pathways to uninterrupted success trajectories. If companies in California rise to the challenge and act boldly, they can protect gains won in gender diversity and become better workplaces for everyone. Hence reiterating the purpose of this study is to examine approaches California companies can adopt to decrease any widening of gender inequality that the COVID-19 Pandemic has further exacerbated.

Statement of the Problem

The problem emerging is that policymaker activism and business leaders pushing for greater gender equality are essential in order to circumvent a more catastrophic outcome for women when another world crisis emerges. Even as the COVID-19 Pandemic crisis continues, the greater the benefits not just for gender equality, but also for overall economic growth for women California specifically, make for a more robust economy. Moreover, there is a risk of losing even more in women's professional growth and economic benefits if dramatic steps are not taken to ameliorate the negative effects COVID-19 had had on women's employment and career advancement. If no action is taken to mitigate disruption in the professional trajectory of women, and the stagnation of the past couple of years becomes the norm, in addition to the gender-regressive shock that has transpired as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic, women will suffer more significant setbacks. And this will directly impact business growth and sustainability.

Background of the Problem

In late 2019, reports of a novel coronavirus surfaced from China. At the end of January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency of international concern; at the time, China had experienced nearly two hundred deaths due to the virus, and there were eighteen documented cases in other countries. During the same timeframe, the United States declared a state of emergency. By March 12, 2019, he COVID-19 Pandemic was moving quickly throughout California. Within one month, the death count reached 1,000, and, within two months, 3,000 Californians had died from the virus. As the virus's rapid spread across California became apparent, public health officials stepped in to provide guidance and policies designed to protect individuals better and preserve life-saving resources (Goodwin, 2021).

While most people's lives and work have been negatively affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic, the magnitude of gender inequality is glaring. According to data and trends from unemployment surveys in California, women's job-loss rates due to the COVID-19 Pandemic are nearly two times higher than male job-loss rates (Zamarro & Prado, 2021). The data also suggest that women in California made up 46 percent of the workforce before the COVID-19 Pandemic. However, unemployment data also indicates that women make up 54 percent of the overall job losses (Robinson et al., 2021). The gendered nature of work across industries partly explains the difference between job-loss rates for men and women; the lack of systemic progress to resolve other societal barriers for women explains the rest (Zamarro & Prados, 2021).

The gender pay gap refers to the disparity between what men and women earn for doing the same work. The gender pay gap reaches back to the start of paid work in our

civilization and perhaps grew as a political issue in America during the late 1800s when

there was a steadfast movement for women to earn equal pay for equal work (Riccucci,

2008). Women's right's activists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton

championed bridging the pay gap to help negate women's suffrage. By way of ratifying

the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, women gained the right to vote, which further

propelled women's wages, yet the pay gap still exists (Dworkin, Schipani, Milliken, &

Kneeland, 2018).

　　　　During the 1940s, there was another failed attempt to lessen the pay gap.

Winifred Stanley, a New York congresswoman, put forth a bill that would make it illegal

to discriminate in pay based on gender; however, the bill failed to make it through

Congress. The next attempt to address the pay gap came in 1963 by way of the passage

of the Equal Pay Act, providing equal pay for men and women. This had embedded

exceptions, like making seniority and merit precursors reasons for inaction. Pushing

forward, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 also acknowledged the pay gap,

expanding the law to make worker's pay based on race, color, religion, sex, or national

origin unlawful (Guy & Fenley, 2014). During the 1970s and 1980s, gender pay equity

continued to enter the national conversation with minimal progress for decades to come.

　　　　However, in the early 2000s, a Supreme Court case, Ledbetter v. Goodyear Tire

and Rubber Co., led to the most significant federal legislation, making way for the Lilly

Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which expanded the filing period for discrimination claims

(Brittan & Onder, 2009). Beyond the Paycheck Fairness Act, first enacted in 2009, there

were other calls for greater enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and increased

penalties for violators, but, to date, to no avail. Despite some legislative progress over

the last century, the pay gap has only narrowed slightly. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, women working full time in 1960 earned about 60 cents for every dollar earned by men.

The gender pay gap has shrunk over time because of women's progress in education and workforce participation and due to men's pay rising at a slower rate (Pinho-Gomes, 2021). Despite the modest progression, the gender pay gap continues to have lifelong financial effects for women. For example, the poverty level of women continued to outpace that of men. In 2017, 13% of American women ages 18–64 were living below the federal poverty level, compared with nine percent of men (Awaworyi et al., 2019).

The pay gap tends to follow women throughout their time in the workforce and beyond. Historically, employers used women's prior salary history to set their pay in new jobs, which often carried forward pay discrimination from job to job, compounding disparities in women's versus men's pay over time. Furthermore, because women are typically paid less than men during their working years, women typically receive less income than men from Social Security, pensions, and other sources when they retire (Awaworyi et al., 2019). Closing the gender pay gap would greatly impact women, their families, and the economy. Eliminating the gender pay gap by increasing women's pay to match that of men of the same age and education level would reduce the poverty rate for working women, regardless of their family structures.

California has been hailed as leading the nation in efforts to close the pay gap. In 2016, a state law went into effect, the California Fair Pay Act, mandating that women be paid the same as their male counterparts for substantially similar work. The law imposed

a ban on retaliation against women who discuss their pay or ask about colleagues' salaries while on the job (Cahn et al., 2018). In 2017, lawmakers amended the California Equal Pay Act, stating that an employer could not rely on last pay to set salaries. In 2018, legislative action added further amendments to the law to prevent employers from asking about a potential employee's previous salary.

Nonetheless, the pay gap in California remains. The gap means women are typically paid less than men. Stereotypes that lead to pay inequity are deeply ingrained. According to the National Partnership for Women and Families, women in California lose $87 billion to the pay gap every year (Dworkin et al., 2018). To circumvent loss, in April 2019, #EqualPayCA was launched to connect Californians to educational equal-pay resources about the pay gap's impact on working women and their families. It secured more than 60 major corporate commitments to an Equal Pay Pledge. Furthermore, research supports, if sufficient investments in education, family planning, maternal mortality, digital inclusion, and unpaid care work, the economic benefits of narrowing gender gaps are six to eight times higher than the social spending required (Dworkin et al., 2018).

A persistent pay gap between men and women continues to hurt the American workforce and the national economy. The consequences of the gender pay gap will affect women throughout their lives. One example: women outpace men in higher education and have a substantial amount of student loan debt in America. Likewise, because of the gender pay gap, women are challenged with student loan repayment. A second example: the gender pay gap follows women into retirement. As a result of lower lifetime earnings, women receive less in pensions and Social Security payments.

Furthermore, the gender pay gap also varies substantially by race. According to 2020 data from the Department of Labor, Hispanic women earned 53 cents for every dollar earned by White men, Black women earned 61 cents, White women earned 77 cents, and Asian women earned 85 cents. Though these numbers are being sourced, they are not universally accepted. Skeptics argue that the gender pay gap is smaller, and the numbers are distorted, making the case that men work longer hours (Coleman et al., 2021). Contrarily, the opposition supports the premise that the pay gap is more significant because part-time and part-year workers are not factored into the comparisons (De Henau & Himmelweit, 2021).

Pay equity will continue to be an issue until the gap is eliminated (Dworkin et al., 2018). However, with 2.6 million women not working since February 2020, the threat of expansion in the gender pay gap will widen (Malladi & Mean, 2021). While the unemployment rate for men and women is somewhat equal, women's departure from the workforce is sometimes for reasons like a need to rearrange schedules to deal with a child's remote learning. A phenomenon called "pandemic parenting" is reshaping the American workforce (Coleman et al., 2021). Women have taken on more of the responsibility for parenting than men and have, therefore, experienced more of an impact than men (Meara et al., 2020).

Companies should assume some responsibility to make their workplaces more supportive and flexible for women who are balancing the responsibility of a job and family. The COVID-19 Pandemic has intensified challenges that women deal with, leading to disruption in the American workforce in ways not witnessed before. Many women have routinely worked double duty, a full day of work, followed by hours caring

for child(ren) and household labor. The COVID-19 Pandemic represents an opportunity for companies to make substantial investments in building a more flexible and empathetic workplace.

Companies will need to explore ways to crisis-proof their employee management infrastructure and this may be able to be done by adopting a marketing and strategic human resource management collaboration, thereby leading to an increase in opportunities for women to advance in the long term. The collaboration of how the two respective disciplines, marketing and strategic human resource management, intersect and become the research focus. Ultimately, companies' choices will have consequences both for their organizations and society when dealing with the equitable pay stance of women versus men.

Culminating months of work to realign California from its aggressive measures, such as lockdowns and shutdowns, work remains the center focus to realign and move forward economically. Key priorities and challenges in California's fight against COVID-19 Pandemic and ongoing work to rebuild a more equitable, sustainable, and resilient economy reaffirm the importance of building a foundation that can sustain the emergence of a similar public safety occurrence.

Furthermore, the type of work women performs compared to men remains significantly gender-specific because women and men tend to cluster in different occupations. The differences among women and men, in turn, shape the gender implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Jobs women dominate are more at risk than male jobs because women are disproportionately represented in sectors negatively affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic crisis. Women fill jobs in food service, which are

among the sectors worst affected by the crisis. In addition, jobs in retail and wholesale trade and hospitality are also disproportionately affected. Notably, education and healthcare, where women are the majority, have suffered a relatively minor impact.

Bias attitudes also shape how women experience the economic consequences of a COVID-19 Pandemic crisis relative to men. These biases are not new but, rather, can be attributed to traditional societal mindsets about the role of women. They may be reflected in recent decisions, at the organizational level or the family level, about who gets to keep his or her job. For example, some may still believe that men have more rights to a job than women. Other structural forces could further compound gender inequality. Long established barriers to acquiring new skills and making mid-career shifts and other factors also make the transition harder for women (Dworkin et al., 2018).

Indeed, the gender effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic crisis highlight the uneven progress toward gender equality. The aggregate progress toward equality in the California workforce has been relatively flat in the five years between 2014 and 2019 (Plakoyiannaki & Budhwar, 2021). California has made progress on a few aspects of gender equality, such as maternal mortality, the share of women in professional and technical jobs, and political representation (Dworkin, 2018). Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, modest efforts to narrow the gender gap in work would not only be equitable in the broadest sense, but also because it is presumed to be one of the most prominent ways to boost economic growth in California.

Purpose of the Study

In recent years, women in California have made many advances but still face inequities that often prevent them from reaching their full potential in the workplace

(Sanchez & Frey, 2020). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences that contribute to the professional growth disruption of working women in various California business sectors and professional rankings, ranging from entry-level to executive leadership, during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Lived experience is defined as an experience a person has encountered in a lifetime (Yoosefi et al., 2022). This research effort aims to identify resources and support options an employer can offer women to help them avoid disruption in their professional growth trajectory when a future world health crisis presents itself.

Research Questions

Economic equality and the professional growth trajectory for working women in California are focal points for this research effort. Supporting the needs of women in the workforce is essential to short- and long-term recovery and safeguarding California's status as the nation's engine of innovation and growth. Likewise, the questions and answers outlined below are intended to further examine issues and discover solutions for women in order to preserve California's competitive edge.

Creswell (2013) recommended that participants in a research study be presented with two broad and open-ended questions that are intended to guide the research:

- Research Question 1: What accounts for women withdrawing from the workforce during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

- Research Question 2: What can women do to mitigate disruption to their career trajectories post the COVID-19 Pandemic?

The ultimate goal is to gain insight into creating quality crisis-proof careers for all Californians with equitable pathways for both women and men. Strengthening

equality is particularly important for women in California as they were most impacted

by the COVID-19 Pandemic and the economic downturn (Del Boca et al., 2020).

Type of Study

Qualitative data is the most suitable study construct because the Researcher (also

known as the primary investigator) prefers to rely on data obtained from participant

interviews. Phenomenological qualitative research is deemed most appropriate because it

has a strong foundation in philosophy that will explore what women have experienced

and focus on the experience. This type of research design is appropriate because its

methods are exploratory; they seek to unearth respondents' opinions, thoughts, and

feelings.

<p align="center">**Theoretical Frameworks**</p>

The theoretical frameworks selected provide a particular perspective, or lens,

through which to examine the research topic. There are many different lenses, such as

psychological theories, social theories, organizational theories, and economic theories,

which may define concepts and explain phenomena (George et al., 2012). The research

related to this study is evolving because the COVID-19 Pandemic is nearly approaching a

two-year existence benchmark. A phenomenological qualitative research construct

sought answers to the two research questions from a group of women participants. This

qualitative research methodology was exploratory, seeking to uncover participants'

opinions, thoughts, and feelings on what women in California can do to decrease the

widening of gender inequality that is being exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Likewise, the theoretical frameworks explored for this research study were the gender

role theory, equity theory and strategic management theory.

Respective controversies exist, most of which are related to the premise that one in four Corporate American women have left the workforce or downgraded their careers due to the COVID-19 Pandemic (Dworkin et al., 2018). In a single year, this would dismantle the growth of women, deepen gender inequality and unwind years of progress toward gender diversity in the workplace. This crisis for women is not going away, but the solutions could be within reach if companies adopt strategies to support women's lives as a new world of work emerges.

In addition, the COVID-19 Pandemic has been a major disruption for all employees.   But the COVID-19 Pandemic has created distinct challenges for low-wage-earning working mothers. Working mothers are concerned about how the COVID-19 Pandemic will impact their career trajectory. Women are more likely than their male counterparts to be responsible for family home life. Women also worry that their performance will be negatively judged due to their home/life responsibilities. Hence, this is why it is deemed appropriate to explore gender role, equity, and strategic management theories.

Gender Role Theory

Gender role theory predicts that the more significant the difference in social roles performed by males and females, the more significant the difference in behaviors and attitudes. The term gender role was first used by John Money in 1954, during his study of intersex individuals, to describe the manners in which individuals expressed that they were male or female. Gender role theory emphasizes the environmental causes of gender roles and the impact of socialization, or the process of transferring norms, values, beliefs,

and behaviors to group members, in learning how to behave as a male or a female (Kray et al., 2017).

Relative to this research effort, gender role theory explains how and why differential gender roles are adopted. Role adoption, therefore, determines much of what happens in the home, school, personal relationships, family life, and employment. Men and women often follow different paths in education and employment, which lead to overall differences in pay (Kray et al., 2017). Segregation into traditional gender roles is often not a conscious choice for either women or men. Instead, these choices are constrained by social pressures and expectations passed from one generation to the next.

For the research study, the primary investigator explored two interrelated questions. The gender role theory was explored because it analyzed how the employment status of men versus women, their working hours, and how their working conditions have changed since the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The use of gender role theory analyzed how the employment status of men versus women, their working hours, and how their working conditions have changed since the onset of COVID-19 Pandemic (Coleman et al., 2021). While previous work has focused on these outcomes, no prior investigation considered how marketing strategies derived from the Ansoff Matrix could be applicable in defining strategies women can use to foster growth in knowledge and stability in the workplace. To the primary investigator's knowledge, this was the first relational study done in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Equity Theory

Equity theory focuses on determining whether the distribution of resources is fair to both relational partners. Equity is measured by comparing the ratio of contributions

and benefits each person receives (Davlembayeva et al., 2021). Equity theory was first developed in the 1960s by J. Stacy Adams, a workplace and behavioral psychologist. Adams asserted that employees seek to maintain equity between the inputs they bring to a job and the outcomes they receive from the job.

According to equity theory, people value fair treatment. The gender pay gap issue is often associated with equity theory, as fairness is understood relative to market norms. As an example, there is a widespread perception in workplaces that only those employees working traditional hours get promoted. Likewise, women are more adversely affected because women are likely to manage family responsibilities and benefit from flexible working arrangements.

In contrast to the gender role theoretical perspective, the COVID-19 Pandemic has had a more significant impact on industries with high proportions of female workers. Most of the impact came from schools and daycares being closed, thereby increasing caregiving responsibilities. In many instances, these changes were abrupt and increased the burden on women more than on men. For example, in corporate America, since the beginning of the pandemic, women have reduced their working hours more than men (De Henau & Himmelweit, 2021). While previous work has focused on these outcomes, no prior investigation considered how marketing strategies derived from the Ansoff Matrix could be applicable in defining strategies women can use to foster personal growth and gravitate toward professional equity in the workplace. To the primary investigator's knowledge, this will be the first relational study conducted in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Strategic Management Theory

Strategic management is the process and approach of identifying objectives, policies, and plans to achieve these objectives and allocate resources to implement the policies and plans. Strategic management involves understanding the strategic position of an organization, strategic choices for future consideration, and managing strategy in action. It also involves modeling and analyzing the overall corporate strategy of the system to include the strategic choices made by the organization Strategic choices involve understanding the underlying bases for future strategy at the business unit, corporate and international levels, and the options for developing strategy in terms of direction and method of creation.

Strategy is concerned with making sure that developed strategies are a work in progress. Strategic management is generally thought to have monetary and non-monetary benefits. Strategic management strategies have changed over time. The modern discipline of strategic management traces back to the 1950s and 1960s. Prominent thinkers in the field include Peter Drucker, referred to as the founding father of management studies. Among his contributions was the seminal idea that the purpose of a business is to create a customer, and what the customer wants determines what a business is (Vohra & Mukul, 2009).

Primary Theory

For the research effort, the strategic management theory was the primary theory. The primary investigator looked deeper (by conducting interviews) into how the COVID-19 Pandemic has exacerbated gender economic inequalities. Because women tend to bear more responsibility for family caregiving, they were more likely than men to drop

out of the workforce, particularly in the first phase of the pandemic. Because the

COVID-19 Pandemic remains an active concern across corporate America entities,

additional research will play a vital role in determining a cure for the problem identified.

It is proposed that strategic management will make for a solution.

Definitions of Key Terms

This section contains the key terms used within the research study to establish a

common understanding of vocabulary and concepts.

Ansoff Matrix, called the Product/Market Expansion Grid, is a four-quadrant

framework used by management teams and the analysis community to help plan and

evaluate growth initiatives. In particular, the tool helps stakeholders conceptualize the

level of risk associated with different growth strategies. Furthermore, for any company

looking to move beyond business as usual," the Ansoff Matrix is a tool that could help

corporate stakeholders analyze and manage risk and strategize growth opportunities.

Developed in 1957 by H. Igor Ansoff, the Ansoff Growth Matrix offers a way to

think about product and market development strategy by looking at ways to grow via

existing products and new products, and in new or existing markets. The matrix outlines

four possible areas of opportunity for growth, market penetration, product development,

market development, and diversification. The Ansoff Matrix is one of the most

widespread tools managers use in strategic planning because it is easy for decision-

makers to understand. The primary investigator used this matrix to examine the

professional growth of women in the workplace (Samantha & Garrie, 2015).

Corporate America is an informal description of the corporations and big businesses within the United States that have at least 2,500 employees (Ferber & Hall, 1962).

Economic Equity is the concept or idea of fairness in economics, particularly regarding equal life chances regardless of identity, to provide men and women alike with a basic and equal income or increase commitment for redistribution (Bonilla & Syitavsky, 2018).

Epoché means to suspend judgment (Candea, 2013).

Equality is the right of different groups of people to receive equitable treatment (Foley & Cooper, 2021).

Gender Bias is a preference or prejudice toward one gender over the other (Braddy et al., 2020).

Gender Discrimination treats individuals differently in their employment because an individual is a woman or a man (Lucifora & Vigani, 2022).

Gender Equity is the process of allocating resources, programs, and decision-making fairly to both males and females without any discrimination based on sex and addressing any imbalances in the benefits available to males and females (Hameduddin & Lee, 2022).

Gender Inequality is a social process by which men and women are not treated equally. The treatment may arise from distinctions regarding biology, psychology, or cultural norms prevalent in society. Some of these distinctions are empirically grounded, while others appear to be socially constructed (Padavic et al., 2020).

Gender Wage Gap is the difference between women's and men's average weekly full-time base salary earnings, expressed as a percentage of men's earnings. It measures women's overall position in the paid workforce (Bartnik et al., 2022).

Household is defined as all individuals living under one roof or residing in a detached housing unit, having direct access to a cooking facility. Where the household members are related by blood or law, they constitute a family (Bartnik et al., 2022).

Low-Wage Earners are individuals or workers that earn less than two-thirds of the median full-time wage in the state where the work is domiciled (Garrick, 2021).

Member Checking, also known as participant or respondent validation, is a technique for exploring the credibility of results. In typical research, results are returned to participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences (Naidu & Prose, 2018).

Modified Van Kaam Method is the method that allowed for the exploration of the participants' lived experiences to understand the phenomenon through the voices of those who lived it (Chrisentary & Barrett, 2015).

Summary

Because of the COVID-19 Pandemic, gender inequality in California women's professional growth trajectory will regress (Dang, & Nguyen, 2021). The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic across the global economy will also be extensive. The socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on markets and supply chains have been substantially disruptive, and millions lost their jobs due to the disruption. Many of these workers were frontline workers and mostly women (Berniell et al., 2021).

Also, emerging evidence from the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic supports the premise that women's economic and productive lives will be more disproportionately influenced than the lives of men (Del Boca et al., 2020). Across the globe, the scenario is no different than what is happening in California. Women earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs, and are more likely to be employed in the informal sector. Women have less access to social protection and are the majority of single-parent homes. Likewise, a woman's capacity to absorb economic shocks is less than that of a man (Balabantaray & Sireesha, 2021). In totality, the aforementioned makes for a growing problem for women's professional growth trajectory in California.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This research aimed to explain gender role theory and offer suggestions that can benefit women in gaining gender equality in the workplace post the COVID-19 Pandemic. Also, this research intended to discover which occupations gender inequality adversely impacts the most. By way of gender role theory, assumptions are often made about the roles men and women occupy within society, based on certain assumptions. Where gender equality in the workplace is concerned, women are sometimes considered less capable than men and often earn less income than men, even if they are more educated and credentialed than men performing the same duties and responsibilities (Dang & Nguyen, 2021). When women earn less than men for doing the same duties and responsibilities, gender inequality issues can trigger discussions. The literature review also explored the advantages and disadvantages of equity theory and how the equity theory can maximize workplace efficiency.

The literature review also sought to understand men's and women's roles through a strategic management perspective. An area of concern for this research was the applicability of labor laws and how labor laws are often not adhered to when making decisions that would ensure gender equality. The literature review specified laws enforced to protect women against exposure to inequities in the workplace. Recommendations for changes are outlined in subsequent sections of this research project.

Literature Search Strategy

The primary investigator conducted a comprehensive search to acquire appropriate research on the topic of gender economic inequality. The search strategy for

the publications selected for the literature review utilized California Baptist University multi-data-base search engine, Annie Gabriel Library. The search criteria included peer-reviewed articles and journals from *Administrative Science Quarterly, American Business Law Journal, American Journal of Public Health, American Journal of Sociology, Applied Economics, Feminist Economics, Georgetown Journal of Gender & the Law, Journal of the Association for Consumer Research, Journal of the Association for Information Systems, Journal of Business Research, Journal of Development Economics, Journal of Economic Issues, Journal of Financial Economics, Journal of International Trade & Economic Development, Journal of Labor Research, Journal of Management Studies, Journal of Personality & Social Psychology, Legislative Studies Quarterly, Public Opinion Quarterly, Research in Economics, and Review of Economics of the Household.* The search rendered greater than two-thousand resources deemed applicable and the primary investigator narrowed the scope to 35 assets for the research effort

Strategic Management: Making the Most of Available Resources

Strategic management is one of the essential responsibilities of an effective organization. Strategic management focuses on identifying and describing the strategies that managers can use to achieve better performance and a competitive advantage for their organizations. An organization has a competitive advantage if its profitability is higher than the average profitability for all other organizations within its industry (Mello, 2019). Strategic management can also be defined as a conglomerate of decisions and acts that a leader undertakes to produce the firm's performance. As the COVID-19 Pandemic subsides, leaders must have a thorough knowledge and analysis of the general and

competitive organizational environment to make the right decisions. The level of analysis will be marginally different from the analytics considered pre-pandemic.

Strategic management proposes planning for both predictable as well as unfeasible contingencies. It applies to both small and large organizations, and by formulating and implementing appropriate strategies, organizations are closer to attaining a sustainable competitive advantage. It is a way in which strategists set the objectives and proceed about attaining them. Strategic management involves making and implementing decisions about the future direction of an organization. It helps to identify the direction in which an organization is moving (Mello, 2019). For this research project, strategic management proposed to consolidate newer methods for balancing the workforce and ensuring that men and women are governed equally.

Because of the COVID-19 Pandemic, gender inequality in California will adversely affect women's professional growth trajectory causing women's careers to regress during the COVID-19 Pandemic, creating greater economic disparity for women in California. And this will take more than a century to retract (Coleman et al., 2021). The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic across the global economy will be extensive. The socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on markets and supply chains have been substantially disrupted, and millions lost their jobs due to the disruption. Emerging evidence of the COVID-19 Pandemic supports the premise that women's economic and productive lives will be more disproportionately affected than the lives of men (Gradin, 2020). Across the globe, the scenario is no different in California. Women earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs, and are more likely to be employed in the informal sector. Women have less access to social protection and are the majority of

single-parent homes (Zamarro & Prados, 2021). Likewise, a woman's capacity to absorb economic shocks is less than that of a man.

Furthermore, the difference in California labor force participation between women and men is minimal when the age band is less than 20 years old. The disparity becomes a double-digit percentage point difference among Californians in their late twenties and older (Choi, 2018). The average age of mothers when they have their first child in California is 28 years old, which falls right into the category where the big jump is seen, where the difference in participation rates between men and women increases from 2.1 percentage points among 20 to 24 year-olds to a 13.3 percentage point difference among 25 to 34 year-olds (Choi, 2018). During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the number of family child care facilities in California decreased approximately 46% during the height of the pandemic (Del Boca et al., 2020).

California has an underrepresentation of women in traditionally higher-paying roles such as STEM occupations, CEO roles, and manager roles (Serenko & Turel, 2021). Less than a third of California's STEM and CEO positions are held by women, and less than half of all managers in California are women (Serenko & Turel, 2021). This disparity among women and men perpetuates the gender wage gap (Choi, 2018). Also, during the pandemic, many low-wage occupations were considered essential. This is where frontline workers have pay gaps between mothers and fathers employed in the same occupations (Gradin, 2021).

Even in women dominated industries, such as childcare and home health aides, there is a significant wage gap between mothers and fathers. Mothers make 70 cents on the dollar among childcare workers compared to fathers, and among home health and

personal care aides, mothers make 85 cents on the dollar compared to fathers (Mandel & Semyonov, 2018). Research has also shown that, in the United States, more mothers than fathers experience career disruptions. Types of child and family care disruptions that the research examined include reduced work hours, taking significant time off, quitting a job, and turning down a promotion. Interestingly, quitting a job is the most extreme difference between mothers and fathers. There is a 17-percentage-point difference between the share of mothers that reported quitting to care for a child or family member than the share of fathers that reported the same.

The purpose of this qualitative research study, with a phenomenological research design, was to understand the lived experiences that contribute to the professional growth disruption of working women in various California business sectors and professional rankings, ranging from entry-level to executive leadership, during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The study was also conducted to identify professional growth opportunities for women who have left the California workforce during the COVID-19 Pandemic, in order to make up for the gap in time produced by being forced out of the workforce. The Study had also been designed to emphasize the importance of diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

From health crisis to economic instability, the impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic compounded economic impacts for women who are earning less money, saving less money, holding insecure jobs, or living close to the poverty line. Unpaid care work has increased, as children are learning through the virtual school, and there is a need to care for older family members. Impacts are further amplified in contexts of institutional capacity and limited services. Exploring how women's lives are changing because of the

COVID-19 Pandemic requires priority measures to accompany both the immediate response and the longer-term recovery strategies.

The COVID-19 Pandemic recovery can lead to more gender equity. This is not just about rectifying long-standing gender inequalities but also about building more gender equity. It is in the interests of not only women but also men. Women may be the hardest hit by the COVID-19 Pandemic, but women will also be the backbone of recovery. Every policy response that recognizes women's well-being is essential will be more advantaged. It will be purposeful to apply an intentional gender lens to the development of growth strategies designed to achieve greater equality, access to opportunities, and social protections.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks are intended to provide a particular perspective, or lens, through which to examine a research topic. There are many different lenses, such as psychological theories, social theories, organizational theories, and economic theories, which may define concepts and explain phenomena (George et al., 2012). Likewise, the theoretical frameworks explored for this research were the gender role theory, equity theory, and strategic management theory.

Gender role theory predicts that the more significant the difference in social roles performed by males and females, the more significant the difference in behaviors and attitudes. The term gender role was first used by John Money in 1954, during his study of intersex individuals, to describe the manners in which individuals expressed that they were male or female. Gender role theory emphasizes the environmental causes of gender roles and the impact of socialization, or the process of transferring norms, values, beliefs,

and behaviors to group members, in learning how to behave as a male or a female (Kray et al., 2017).

Relative to this research effort, gender role theory explains how and why differential gender roles are adopted. By way of role adoption, much of what happens in the home, school, personal relationships, family life, and employment is determined. Men and women often follow different paths in education and employment, which lead to overall differences in pay (Kray et al., 2017). Segregation into traditional gender roles is often not a conscious choice for either women or men. Instead, these choices are constrained by social pressures and expectations passed from one generation to the next.

For this research study, the primary investigator investigated two interrelated questions. The gender role theory was explored because it analyzes how the employment status of men versus women, their working hours, and how their working conditions have changed since the COVID-19 Pandemic. The use of the gender role theory analyzed how the employment status of men versus women, their working hours, and how their working conditions have changed since the COVID-19 Pandemic (Coleman et al., 2021). While previous work has focused on these outcomes, no prior investigation considered how marketing strategies derived from the Ansoff Matrix could be applicable in defining strategies women can use to foster growth in knowledge and stability in the workplace. To the primary investigator's knowledge, this was the first relational study in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Equity theory focuses on determining whether the distribution of resources is fair to both relational partners. Equity is measured by comparing the ratio of contributions and benefits for each person (Davlembayeva et al., 2021). Equity theory was first

developed in the 1960s by J. Stacy Adams, a workplace and behavioral psychologist. Adams asserted that employees seek to maintain equity between the inputs they bring to a job and the outcomes they receive from the job. According to equity theory, people value fair treatment.

According to equity theory, people value fair treatment. The gender pay gap issue is often associated with the equity theory, as fairness is understood relative to market norms. As an example, there is a widespread perception in workplaces that only those employees working traditional hours get promoted. Likewise, women are more adversely affected because women are likely to manage family responsibilities and benefit from flexible working arrangements.

In contrast to the gender role theoretical perspective, the COVID-19 Pandemic has had a more significant impact on industries with high proportions of female workers. Most of the impact came from schools and daycares being closed, thereby increasing caregiving responsibilities. In many instances, these changes were abrupt and increased the burden on women more than on men. For example, in corporate America, since the beginning of the pandemic, women have reduced their working hours more than men (De Henau & Himmelweit,2021). While previous work has focused on these outcomes, no prior investigation considered how marketing strategies derived from the Ansoff Matrix could be applicable in defining strategies women can use to foster personal growth and gravitate toward professional equity in the workplace. To the primary investigator's knowledge, this research was the first relational study in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The gender pay gap issue is often associated with the equity theory, as fairness is understood relative to market norms. As an example, there is a widespread perception in workplaces that only those employees working traditional hours get promoted. Likewise, women are more adversely affected because women are likely to manage family responsibilities and benefit from flexible working arrangements (Mandel & Rotman, 2022).

Equity theory is primarily concerned with defining and measuring the relational satisfaction of employees. Equity theory is also based on the principle that a person will act and have an increased level of motivation when they believe the atmosphere is perceived to be fair and equitable. Long gone are the days when managers can control employees. Employees now bring different generational expectations based on different life experiences. While managers are not solely responsible for motivating people, managers are responsible for fostering an environment that motivates performance. Because of the new millennium's uncertainty and intense demands, employees are especially sensitive to issues of fairness and how organizational leaders treat them more so today than ever (Baralt et al., 2020).

As previously mentioned, the primary framework used in this research was the strategic management theory. Strategic management is the process and approach of specifying an organization's objectives, developing policies, programs, and plans to achieve these objectives, and allocating resources to implement the policies, programs, paradigms, and plans. Strategic management aims to provide an integrated approach to an organization and provide a set of principles to determine and understand how the organization will compete in a related industry.

Strategic management theory involves understanding the strategic position of an organization, the strategic choices for future endeavors, and managing the strategy planned. Strategic management involves exploring and management of a corporate organizational strategy. Furthermore, strategic management theory involves modeling and analyzing the overall corporate strategy. The strategic position is concerned with the impact on the external environment, an organization's strategic capability, the expectations and influence of stakeholders.

From a post-COVID-19 Pandemic perspective, a new normal will likely emerge and will continue to create complexity and uncertainty for the organizational leadership teams (Pinho, 2021). Organizations must adapt to or re-shape their workplace environments to address the substantial changes by identifying and creating opportunities (Klainot & Norris, 2021). Organizations within uncertain business landscapes are growing willing to engage in riskier entrepreneurial strategies to shape organizations for a new level of engagement post-COVID-19 Pandemic (Zandberg, 2021)

Organizational hybridity, which integrates different management strategies to manage complex problems, may be required to manage resources and stakeholders more effectively in the post-COVID-19 Pandemic era (Berniell et al., 2020). Organizations must have the ability to effectively design and implement strategic changes and mindsets that encourage innovative thinking and resilience. These efforts depend on the skills of organizational leadership. While top executives are likely to have a higher level of cognitive capability, for other organizational managers, developing new capabilities will require adaptation of the cognitive and emotional skills of the top executive team and other stakeholders inside and outside the organization (Carnahan & Greenwood, 2018).

Because of the societal uncertainty and increasing emphasis on organizational stakeholders, internal and external, a more strategic management capability will be necessary to perform at minimal levels to create organizational hybridity and manage resource complexity and acquisition. There will also need to be ability to measure and manage organizational capability, making organizational leadership more dynamic in today's era than ever before.

Strategic management is the process and approach of identifying objectives, policies, and plans to achieve these objectives and allocate resources to implement the policies and plans. Strategic management involves understanding the strategic position of an organization, strategic choices for future consideration, and managing strategy in action. It also involves modeling and analyzing the overall corporate strategy of the system to include the strategic choices made by the organization. Strategic choices involve understanding the underlying basis for future strategy at the business unit, corporate and international levels and the options for developing strategy in terms of direction and method of creation (Hitt et al., 2021).

This first step could be the most crucial. The first step will affect an organization's strategic management process; hence, the strategic management approach should reflect a company's culture. The objective of strategic management is to create a distinct and meaningful competitive advantage and position for the organization to achieve a superior level of performance. The strategic management process provides planning processes and decision tools that help an organization examine and manage its business processes (Hitt et al., 2021).

Strategic management is a continuous process and focuses on a dynamic environment to ensure that the organization remains effective. Strategic management requires constant attention and may be considered the most important responsibility of efficient leaders. Strategic management requires the leaders to monitor changing internal and external environments constantly. The process of strategic management was created to help improve an organization. One of the most critical responsibilities of any leader would be evaluating the business environment and then strategically managing the organization to succeed within the environment (Hitt et al., 2021).

The goal of every leader should be to ensure the highest and best use of organizational resources to achieve both the short-term and the long-term objectives. Strategic management should be the force that drives the organization. Strategic leaders must make clear distinctions between strategic and operational decisions to get the most effective benefits from the strategic management plans. Equality is the right of different groups of people to receive the same equitable treatment (Foley & Cooper, 2021). Strategic decisions focus on an organization's strategic objectives and require that top managers have a clear understanding of the long-run future.

Strategy is concerned with making sure that developed strategies are a work in progress. Strategic management is generally thought to have monetary and non-monetary benefits. Strategic management strategies have changed over time. The modern discipline of strategic management traces back to the 1950s and 1960s. Prominent thinkers in the field include Peter Drucker, referred to as the founding father of management studies. Among his contributions was the seminal idea that the purpose of a

business is to create a customer, and what the customer wants determines what a business is (Vohra & Mukul, 2009)

For the research effort, the strategic management theory was the primary theory. The primary investigator looked more deeply by conducting interviews and constructing a survey questionnaire. This helped to inform the examination of how the COVID-19 Pandemic has exacerbated gender economic inequalities. Because women tend to bear more responsible for family caregiving, they were more likely than men to drop out of the workforce, particularly in the first phase of the pandemic (Berniell et al., 2021). Because the COVID-19 Pandemic remains an active concern across Corporate America entities, additional research will play a vital role in determining a cure for the problem identified.

Comparison between Impacts of Spanish Flu and COVID-19 Pandemics

Despite the Spanish Flu Pandemic, the United States was experiencing tumultuous times in the year 1918. Because of World War 1, unemployment was about 1.4%, and post-war unemployment grew over 11%, and civil unrest and domestic violence threatened the notion of peace in America. Furthermore, the 1918 flu pandemic disproportionately affected young women, which created a shortage of labor. This shortage enabled women to play a new and indispensable role in the workforce during the crucial period just before the ratification of the 19th Amendment which gave women the right to vote in 1920. Women's rights propelled women economically (Balabantaray & Sireesha, 2021).

During this same timeframe, the Spanish flu had run its course, and without a cure, the flu pandemic began to subside. By 1923, the United States began to experience an economic resurgence that lasted six years until the stock market crash of 1929. The

world during this timeframe was profoundly different from the world today. Yet, the United States recovered in a short block of time from a world war, two recessions in quick succession, a pandemic, and a period of extreme domestic unrest. By comparison, the COVID-19 Pandemic is calmer despite the massive disruptions and uncertainties caused by the pandemic (Balabantaray & Sireesha, 2021).

Vaccines to make COVID-19 impotent were fast-tracked. The United States accomplished a major feat compared to a century ago, in addition to an array of modern-day challenges. The 1918 flu pandemic helped advance women's rights over 100 years ago, and it was accompanied by unexpected social changes, opening up new opportunities for women and, in the process, irreversibly transforming life in the United States. The 1918 Flu pandemic brought more women into the workforce, yet the COVID-19 Pandemic decreased the growth of women in the workforce (Balabantaray & Sireesha, 2021).

The 1918 Flu and COVID-19 Pandemics transformed women's lives in relatable, yet different ways. The COVID-19 Pandemic has contrasting effects on the lives of women. The 1918 flu pandemic was pivotal in advancing women's role in the workplace, while the COVID-19 Pandemic seems to have sent women backward. Today, women have been hit particularly hard, and as their roles in society have shifted over the years, the systems intended to support women have not gained the same traction. Low wages and inadequate childcare are not new phenomena as they have been barriers for years. Nonetheless, when schools and daycares shut down and shifted to a virtual platform, women were disproportionately affected because they were usually the primary

caregivers in the home. Likewise, women were forced to leave the workforce in higher

numbers than men (Balabantaray & Sireesha, 2021)

Women's departure from the workforce leads to the notion that bias against

gender equality is even more prevalent today (Davlembayeva & Papagiannidis, 2021).

Today, education, women's reproductive rights, and economic progression for women is

regressing (Maxwell & Wozny, 2021). Since the first cases of the COVID-19 Pandemic

were reported in the United States in January 2020, more than two million women have

dropped out of the workforce, resulting in women's workforce participation rate

regressing to a rate equal to the rate three decades ago (Pech et al, 2021). But what if the

COVID-19 Pandemic is an opportunity?

Even though each pandemic had different effects on women, some outcomes led

to a need for change (Morens et al., 2021). The COVID-19 Pandemic has presented

many challenges, especially for working women. It has brought to light many of the

barriers women have faced for a long time, which have employers exploring alternatives

to what is perceived to be the traditional eight-to-five work environment (Collins et al.,

2021). Women in the workplace have been advocating for better childcare and more

flexible work schedules for decades (Del Boca et al., 2020). Now is the moment to work

towards policies that better support women while working outside the home and raising a

family.

Adopting flexibility is essential to the future success of women in the workforce

(Dworkin et al., 2018). Women are in a position to seize the opportunities that result

from the COVID-19 Pandemic. The workforce vacancies resulting from the COVID-19

Pandemic could open a world of possibilities for women. Likewise, women can use the

opportunities afforded to them by the COVID-19 Pandemic to prove they can be both mothers and executives and are able to balance work and family life (Berniell et al., 2021). Women have been multi-tasking these responsibilities for years, but now could be the time to highlight their capabilities and seek higher rewards and gratitude because women constitute such a valuable portion of the United States workforce (Dworkin et al., 2018).

As the United States economy starts to shift beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic and the federal government stimulus packages have broadened the safety net for many American families, women remain challenged with recovery from the pandemic at a greater rate than men (Akter, 2021). Based on economic scenarios, it is projected that women may not economically recover for at least two years (Chantreuil et al., 2021). Without additional employer support and training and development programs to allow for sharpening professional skills, there is a threat that the participation rate of women in the workforce could be set back three decades (Gradin, 2020).

Unemployment statistics do not solely give a complete perspective of the challenges women face in the workplace. Since the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic, more women have left the workforce than men (Maxwell & Wozny, 2021). One of the main drivers of this disparity is the increased burden of unpaid family care, including managing the household duties (Del Boca et al., 2020). Historically, women's unemployment has lasted longer, and it has taken women longer to reenter the workforce after past recessions (Gradin, 2020). The longer women are out of the workforce, the greater the threat of a widening underrepresentation of women in leadership roles

becomes (Serenko & Turel, 2021). By stepping down the ladder, women's climb to the top will take longer to achieve.

Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, many women already carried the responsibility for unpaid family care when compared to men, but the pandemic crisis added to the already unequal baseline of gender comparison (Pinho, 2021). A substantial increase in caregiving responsibilities may impede women's ability to stay in the workforce and progress. Women have added more hours per day to care for others, amounting to the equivalent of a part-time job on top of all other obligations (Pech et al., 2021). For many women, caregiving at home could be exacerbated by additional stress at work, thereby increasing the pressure for women to perform at higher levels. If these trends are left unaddressed, it is anticipated that gender economic inequality will reverse decades of progress toward an inclusive economy for women (Chantreuil et al., 2021).

The loss of women from the workforce has significant negative implications worldwide. Economists estimate that the global gross domestic product could be $1 trillion lower over 10 years (Chantreuil et al., 2021). With the repercussions of an extended unemployment gap for women and the economy overall, stakeholders should take bold and targeted action. For example, both employers and governments could expand childcare assistance to encourage women to return to the workforce more quickly. Also, educational assistance could help propel women by offering re-skilling programs that could prepare women for the workforce demands projected for the years ahead and better position women for their return into the workforce. Because of the acceleration of automation and the shifting of jobs and skills necessary to perform jobs of the future re-skilling will be essential for success (Zandberg, 2021).

Employers can also take measures to ensure that women who have left the workforce during the pandemic are offered opportunities to make up for gaps in time. Employers should also reevaluate workplace norms to increase work-life balance flexibility for all employees. Such policies were often implemented to accommodate a remote workforce and could be expanded. A swift and conscious effort on behalf of employers could limit the duration and severity of the economic damage and provide a more concise path for the return of women to the workforce (Raile et al., 2021).

As the United States struggles to reopen, many women seek answers to tough questions: Is it safe to return to the workplace? Are comparable and more flexible jobs available?   What about unvaccinated children? Should another career field be pursued? Likewise, economists refer to the COVID-19 Pandemic "shecession," with monumental consequences for the American workforce after decades of hard-earned gains by women (Maxwell & Wozny, 2021).

Furthermore, the new standard way of business operation for many businesses in a cross-section of industries will look different from pre-pandemic ones because the pandemic is a major setback to the struggle for workplace equality. The COVID-19 Pandemic has primarily affected service roles that women most often hold. White-collar jobs survived because many who held the jobs worked from home. If the same workers continue to work from home, many jobs held by women like office personnel, restaurant employees, and retail service staff may disappear (Maxwell & Wozny, 2021).

The COVID-19 Pandemic brought gender economic inequalities to the surface. With lower wages, fewer dollars in savings for emergencies, less access to paid leave or health insurance, women have few resources to endure the economic crisis (Choi, 2018).

Whether low-wage or high-wage, women assumed most of the burden to care for the family as the COVID-19 Pandemic sickened elderly parents and forced schools and day-care centers to close, studies show (DeHenau & Himmelweit, 2021). The Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco reported that mothers dropped out of the American workforce at a far higher rate than men or women without children. This is likely to increase gender disparities since the penalty is most harmful to women with lower wages after career interruptions (Del Boca et al. 2020).

President Biden's ambitious American Families Plan addresses many concerns of working women with universal preschool; expanded parental, family, and sick leave; childcare support; and tax credits for low-wage families with children (Kuk & Hajnal, 2021). Many women may be eager to return to work with the reopening of schools, but the COVID-19 Pandemic has highlighted the work-life balance question for others. Companies may need to offer flexible schedules or risk losing more women from the workforce (Kutzner, 2019).

Over the past four decades, the labor market gains among women have played a significant role in boosting household incomes (Cross & Shergold, 1987). Since the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic, women have experienced a more considerable decline in labor market activity, reflecting the propensity for women to be in industries and positions that have disproportionately led to women's professional growth trajectory being impeded. When the economy begins to recover, investment in family aid programs will help ensure women have a more significant safety net to prevent similar disruption if there is a future pandemic. Before the COVID-19 Pandemic-induced recession, men and women in the California labor force had similar unemployment rates, but the COVID-19

Pandemic created a gender gap in unemployment (Chantreuil et al., 2021). A similar gap emerged in the share of men and women who were unemployed or underemployed when there was a preference for working full-time (Pech et al., 2021). The same gaps in employment also signaled that the disparities would lead to longer-term adverse effects on women's income and earnings trajectories.

Evidence suggests that most of the increase in unemployment and underemployment for women is derived from a decrease in employment opportunities for women. If the trend continues, it will likely exacerbate gender income inequality, which will likely worsen women's economic standing in California (Chantreuil et al., 2021). Ensuring that women can fully engage in the workforce is essential. Policymakers should focus on bolstering the fiscal health of the dependent care sector by subsidizing or expanding family leave and existing in-home support programs along with the California transitional education programs. Higher investment in the dependent care sector can also be understood as an infrastructure pathway for economic growth and mobility in the long run. Another collateral benefit can occur if policymakers prioritize improving wage levels (Kuk & Hahnal, 2021). And expanding access to high-quality early childhood education will yield greater benefits in the form of improved educational outcomes, higher earnings, and reduced crime (Kutzner, 2019).

At the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic in California, unemployment spiked more among women than men. Unemployment reached nearly 9% among women compared to 5% among men as of April 2021, despite nearly identical rates at the start of the year 2020. This gap improved considerably by the fall of 2020, but as the COVID-19 Pandemic surged again in the winter of 2020, the unemployment rate grew in early 2021.

Furthermore, women are overrepresented in hospitality and personal care service-oriented businesses that have been hard hit. Women are 11% more likely to work in the hardest-hit sectors than in the workforce (Berniell, Berniell, Mata, Eldo, & Marchionni, 2021).

A robust ecosystem is necessary for an effective and equitable workforce to be reimagined and built with reliable access to child and family care, job conditions that protect worker health, and a safety net for those facing unforeseen shocks. Even when schools and businesses fully reopen, economic recovery may be sluggish until all Californians who would like to work can work. Getting the California economy going again may be a long and challenging process for those who have dropped out of the labor force. Things will be more challenging if businesses have closed or in-demand skills have changed (De Henau & Himmelweit, 2021).

Women's Financial Security vs. Insecurity

The experience of working women during this pandemic reveals the pressures of work in the modern economy. California has taken steps to address these pressures, like extending support to businesses and providing direct relief to families in economic need. Federal efforts, like tax credits for families with children in the stimulus bills, are also projected to ease the burden on families in need substantially (Kuk & Hajnal, 2021). In the future, identifying the ecosystem investments that support a strong workforce will be critical for California's economic recovery efforts.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed many Californians to unprecedented economic instability. Still, many women in California were already struggling to pay the bills before the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic-induced economic crisis. According to the California Women's Well-Being Index, in five years leading up to the COVID-19

Pandemic, many women across the state were already experiencing economic hardship. The associated economic hardship was happening during one of the most extended periods of economic growth in California's history. Women in California faced wage inequality, and women were more likely than men to earn lower wages and live in poverty. Pre-pandemic hardship and lack of economic stability were particularly acute for women of color in California (Chantreuil et al. 2021).

Discrimination and policy barriers have blocked women from economic opportunities, including the ability to save money or build assets (Davlembayeva, Papagiannidis, & Alamanos, 2021). Many women in California are not in the position to make it successfully through a financial crisis (Bloome et al., 2019). The COVID-19 Pandemic-induced recession was the first recession in which more women than men lost jobs, especially at high rates in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. After one year into the COVID-19 Pandemic-induced recession, many women in California are still grappling with the reality of not having enough financial resources to pay for everyday expenses after losing jobs, and household income has stretched California household budgets really thin (Collins et al., 2021).

Furthermore, many women in California deal with a caregiving crisis, isolation, economic hardship, illness, and the loss of loved ones. The COVID-19 Pandemic has had a consequence beyond the risk of contracting the virus. In California, nearly half of women were coping with anxiety or depression symptoms, which have more than tripled during the pandemic. For women experiencing multiple economic hardships, such as the loss of household income or the inability to pay for food or housing, a substantial number

of women were dealing with an associated mental illness (De Henau, & Himmelweit, 2021).

Many women were locked out of California's prosperity well before the Pandemic and hit especially hard by the COVID-19 Pandemic induced recession. A brighter future for women will begin with an equitable economic recovery targeted explicitly for women. To start, California leaders should increase women's economic security, especially women who have immigrated to California and who have been blocked from federal COVID relief funds (Kuk & Hajnal, 2021). Next, ensure that women have access to healthcare services in general and mental healthcare services in particular (De Henau, & Himmelweit, 2021). Lastly, more efforts need to be made to help women create a balanced career with family life. When California state political leaders put forth policies to invest in women, their families, and communities, women thrive, their communities thrive, and California will prosper (Kuk & Hajnal, 2021).

When women are active participants in the workforce, women have more money to invest in the economy (Fouejieu et al., 2020). When women invest in the economy, the gross domestic product (GDP) grows in return. Research shows that the overall impact of women participating in the workforce could grow exponentially over the next 10 years. For this reason, it is vital to examine why women are so vital to the workforce, what women can contribute, and what needs to be done to see women thrive in the workforce. To understand women's unique experiences, the primary investigator had to also understand their financial preparedness. Women's financial preparedness and participation in the economic marketplace led to a better understanding of the influences that impact women's economic issues.

Research indicates that there is a contrast between men and women on a variety of economic issues. Women are often less financially secure and less optimistic in comparison to men about their economic positioning. Women are broadly leerier of investments than their male counterparts (Fouejieu et al., 2020). A surprisingly high percentage of women in the United States believe they would only sustain their current standard of living for a short time if a crisis were to occur (De Henau & Himmelweit, 2021).

In the United States, women hold an estimated 42% of wealth yet are very pessimistic about their finances (Bloome et al., 2019). Even when the financial markets offer the potential for economic prosperity, women are generally in less secure positions to take risks associated with investing in financial markets. Interestingly, a majority of women believe they are in charge of their financial well-being (Bloome et al., 2019). Beyond learning that women can control their own financial well-being, it is also essential to realize what happens to the financial markets when women, a large part of the population, do not actively invest in financial markets (Baralt et al., 2020). Women's investment habits pose a growing level of concern because of the most recent economic crisis because of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the demographic changes causing significant uncertainty.

The thought of investing in the economic landscape may be high, but women's actual contribution may be contingent on perceived economic security. Many women believe their financial well-being depends on instances beyond their control, such as economic development. Paradoxically, women feel a greater sense of conviction when using their economic strength to exercise their values. Understanding this premise can

help states, companies, and individuals take practical steps toward economic growth that universally benefit everyone. Women are most often more likely than men to gauge a company's environmental and social impact when making an investment decision or buying a product. With women holding nearly half of the world's total wealth, it is increasingly necessary to focus on transformative ways to reliably factor women into the financial landscape (Bloome et al., 2019).

Women are transforming financial markets and economies across the globe. Research indicates that women's risk tolerance, confidence, and willingness to invest will impact our world for decades to come. As we consider the relationship between women's sense of their financial well-being, thought must also be given to the capacity for women to enter and succeed in the workplace (Carnahan & Greenwood, 2018). Women's contributions in the workplace are significant and too often undervalued or underrepresented. Research focus and commitment to corporate responsibility and increased awareness of women's inclusivity in the workplace and how their inclusion benefits world economies are important.

Greater participation of women in the workplace will lead to stronger economies, and there is a lot of work to do to arrive at a space where there is gender equality. For women to realize their economic potential, women must enter and remain in the workforce. Continued reductions in the American workplace will widen or expand gender inequalities, helping to offset the trend of baby boomers placing a strain on economic growth as they continue to exit the workforce. Increased workforce participation among women has a positive effect as women are more likely to invest a significant amount of household income in their children's education. Hence, as children

grow up, it is presumed that education becomes the gateway growing subsequent generations, mainly girls, to become more financially aware (Baralt et al., 2020). Raising the knowledge base and understanding of women's investing spurs economic growth in their areas of influence (Bloome et al., 2019).

Poverty globally had been declining until the COVID-19 Pandemic came and caused massive job losses, particularly for women. Research indicates that the COVID-19 Pandemic will continue to push millions of people into extreme poverty through 2021. Women and girls make up a large portion of the population to be affected. The COVID-19 Pandemic-induced poverty surge will widen the gender poverty gap, meaning more women will be pushed into extreme poverty versus men (Davlembayeva et al., 2021). This is most meaningful for women in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties years old to know

Women are overrepresented in many industries hardest hit by the COVID-19 Pandemic, such as food service, retail, and hospitality. Within some of these sectors, workers were already subject to low wages, substandard working conditions, and a lack of social protection. Economic insecurity is beyond a focus being on jobs only. There is also an effect on the lives of women and girls that could last for years ahead. Impacts on education and employment have long-lasting consequences that, if unaddressed, will reverse hard-won gains in gender equality. Without sufficient economic resources, women cannot escape the downward spiral of economic disruption. These consequences will not disappear when the pandemic subsides. Women are likely to experience long-term setbacks in workforce participation and income equity. Impacts on retirements and

savings will have implications for women's economic security for years to come (Collins et al. 2021).

The Value of Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace

Diversity and inclusion in the workplace have been a debated topic since the Second World War (Yadav & Lemka, 2020). Around this time, many women entered employment to help cover the major workforce shortages due to men carrying out their military service. Despite women taking an active role in the workplace during the 1940s, their employment opportunities were subsequently curtailed. During this same timeframe, President Truman signed Executive Order 9981, which is perceivably the first legal effort to desegregate the United States Army, which was segregated based on ethnicity until this point in history (Soules, 2020). This action is believed to be the first legislation regarding diversity in the workplace and set the trajectory for initiatives across multiple sectors.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s offered more opportunities for cultural and ethnic diversity in the workplace. But it took many decades for employers to understand the value behind diversity and inclusion initiatives. By the 1980s and 1990s, women began returning into the workforce on a more regular basis, and women were also entering industries that were until this point dominated by men (Soules, 2020). Despite the change in time, cultural diversity and inclusion had stalled somewhat and been largely ignored as a positive until the turn of the century and even more emergent today (Fujimoto & Uddin, 2020).

The year 2021 was an enormous year for organizations in the United States and around the world to potentially reemerge from the global pandemic with new initiatives

that have the propensity to change the way many organizations are managed. The associated changes to conform to what was perceivably new and met the current time was relative. Diversity and inclusion are still at the forefront of many business leaders' planning initiatives, especially leaders associated with major organizations that seek to re-engage employees and strive for tremendous success. There are many organizations on the frontline of change to be more diverse and inclusive. These efforts help organizations align with change that amplifies their success and produces the business growth leaders seek to gain (Mousa, 2021).

Diverse and inclusive organizations perform better (Goswami & Goswami, 2018). Organizations that seek to embrace diversity and inclusion become more attractive organizations to job seekers (Hauret & Williams, 2020). Also, organizations with pronounced diversity and inclusion strategies equate to higher revenue (Jones, 2019). So, organizations should take a closer look at incorporating diversity and inclusion strategies in their practices. Diversity and inclusion in the workplace have evolved from a focus on compliance to organizational performance. In the current business climate, organizations that strive for diversity and inclusion are better positioned to achieve intended business results. Strategy-driven human resource practitioners also believe that diversity and inclusion are much more than legal or moral requirements; they also provide a greater competitive advantage (Mello, 2019).

While diversity and inclusion have long been a key aspect of recruitment and talent acquisition, these practices have evolved a great deal since President Truman signed that Executive Order way back in the 1940s (Soules, 2020). As of today, from gender to generational diversity, and despite undeniable growth, it seems that many

organizations have become more and more disconnected from a diverse and inclusive workforce. The topic of diversity and inclusion in the workplace has surged, setting the stage for a reflective human resource paradigm. Gender diversity and inclusion at the boardroom level are still an issue ((Mousa, 2021).

In terms of the workplace, diversity and inclusion involves viewing people's well-being at work, safeguarding people's mental and physical resources, and championing rights and cultural differences, all of which collectively help people succeed (Hight, 2017). A diverse and inclusive environment allows an individual contribution to matter, and employees can perform to their full potential, regardless of their gender, background, identity, or circumstances (Downey et al., 2015). This is also a timeframe for the emergence of remote work to become a significant employee benefit. The ability to work remotely opened up a more culturally diverse talent pool.

Multiple studies have shown that diverse work groups better business performance, and organizations with more diversity tend to be more innovative. And inclusion is required for diverse groups to thrive. The risks of overlooking diversity and inclusion in major technology organizations can affect all aspects of their business at a high cost. Risks can affect business practices, business objectives, employee engagement and organizational performance (Hight, 2017).

While there have been many points in history where society reflects diversity and inclusion expectations, 2020 presented a real opportunity for change. As employees across the globe engaged in discussions of racial justice, organization leaders seized this moment to consider their roles and opportunities to advance diversity and inclusion initiatives. When considering past, present, and future, there has been and will be

societal failures, but accountability is now necessary: accountability for academic leaders, political leaders, and organizational leaders alike. There is an extraordinary challenge and unprecedented opportunity for large-scale change to realign American business culture. Diversity and inclusion are of utmost importance to merge a gaping divide in the many institutions (Mousa, 2021).

Majority and minority differentiation are at the forefront. Concern over professional progression is now being examined, and how recruitment and promotion are evolving to be more diverse and inclusive makes for a better working environment. Yet, it is widely known that there was, is and will continue to be a struggle in this area. Ambiguity in understanding the true essence of diversity and inclusion will be a struggle for many business leaders. There will likely be a long road to travel before substantial improvements across many businesses will be apparent. Diversity is about representation, a joining together of character differences like socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, language and mental or physical ability. At the same time, inclusion represents a sense of belonging and acceptance of differences. So, the rhetorical question becomes, how much more do we need to understand about the premise of diversity and inclusion? (Goswami & Goswami, 2018).

Moving forward, from a human resource perspective, business leaders will need to engage on many significant issues that will affect the overall employee management system. Beyond the need to select health insurance coverage, and manage and protect employee physical or mental limitations in an appropriate response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, there is much riding on business success. Making diversity in recruitment a widespread reality will be much more critical because organizations need diversity and

inclusion to increase the odds of variety in thought. Monolithic thinking and following

outdated norms may not be the impetus for business success futuristically (Mello,

2019).

For this research, the focus was multifold. The needs for gender diversity and

inclusion at the boardroom level, coupled with cultural diversity and the inclusion of

people with disabilities (mental and physical) are on the rise, making for significant

human resource events. The impact of these events remains a stretch to explain. In an

attempt, it was presumed that companies with gender diversity on their leadership teams

and throughout perform better. There is a multitude of evidence to support the intrinsic

value of having a diverse set of employees in order to add greater value to an

organization. A growing body of research indicates organizations being more advantaged

than organizations that do not have more women (Yadav & Lemka, 2020).

Diversity and inclusion in the boardroom, as an example, really does matter when

considering organizational growth as the COVID-19 Pandemic starts to dissipate,

hopefully. A recent study by Business, Inc. showed that males comprise 62% of the

boardrooms and 84% of directorships, while females represent 28% and 10%,

respectfully. Statistics are indicative of more that needs to be done to bridge the gaps.

More organizations are growing more anxious to diversify the boardroom experience,

spearhead fresh new ideas, and have a more balanced workforce so that employee

engagement is optimal.

Much of what was explored for this research stretches beyond an examination of

profit and loss. The COVID-19 Pandemic created a game-changing experience, creating

organizational challenges without comparison. Social issues are gaining momentum, and

leading beyond the pandemic is presenting newer challenges. Social issues integrate into corporate value propositions at an accelerated level, extending far beyond an organization's profit and loss.

Diversity and inclusion in the generic sense is sought after because it joins together a wide range of experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds that lead to better decision making. Specifically, optimizing the boardroom decision-making process is likely to be a worthy goal for many organizations in a highly complex and uncertain world. A Harvard Business Review study suggested that gender diversity on boards and organizations could improve overall company decision-making. It is because the business climate, in general, is so turbulent today, organization leaders are often under pressure to make sense of the markets they target, the employees they manage and the complex issues they must understand to survive in business. For these reasons, the employee line-up needs to represent the markets they serve as diversity and inclusion present a greater worldview perspective (Goswami & Goswami, 2018).

Diversity and inclusion also enhance complex organizational responsibilities (Goswami & Goswami, 2018). For instance, companies with greater gender balance have a higher sense of social and environmental, and ethical responsibility. Post COVID-19 Pandemic, the values and perspectives diversity and inclusion are anticipated to bring value far greater than the cost of status quo. These businesses do not ignore the reality of bringing a cross-section of people of all backgrounds together to manage change in an ever-adjusting world of business (Hauret & Williams, 2020).

Increases in interpersonal competence improve organizational performance. The goal is for every member to strive to achieve group acceptance. To gain group

acceptance helps to reduce dependency on external forces. Encouraging new ideas and thoughts will help to increase experimentation and risk-taking with new ways of thinking. These patterns of behavior will help an organization stay relevant in a fast-paced economic and technological environment. Successful outcomes are hard to achieve yet very desirable. The most proposed solution is diversity and inclusion training or more advanced education. However, this is not education in the ordinary sense of acquiring knowledge. Diversity training is mostly processes oriented as opposed to content-oriented (Celik et al., 2012).

Diversity and inclusion training, derived from a sensitivity training model, from the onset, is about human relations by way of emotional connections (Simmons & Yawson, 2022). When designing sensitivity training models, the trainee is the focal point. The trainee is empowered to control rewards and punishments. The ultimate goal of diversity training is to learn and understand newly designed interpersonal behavior models through interaction with others in a feedback-induced environment, with unstructured demonstration scenarios (Kearney & Martin, 1974).

In order for a business to be successful today, there needs to be diversity in the talent pool. There needs to be people with different cultural backgrounds, genders, ages and lifestyles in the talent pool so that there is expediency in responding to fast paced changes in external market conditions. To have representation within a company that represents a cross-section of American culture will allow organizations an opportunity to make strategic adjustments in order to maintain competitive advantage; although there are inherent challenges (Murphy, 2018).

Overall, today's workplace is more diverse than ever before. With a more diverse pool of workers, there are new perspectives that force leaders to be open to new ways of thinking, to be open to feedback and to be open to varying viewpoints. The result can render more creative ideas and better approaches to solving problems. Thus, diversity and inclusion may also improve upon corporate decision-making processes as it can add value to organizational expansion in products and/or service and results (Goswami & Goswami, 2018).

Diversity and inclusion management challenges in Corporate America are a big deal for leadership teams. While this is conceivably a new phenomenon, there is extensive effort to research and explain how to manage many people who are inspired by varying cultural norms. Often, focus is on the differences among ethnic minorities and the uniqueness of these varying groups. In simple terms, people will act based on what they are taught early on in life and there is a very thin gap between one's personal and professional persona (Hight, 2017).

What a person believes and how they treat others is largely due to how a person is outwardly perceived based on stereotypical behavior. Outward perception mostly surrounds what can be seen, such as race and gender. As an example, racial profiling creates limitations in power, freedom and influence. Think in terms of African-Americans in the workplace versus Whites. History has revealed the disparity African-Americans have suffered in the workplace, not because of an inability to perform, but because of a stereotypical belief that misaligns with the reality of worthiness. Research will continue to provide insight for managers to support diversity and inclusion management (Weeks et al., 2017).

Federal Mandate Impacts

Affirmative Action is an integral part of human resources policy-making. It underpins a federal law that requires every federal government agency to ensure equal opportunity for all qualified persons, without regard to race, creed, color, or national origin, employed or seeking employment with federal government entities and contractors. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) created standards to assist employers with implementing affirmative action policies and adds protection from reverse discrimination lawsuits (Murphy, 2018).

Title VII also has impacts, as it outlaws discrimination based on age, race, gender, and national origin. However, in some cases, federal law permits the consideration of protected identifiers in the recruitment, promotion and development of employees. Title VII is merely another legal policy enactment that protects employers, allowing no harm, to target specific hiring identifiers, mainly when Affirmative Action Plans include targeted hiring goals. Some employers benchmark affirmative action programs to enhance the equal opportunity rights of women, minorities, and other federally protected groups. However, and cause for concern, hiring conflicts with the non-preferential mandate issued by the federal government, may give issue to an employer giving preferential treatment, which leads towards the susceptibility of legal harm (Murphy, 2018).

Entrepreneurship in Action

Millennials have witnessed instability in the workplace, business scandals, and their parent' jobs being downsized after loyal years of service. These market conditions are leading many to become entrepreneurs. Millennials have watched members of their

peer group achieve star status, like Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, Brian Chesky of Air BnB and John Zimmer of Uber. This makes entrepreneurship more attractive to them. Not to mention, many of them understand that small business is regarded as a driver of the United States economy, providing jobs for the nation's private workforce, another way to add relevance to millennials and their economic strength.

In 2011, many millennials took the leap to become entrepreneurs. They launched almost 160,000 startups each month (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). As small business is essential to job creation in the United States, the ability to access capital for business startups was and is the greatest challenge faced. Millennials are deemed direct in their approach. They push politicians to lobby for the passage of laws that make it easier to start a business by providing more access to education, training, and student-loan relief.

While millennials are great at multitasking, this often results in turning prospective clients away because of a lack of engagement, doing too many things at once when there should be undivided attention given to clients. There is work in progress to enhance entrepreneurial curricula in colleges as many students believe the current curriculum is not adequately preparing them for lives as entrepreneurs. Moreover, many of the students enrolled in entrepreneurial education programs have already started businesses. They enroll in entrepreneurial programs because they are seeking a higher understanding of the business life cycle. In turn, employers also benefit because the innovative skills that an entrepreneur brings to a company adds value by way of more creative ideas (Hauret & Williams, 2020).

The size of the workforce dictates whether small-group or whole-group training sessions are provided. Training must outline the importance of diverse ideas and be inclusive of all levels of employees within the organizations. Studies show that employees care most about their leaders valuing their ideas and being open to diverse thoughts. Participation in training and developing employees cannot be disregarded. While training does not necessarily generate revenue, it can be a significant cost center if not valued. Training and development in itself is a demonstration of how diverse and inclusive a workplace is because these elements offer opportunities to be exposed to more phenomena that are intended to deepen understanding of people and things that may affect the way one contributes (Hight, 2017).

A diverse and inclusive workforce offers a multitude of advantageous outcomes for an organization. Diversity and inclusivity offer access to variety in the talent pool, as well as internal and external organizational experiences that create more positive experiences. Diversity and inclusion may pose challenges from its inception, and some employees may be hesitant to embrace diversity and inclusion; but when leadership is able to effectively communicate purpose and vision and assemble teams of the best employees, success is inevitable (Hight, 2017).

A growing number of companies are cultivating workplace cultures that make it an ethical norm to intertwine diversity and inclusion into the fabric of the workplace. Human resource professionals are becoming more strategic in deploying and managing diversity and inclusion planning efforts that promote the values, cultures and ethics of organizations (Hight, 2017).

Multi-generational Workforce

The pandemic cast a bright light on the differences among the generations in today's workforce. Employers who want to create a caring, collaborative, and productive culture must understand the differences in the multigenerational workforce and have management solutions that reach and engage everyone. Today's workforce is diverse in many ways, especially in age. The United States working population includes five generations, defined by the 2021 U.S. Census Bureau as:

- Traditionalists (also called the Silent Generation)—born between 1928 and 1945

- Baby boomers—born between 1946 and 1964

- Generation X—born between 1965 and 1980

- Millennials—born between 1981 and 1996

- Generation Z—born in 1997 or later

Younger generations are coming of age and entering the workforce in high numbers. At the same time, older generations are choosing to work beyond what was once deemed the standard retirement age of 65. Millennials currently account for over a third of the United States labor force and are now the largest generational workforce group. At the same time, the number of older Americans is expected to double between 2014 and 2060 when more than or most boomers will still be on the job. Although a multigenerational workforce presents some obstacles for business leaders, this workforce is more productive and has fewer turnovers than less diverse work populations.

Over the past couple of years, the rapidly shifting world of work has allowed us to reassess what we value in our personal and professional lives. Accelerated changes to work-life routines are leading some people to radically rethink their priorities and

approaches to productivity, and many are making significant changes that alter what constitutes their quality of life. Soon after the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic, there have been endless discussions about how the future of work will look. Existing technology like Zoom Web Conferencing, Slack, Microsoft Teams, and the thousands of other communication and productivity tools can support a variety of flexible modes of working (Ellis et al., 2022).

What Millennials Want Most

Millennials seek quality benefits packages, and this is what strongly influences their choice of employers today. While managers believe that millennials put the highest priority on salary, research indicates salary has become a non-issue for many. Millennials prefer more paid time off, retirement savings plans, and fringe benefits like medical insurance, dental insurance, vision insurance and a flexible work schedule. They also look for interesting and challenging work, personal development, custom career plans, and organizations that reflect their values (Ferri-Reed, 2014).

Work-life balance is a big deal for millennials, and it drives their career choices. Many organizations have shifted their benefits and environments accordingly. Most notable is Google, the consistent top mention of places millennials would like to work because it offers many perks and "balance enhancers" (Morgan, 2006).

Millennials expect close relationships and frequent feedback from their managers. They view their managers as coaches or mentors. These managers, not the company, can earn the loyalty of millennial employees by serving as excellent coaches and mentors and honoring their commitments. Positive relationships with managers help manage millennial retention. The number one reason that this age group leaves a job is directly

related to a boss. Millennials want an employer that offers a fair workplace where authority is earned in a collaborative, casual office environment. There is also an expectation that ideas matter more than experience, and work output is valued more than the time worked. Overall, millennials will be the change agents as we progress in time. They are the most populous group in existence and as they enter adulthood, they are forcing change in the way education is organized and delivered and the way that employers manage them in the workplace (Karakas et al., 2015).

When seeking ways to increase revenue, organizations must strategically explore new markets and align their organizations with the right leaders. Partneri ng with other companies, clients and counties can evolve new strategies for expansion (Jones, 2019). With expansion comes a need to grow from good to great in managing a diverse and inclusive workforce. Part of the focus should be on the people, and the remaining part should be on the products and/or services. Formulating innovative approaches will come largely from the diverse thinking of those involved in the discovery phase.

Summary

While the research suggests that women's employment opportunities will suffer severely because of the COVID-19 Pandemic, some believe there could be space for optimism in the long run (Davlembayeva et al., 2021). In response to the COVID-19 Pandemic, many businesses adopted work-from-home and telecommuting options on an expansive scale. If these arrangements remain, they will benefit working women who struggle to combine their careers with childcare and family needs. The lack of flexible Work arrangements will be one of the largest sources of gender inequality that will affect the professional growth of women (Collins et al., 2021).

Diversity and inclusion will also play a significant role in how women will be managed through a re-emergence process. In addition, training and development programs will enhance skill sets, while entrepreneurial endeavors will often be explored as a means of gaining greater scheduling autonomy. A growing number of companies are also cultivating workplace cultures where it is becoming an ethical norm to be more greatly intertwined with diversity and inclusion. Human Resource professionals are becoming more strategic in deploying and managing diversity and inclusion planning efforts that pronounce the values, cultures and ethics of organizations.

It is also predicted that there could be a shift in social norms, and men will have to come to terms with caring for their children and family needs more (De Henau & Himmelweit, 2021). The potential cultural shifts are the families in which the crisis will turn fathers into primary childcare providers (Kray et al., 2017). This will be the case, for example, in families where the mother is a frontline worker and the father is not, and he can work from home. In contrast, experience also shows that shifts in family arrangements induced by crises or policy changes can have long-term effects. World War II necessitated substantial changes in women's labor force participation that persisted after the war, and policy experimentation with paternity leave suggests that even short windows that engage fathers can bring about long-term changes in the division of childcare responsibilities. Given the magnitude of the changes in childcare arrangements induced by the COVID-19 Pandemic crisis, future shifts in social norms are highly probable.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter presents the study's research method, including the research design and rationale, the Primary investigator's role, and research methodology. The research design and rationale section expound on the phenomenology of the study, the theoretical framework, and the research questions used to guide the data collection and analysis. This chapter also addresses any professional and personal relationships with the participants, the Primary investigator's persona in the research which may have contributed to bias, how the primary investigator managed research integrity, and how ethical issues were identified and addressed. The primary investigator's research efforts strive to voice the needs of working women in California to ensure that their perspectives enter the public debate in ways that improve opportunity and increase economic security for women when a world crisis emerges and leads to economic disruption.

Purpose of the Study

In recent years, women in California have made many advances, but still face inequities that often prevent them from reaching their full potential in the workplace (Sanchez, & Frey, 2020). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to understand the lived experiences that contribute to the professional growth disruption of working women in various California business sectors and professional rankings, ranging from entry-level to executive leadership, during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The primary investigator explicitly targeted women at least 18 years old who lived in California from the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic, and who worked at least part-time at any level in their career pursuits (exploration, establishment, mid-career, late-career, and decline).

In addition, the research effort aimed to examine approaches that working women in California can adopt to decrease the widening of gender inequality, especially as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic. In addition, companies have made slow but steady progress toward diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace (Fang et al., 2020). Because of the pandemic, companies may need to escalate interventions to keep women who work in California progressing upward without interruption, especially when another economic crisis emerges. The effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic crisis on women at work and the crossroads at which California-based companies now find themselves are becoming more amplified (Bruine de Bruin et al., 2020).

Research Questions

Creswell (2013) recommended that participants in a research study be presented with two broad and open-ended questions that are intended to guide the research. The primary investigator posed the following questions:

- Research Question 1: What accounts for women withdrawing from the workforce during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

- Research Question 2: What can women do to mitigate disruption to their career trajectories post the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Research Methodology

This phenomenological qualitative research study relied on data obtained from participant interviews via Zoom Web Conferencing and face-to-face, firsthand observations. Phenomenological qualitative research also has a strong foundation in philosophy that explored participant experiences (Husserl, 2012). Furthermore, qualitative research requires standardization of procedures and a defined process for

selecting participants to avoid a biased influence and ensure generalizability of the research results (Moustakas, 1994). Hence, participants were randomly selected based on who could best inform the research questions and enhance an understanding of the phenomenon under study. The primary investigator aimed to interpret the data and the resulting themes to understand the studied phenomenon.

This study focused on discovering what disruption women have experienced in their careers during the COVID-19 Pandemic. This type of research design was appropriate because its exploratory methods sought to unearth respondents' opinions, thoughts, and feelings. As a research methodology, phenomenology is positioned to help researchers learn from the experiences of others (Husserl, 2012). In other words, philosophies gained through this approach create theories about the meaning of human experience (Gorichanaz, 2019).

Furthermore, engaging in phenomenological research requires the researcher to become familiar with the philosophical perspectives and interpretations of human experiences (Zamarro & Prados, 2021). The questions that phenomenology can answer and the insights this kind of research can provide (Moustakas, 1994) are of foundational importance to understanding why women experienced greater disruption in their career trajectories and what can be done to offset disruptions in the future. The researcher's rationale is further supported by choosing a phenomenological research approach because it investigates the truths and perspectives of those who have experienced a phenomenon.

At its core, qualitative research enables researchers to understand a topic through truthful reporting and firsthand knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). The primary investigator explored the impact of career trajectory disruption on women at least 18 years old and

who worked at least part-time and at any level in their careers (exploration, establishment, mid-career, late-career, and decline) in California with a phenomenological inquiry. This approach allowed the primary investigator to explore and understand the participants' lived experiences while maintaining reflexivity. Reflexivity is essential in qualitative research because this field heavily depends on participants' information (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). Since questionnaires, discussions, and interviews are all led by researchers, the information gathered during qualitative studies may be influenced by underlying beliefs (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The primary goal of reflexivity is to be aware of researcher biases and how they influence the study's outcome. Hence, the primary investigator's approach was to be conscious of biases to the extent humanly possible, whereas it can be a central tool for deriving knowledge. Despite its potential drawbacks, reflexivity is vital for qualitative research (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). Qualitative research is inherently subjective, no matter how well the project is designed, which is why it was necessary to incorporate reflexivity into this study. The primary investigator engaged in reflexivity by making notes about participants' comments and the primary investigator's thoughts during the interview. Second, recording notes as soon as possible after an interview was undertaken in order to preserve information as accurately as possible. Third, the primary investigator continuously edited subjectivity statements.

Qualitative researchers often explore their positionality in a phenomenon and the people experiencing it. Positionality is the notion that personal values, views, and location in time and space influence how one understands the world (Creswell, 2013). Moreover, the subjective nature of qualitative research is recognized by establishing how

one's identity contributes to constructing the research process and findings. This positionality is the essence of reflexivity (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). So, in this study, perception is acknowledged as the primary driver of knowledge in phenomenology and must be trusted (Husserl, 2012). Overall, the main advantage of the phenomenological study design was to embrace subjective experiences. Moustakas (1994) explained that phenomenology is a process in which one must "explicate my own intentional consciousness through transcendental processes before I can understand someone or something that is not my own, someone or something that is apprehended analogically." (p. 37).

The primary investigator was interested in uncovering the meaning of a phenomenon for women who may have experienced an interruption in their professional growth trajectory because they lost jobs or had to reduce work hours because of added work-life balance pressures induced by the COVID-19 Pandemic. The ultimate objective of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to interpret women's experiences and the themes discovered from the interpretations of their interviews to understand the meanings associated with the research problems.

The primary investigator also subscribes to the hermeneutic school of thought. Hermeneutics refers to the theory and practice of interpretation, where interpretation involves an understanding that can be justified (Keshavarz, 2020).

Overall, many methods could have been deemed appropriate for the research methodology and design. The selected approach depended on the phenomena and the research problems (Plakoyiannaki & Budhwar, 2021). Qualitative was chosen as the most effective research methodology for this research study because it outlined a protocol

for describing, interpreting, and understanding the experiences of working women in California. To acknowledge biases, the researcher acknowledges, according to Husserl (2012), that perception is the primary driver of knowledge in phenomenology and must be trusted. The term epoché, coined by Husserl (2012), outlined the importance of setting aside biases to accept newly discovered phenomena without prejudice. The primary investigator adhered accordingly, all while understanding the philosophical assumptions of the phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants

Within this qualitative research study, the primary investigator engaged in two main strategies to promote rigor and quality when selecting participants. The first was to ensure the authenticity of the data, and the second was the analysis's quality or trustworthiness (Moustakas, 1994). The primary investigator presented a soft or hard copy invitation (Appendix B) to those invited to participate in the research study. Soft copy invitations were sent via email, and the hard copy (paper) invitations were distributed in person by way of the primary investigator giving the invitation to the study participant.

LinkedIn, Facebook, Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), Inland Empire Chapter, and the primary investigator's professional network represent four sources. The researcher explicitly targeted women, at least 18 years old, who worked at least part-time and at any level in their careers (exploration, establishment, mid-career, late-career, and decline). In addition, participants must have lived in California from the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic in March 2020.

The population sample, the sampling method and sample size, eligibility criteria for participants, the data collection tools and instruments, the process for tracking data, and how the data analysis logically and sequentially addressed all research questions will be explained in a subsequent chapter of this research report. The data were observed, recorded, and arranged categorically, based on the attributes and properties of the phenomenon identified. The researcher diligently attempted to segment preconceived notions, not to influence the research outcomes, but to understand the participants' lived experiences related to the explored phenomenon (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022).

All qualitative phenomenological research methods typically identify an appropriate sample of participants to acquire data (Creswell, 2013). Moustakas (1994) suggests five to 25 participants for phenomenological research; Boyd (2001) regards two to 10 participants as sufficient to reach saturation; and Creswell (2013) recommends long interviews with three to 10 participants for a phenomenological study. After posting the pre-developed recruitment pre-screening tool (see Appendix A) and connecting with the primary investigator's professional network, 41 potential participants responded.

The primary investigator pre-screened each of the 41 potential respondents using an open-ended pre-screening tool. After pre-screening, it was determined that 10 of the respondents were not eligible to participate. Subsequently, 23 interviews were scheduled and conducted, and eight potential participants who responded were never scheduled because of conflicting schedules.

Participants were interviewed either via Zoom Web Conferencing or face-to-face. Data were collected and considered sufficient in their depths because evidence of

empirical saturation became apparent after 12 interviews. Eleven additional interviews were conducted to strengthen the credibility of the research findings.

The credibility of the research results was of significant importance (Moustakas, 1994), and the participants were given a transcribed hardcopy of their interview results to validate accuracy and resonance. Respondent validation occurs when the investigator solicits feedback from the participants involved in the semi-structured interview process or observes to avoid misinterpretation of what interviewees described and their paradigms (Creswell, 2013). In addition, after the participants affirmed the transcriptions of their interviews, the primary investigator presented each interviewed participant with a copy, deemed final, of their entire interview before recommendations and a conclusion to the research study were written.

An adequate engagement in data collection means the primary investigator must purposefully seek data supporting alternative explanations in order to challenge the primary investigator's expectations or emerging findings (Creswell, 2013). Likewise, reflexivity occurs when the primary investigator understands how their perceptions and values can affect the shape of the study (Cairns-Lee et al., 2022). So, the final strategy, the peer review process, involved having the study's dissertation committee review the raw data and assess whether the findings were plausible, based on the data.

Interview Instruments

The interview instrument included a series of 13 open-ended interview questions listed in this chapter (Appendix D). Each question was asked of every participant. Interviews were conducted in durations of 45 to 75-minutes. The primary investigator will retain the research data for a minimum of three years. The primary investigator will

store the data on a laptop computer and a hard disk; both are password protected and could be accessed by the primary investigator for future research and to see how data change and the implications these changes have for future research. The primary investigator may use the data to compare results with other research studies conducted after the completion date of a successful dissertation defense. The data will be kept anonymous by using the participants' first names only.

From the 40 participants invited to participate in this study, a subset of 23 participants was randomly selected through randomizer.org, an online random selection generator. According to Moustakas (1994), a good sample should be a representative subset of the population a primary investigator is interested in studying. Therefore, the simple random sampling method is deemed one of the best probability sampling techniques that helps save time and resources (Dimi & Cornel Virgil, 2015). The simple random sampling method is a reliable method of obtaining information where every member of a population is chosen randomly, merely by chance (Handley, 1991). For this study, each participant had the same probability of being chosen to be a part of a sample.

As with all probability sampling methods, simple random sampling allows the sampling error to be calculated and reduces selection bias (Dimi & Cornel Virgil, 2015). A specific advantage is the most straightforward probability sampling method (Handley, 1991). A disadvantage of simple random sampling is that there may not be enough individuals with relevant characteristics of interest, or it may be challenging to define a complete sampling frame or be unable to contact a selected participant (Handley, 1991).

The participants were, at least, all women employed at the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Because of the similar nature of the participant population, the 23 participants

randomly selected for the subset were deemed satisfactory to achieve research fullness (Moustakas, 1994). The open-ended nature of such qualitative research argues that data collection should continue until saturation or informal redundancy occurs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Based on the data analysis, saturation became apparent after the 23 interviews. Using participants' answers to the interview questions provided data that were analyzed and compared for this study. The answers to the interview questions may also add to future research.

Recruitment Method

Participant recruitment can be a significant challenge in research studies involving human subjects (Hentschel et al., 2021). Recruitment involves several activities, including identifying eligible participants, adequately explaining the study to potential participants, recruiting an adequate sample based on study goals and design, obtaining informed consent, maintaining ethical standards, and retaining participants until study completion (Kaur, & Krishna, 2020). With all that is involved and despite the widely acknowledged premise that recruitment is a challenge, details about recruitment efforts and outcomes are rarely published (Hentschel et al., 2021), resulting in limited knowledge about why recruitment rates vary between studies and what the most successful approaches are for recruiting study participants.

The recruitment method, the way to establish contacts to represent the purpose of this study, required a drill down to the exact participants needed, according to Reysen et al., 2019. The primary investigator conducted pre-screening interviews (Appendix A) to ensure the right participants were included. To add value to each screening interview, the primary investigator avoided asking leading questions that could instruct a person to

answer in a specific way. This was done to minimize biases (Hentschel et al., 2021).

The participants represented the criteria that targeted individuals within a specific

demographic population, including women, at least 18 years old, who worked at least

part-time and at any level in their careers (exploration, establishment, mid-career, late-

career, and decline). In addition, participants must have lived in California from the start

of the COVID-19 Pandemic in March 2020.

For the purpose of this study, recruitment approaches included a variety of

strategies to make potential participants aware of the research study. The primary

investigator did the following steps to build on a pool of potential participants. First, the

investigator placed telephone calls and sent emails to the primary investigator's

professional network. Next, she approached meeting-goers at a monthly Society of

Human Resource Management (SHRM) chapter meeting and, finally, she posted social

media notes on LinkedIn and Facebook. Facebook and LinkedIn groups allowed for the

use of an internal search bar to find relevant groups and filter them by city. Once the

primary investigator identified target groups of potential participants, they were sent a

LinkedIn or Facebook message explaining the research purpose.

Sources of Data

LinkedIn, Facebook, SHRM Inland Empire Chapter, and the primary

investigator's professional network represented four sources. The data collected in this

study came from interviews related to the study. Responses to interview questions helped

to reveal patterns that contribute to the challenges women experienced with their career

trajectory due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and provide a roadmap for women's progress

in a post-pandemic era.

This research was specifically designed to discover what accounts for women withdrawing from the workforce during the COVID-19 Pandemic and what actions women can take to mitigate disruption to their career trajectories post the COVID-19 Pandemic. According to Moustakas (1994), the research inquiry was answered by analyzing the participants' responses and attempting to understand any specific patterns that emerged from interview responses. The patterns were determined by any consistency in responses, especially in the interview process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This consistency was also known as the point of saturation, which occurred after 23 interviews.

The instrument used for this study was a questionnaire consisting of 13 questions (Appendix D). The interview questions were designed to get a more detailed account of the target population's realities and perceptions, along with issues in the workplace that need to be addressed regarding gender equality. The participants were all asked the same 13 open-ended interview questions.

The primary investigator also established a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to keep track of the engaged and selected participants who participated in the research study. The information included in the spreadsheet is the name of each participant and her contact information. Moustakas (1994) says having this information readily available allows a researcher to create a list of interested participants that can be contacted for other research projects. The referenced spreadsheet is stored on a laptop computer and a hard disk; both are password-protected.

Data Collection

Data collection involves gathering and measuring information on variables of interest using an established systematic approach that enables a researcher to answer stated research questions and evaluate outcomes (Spry & Pich, 2021). While data collection methods vary by discipline, the emphasis on ensuring accurate and honest collection remains the same (Moustakas, 1994). Quality control activities (detection/monitoring and action) occurred during and after data collection.

The primary investigator established a communication structure at the start for monitoring collaboration among the primary investigator and study participants. The establishment of a quality control protocol, with focus on communication, both oral and written, was intended to remove uncertainty about the flow of information between the researcher as principal investigator and the study's participants (Spry & Pich, 2021). The primary investigator's quality control of communication occurred through documents, hard and soft copies, to communicate research purposes, to provide consent, and to affirm the accuracy of the information recorded during the interviews.

Before the data collection phase began, participants were advised of the survey instrument and interview process described in the approved Institutional Review Board (IRB) documentation. Participants were asked the best possible day and time that they might be interviewed. Twenty-three randomly selected participants were invited to participate in the research study. The participants were formally asked to participate in the interview process, where data were collected to help explain the nature of each participant's workplace (Appendix B). Data were also collected for research analysis on participants' thoughts on their respective professional growth trajectories during the

COVID-19 Pandemic era. The participants were also engaged in one-on-one interviews conducted via Zoom Web Conferencing, telephonically, or face-to-face.

The ultimate goal of the interview process was to reach consistency in any emerging patterns while participants were being asked the same series of questions (Spry & Pich, 2021). Detailed notes were taken as participants elaborated on their answers. These notes were transcribed, transformed into a textual representation of audio responses, and then analyzed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software to find similarities or differences in responses and contribute to the findings and results. After the entire interview process, the participants were thanked (Addendum E) and reassured that their participation in the data collection process was entirely confidential and was to be used for research purposes only.

Data Collection Instrument

Participants were asked 13 open-ended questions in a verbal semi-structured interview. Creswell (2013) recommends two fundamental questions: Research Question 1 (RQ1): What accounts for women withdrawing from the workforce during the COVID-19 Pandemic? And Research Question 2 (RQ2): What actions can women take to mitigate disruption to their career trajectories post the COVID-19 Pandemic?

The following questions aligned with the two fundamental research questions and were presented to each participant one by one in sequential order as the basis for this study:

1. In March 2020, California was the first state to order residents to stay home because of COVID-19; tell me about your experience during that time. RQ1

2. How did your work life change after California residents were asked to stay home? RQ1, RQ2

3. Was it easy for you to adjust to California's COVID-19 restrictions? Why or why not? RQ1, RQ2

4. Do you, or did you, provide care for anyone beyond yourself at points throughout COVID-19? If yes, who? RQ1, RQ2

5. Describe your biggest challenge with balancing life, in general, with COVID-19 and work. RQ1

6. Did you maintain the same employment level (full-time, part-time, laid-off) from the start of COVID-19 until now? – Describe your journey. RQ1

7. What satisfies you about the work you do? RQ1

8. What dissatisfies you about the work you do? RQ1

9. Describe how you feel about your professional growth during COVID-19, from beginning to present? RQ1

10. Do you imagine yourself changing careers within the next 12 months? Why? RQ1

11. Describe the support your employer provided during COVID-19? How did/ does this make you feel? RQ2

12. Can you name three things employers can do to make their employees' work-life more balanced when catastrophe emerges and forces change? RQ2

13. How would you describe your current professional outlook? What makes you feel this way? RQ1

Data Collection Procedure

Each participant was interviewed individually using the Zoom Web Conferencing platform or face-to-face. Before the interview, each participant consented to participation in the study and was given the list of the 13 interview questions in advance of the interview date and time. Interviews lasted 45-75 minutes, based on the preconceived way the participants constructed their answers to the 13 questions given in advance of the interview.

The NVivo transcription service was used to ensure accuracy and memorialize all of the interviews. The interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word using simple text formats. The Word document was uploaded to NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The NVivo software assisted the primary investigator in identifying and organizing themes in the data.

The research study used a phenomenological method of recording interviews and creating detailed notes to capture participants' lived experiences. The study relied on the participants' personal experiences, perspectives, and feelings about how their professional growth trajectories were influenced by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Follow-up correspondence was given to each participant via hard or soft copy after all interviews were completed, which allowed all participants to amend or add to any responses given in the original interview. Notably, the interview questions were scripted and distributed before the interviews to help guide the interviewees in their responses.

For this study, the primary investigator used the bracketing method that Carpenter (2007) describes. This is the scientific process in which a primary investigator suspends or abides with presuppositions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences to see and describe the phenomenon described in responses. Bracketing is most helpful because it allows the researcher to focus more on the participants' experiences in the study (Creswell, 2013).

Data Analysis

Moustakas' (1994) analysis process was used to analyze the phenomenological interview data. The steps of this method were as follows: (1) transcription – where research interviews between primary investigator and participant acted as reference

materials for research; (2) bracketing and phenomenological reduction or phenomenological epoché, was the preliminary step used in describing an act of suspending judgment about the natural world to instead focus on an analysis of each interviewer's experience; (3) listening to each interview involved, keeping both verbal and non-verbal communication channels open to add value to the interpretation of what was said and analyzed; (4) clustering information relevant to meaning was the method of identifying similar groups of data, one of the most popular techniques in data collection science; (5) determining themes from clustered meaning and writing a summary of the interviews. Overall, Moustakas (1994) embraces the standard features of human science research, such as the value of qualitative research, on a focus on the wholeness of experience and a search for the essence of experiences.

Credibility and Dependability

Credible research that ensures accurate participant contributions is crucial (Saunders & Townsend, 2016). This study was dependent on the data provided by participants and needed to be accurate. Participants were reminded to respond genuinely with their answers to the questions. Creswell and Miller (2000) argued that qualitative researchers use a lens not based on scores, instruments, or research designs. Still, a lens is established using people's views who conduct, participate in, or read and review a study.

The primary investigator's intensity, veracity, and input can enhance credibility and dependability. Researchers should continuously review their data, analyze emergent constructs, and update their interpretations (Patton & Appelbaum, 2003). Creswell and Miller (2000) also recommend that the researcher assess whether their interpretations are

accurately portrayed. Credibility can also be enhanced by using an external reviewer or individuals not affiliated with the study to examine responses and their interpretations. Lincoln and Guba (1986) agreed that qualitative research is dependent on the credibility and dependability of the participants' perspectives.

Setting and Sampling

The primary investigator was the narrator of the lived experiences from the participants' viewpoints. The phenomenological study was significant to both the primary investigator and the participants involved; they worked together to explain the problem. The primary investigator's active listening skills were the most dominant skill used, as participants described their experiences related to the phenomenon, to detect meaningful cues in participants' gestures, expressions, pauses, and answers.

Participants worked in various industries. The primary data collection process was via Zoom Web Conferencing. For individuals unable to participate via Zoom Web Conferencing, face-to-face interviews were conducted.

Summary

There are generally two primary options in research related to gender inequality, quantitative and qualitative. The qualitative method was chosen because of the primary investigator's interest in uncovering the meaning of phenomena identified by women seeking career advancement after the COVID-19 Pandemic. The primary investigator used the phenomenological research design to interpret the lived experiences of participants, influencing the outcome of the research and providing patterns.

Validity and reliability are essential qualities in the scientific research community of any empirical social research. The triangulation method included respondent

validation, reflexivity, and peer examination. The phenomenological study was selected

to investigate women to understand why gender inequality exists in California's private

employment sector. This approach was selected to develop a theory related to a theme or

to increase the validity of an existing theory of how companies can adapt to change that

equalizes gender inequality in pay and employment status.

In Chapter 4, the primary investigator addresses how the research tools were used

to gather data to support the research, how the findings were built logically from the

problem, and how the research design was presented to address the research question.

Whether quantitative or qualitative, data analysis is intended to summarize a mass of

information in order to answer the research questions, test the hypotheses, examine the

foreshadowed problems, or to explore the conjectures (Moustakas, 1994).

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to discover the lived experiences of 23 participants who are women, at least 18 years old, California residents in March 2020, and employed. The participants were asked 13 interview questions related to their work experiences that took place during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The participants were interviewed via Zoom Web Conferencing or face-to-face. The interview data analysis tracking was conducted using NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

The primary investigator used Moustakas' (1994) Modified Van Kaam Method to analyze the data obtained. This method allowed for exploration of the participants' lived experiences, to understand the phenomenon through the voices of those who lived it (Chrisentary & Barrett, 2015). Below is a brief outline of the eight steps implemented for the Modified Van Kaam Method analysis. In addition, the steps outlined apply to each of the 23 individual interviews, meaning that each interview was treated as its own dataset and will be explained in more depth when describing the coding process:

1. Horizontalization: Treated all the data equally. No quote or excerpt was more important than any other. This process was performed in the preliminary coding and grouping phase by listing every quote relevant to the experience under investigation.

2. Reduction and Elimination: Idealized two questions: (1) Is this quote important to the participant's lived experience of the phenomenon? and (2) Can this quote be reduced to its latent meaning? If the answer was "No" to either of these questions,

the quote was eliminated; this helped separate the invariant constituents of the experience from redundant and ancillary information.

3. Clustering and Thematizing: Took the excerpts and quotes that passed the two-question test, explored the latent meanings, and grouped excerpts based on those latent meanings. The groupings form the themes that express the experience of each participant.

4. Validation: After the themes were generated; themes were examined against the dataset to ensure the themes were representative of the participant's experience and help tell the participant's story.

5. Individual Textural Description: Individual textural descriptions were created for each participant. These descriptions utilized verbatim excerpts and quotes from the participant.

6. Individual Structural Description: Individual structural descriptions were created for each participant. These descriptions examined the emotional, social, and cultural connections between what participants said.

7. Composite Textural Descriptions: In this step, a table was created to outline all the themes, describe each participant, and examined the 13 research questions. This composite description relayed what participants said during their interview and noted the common themes of the lived experiences of the phenomenon.

8. Composite Structural Descriptions: Examined the emotional, social, and cultural connections of each participant's experiences across all the participants. During this phase, the primary investigator conceptualized what elements factored the

most into the participant's experiences and what elements informed their experiences.

9. Synthesis: Merged both the textural and structural composites to comprehensively understand the phenomenon.

Interview Questions

The 23 participants were asked the 13 pre-developed interview questions, listed below and in Appendix D. Participant responses were recorded and transcribed into a textual representation of audio and then analyzed, using NVivo qualitative data analysis software to find similarities or differences in responses and contribute to the findings and results.

The 13 pre-developed questions were used in each interview to conform to the guidelines for a structured interview. Each of the 13 questions was open-ended. The primary investigator asked each question to every participant. The questions were sent to the participants at least 24 hours before the scheduled interviews to familiarize the participants with the questions and allow them time, if they chose, to curate their responses. Participants understood the questions, and neither of the questions needed to be adjusted for clarification.

During each of the 23 interviews, the primary investigator ensured each participant that her data was solely used to understand the participant's experience. The primary investigator (1) emphasized that participant involvement would be confidential, (2) discussed that only the primary investigator would know the participant's identity, and (3) reiterated that transcription records would not be shared. Additionally, the primary investigator informed each participant that the interview would focus solely on

the participant's answers to the questions and that the primary investigator would not interject opinions or thoughts. The primary investigator aimed to fully understand the participant's experience and not allow for any bias on the primary investigator's behalf to contaminate the process.

Each interview question was asked for a specific reason. Below is the list of interview questions along with the specific reason for asking each question:

1. In March 2020, California was the first state to order residents to stay home because of COVID-19 Pandemic; tell me about your experience during that time.

   Question #1 was asked to understand how the participant felt about having to navigate a statewide order to distance herself from society.

2. How did your work life change after California residents were asked to stay home?

   Question #2 was asked to gauge if the participant could quantify work life changes.

3. Was it easy for you to adjust to California's COVID-19 Pandemic restrictions? Why or why not?

   Question #3 was asked to gauge the participant's agility, to help determine if the participant was open or resistant to change.

4. Do you, or did you not, provide care for anyone other than yourself at points throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic? If yes, who?

   Question #4 was asked to determine if dependent care caused the participant additional challenges while navigating COVID-19 Pandemic restrictions.

5. Describe your biggest challenge with balancing life, in general, with COVID-19 Pandemic and work.

   Question #5 was asked to allow the participant an opportunity to elaborate on her experience in order to describe what took place.

6. Did you maintain the same employment level (full-time, part-time, laid-off) from the start the COVID-19 Pandemic until now? – Describe your journey.

   Question #6 was used to discover if changes occurred in employment status for the participant.

7. What satisfies you about the work you do?

   Question #7 was asked to determine the participant's motivation for the work she does.

8. What dissatisfies you about the work you do?

   Question #8 was asked like Question #7, to help align any differences in participant perspective.

9. Describe how you feel about your professional growth during the COVID-19 Pandemic, from the beginning until the present?

   Question #9 was used to discover if the participant felt COVID-19 interrupted her professional growth.

10. Do you imagine yourself changing careers within the next 12 months? If so, why?

    Question #10 was used to determine if the participant had planned changes in her career trajectory.

11. Describe the support your employer provided during the COVID-19 Pandemic? How did/does this make you feel?

Question #11 was asked to determine if the participant experienced support provided by her employer, in a way that supported change in her life.

12. Can you name three things employers can do to make their employees' work-life more balanced when catastrophe emerges and forces change?

Question #12 was asked to discover what the participant expects from her employer.

13. How would you describe your current professional outlook? What makes you feel this way?

Question #13 was asked to gauge the participant's perspective on her career trajectory.

Results

The data collection and analysis processes included scheduling the interviews and their locations, conducting the interviews, transcribing the interviews within 48 hours, and analyzing and coding the interview data. The research study included views from women at least 18 years old who lived in California in March 2020 and were employed. Additionally, the participants were of various career levels. The primary investigator stopped interviewing after completing 23 interviews because themes emerged and, therefore, saturation occurred. It took four weeks to collect the data. Data are password-protected and will be retained for at least three years after completion of the research. They will then be destroyed.

Interview Process

The interviews were conducted via Zoom Web Conferencing or face-to-face, depending on the participant's availability. Before starting the interview, the primary

investigator engaged epoché, reminded the participant that the interview was confidential, and that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions. The purpose of the interview was to discover the participant's viewpoints, opinions, and lived experiences. Also, the primary investigator informed the participants that the interviews would be recorded and transcribed. The primary investigator agreed to provide the participant with a transcription of her interview, also known as member checking.

There were certain logistics that were evident based on the responses to the research study's pre-screening tool (reference Appendix A). Likewise, the primary investigator used the pre-screening tool to confirm gender, minimal age, and if employed in California in March 2020, along with nominal data (see Table 1), which included the average number of hours worked per week and current career level.

Each interview took between 45 to 75 minutes to conduct. The primary investigator took notes during each interview to capture body language, facial expressions, and inflections in the tone of the participant's voice, because nonverbal communication plays as much a part as verbal communication in interview analysis (Zamfir, 2021). Each interview was transcribed using NVivo within 48 hours of the interview and forwarded to the participant for validation, establishing member checking.

Table 1

Nominal Data

Participant Number	Gender	Age 18+	Employed in California	Average Number of Hours Worked Per Week	Current Career Level
301	Female	Yes	Yes	Greater Than 20 Hours	Decline
302	Female	Yes	Yes	Greater Than 20 Hours	Decline
303	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 40 Hours	Late-Career
304	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 40 Hours	Mid-Career
305	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 40 Hours	Mid-Career
306	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 20 Hours	Exploration
307	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 40 Hours	Decline
308	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 20 Hours	Late-Career
309	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 40 Hours	Mid-Career
310	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 40 Hours	Decline
311	Female	Yes	Yes	Less Than 20 Hours	Decline
312	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 40 Hours	Late-Career
313	Female	Yes	Yes	Less Than 20 Hours	Exploration
314	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 40 Hours	Establishment
315	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 40 Hours	Mid-Career
316	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 40 Hours	Decline
317	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 40 Hours	Decline
318	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 40 Hours	Late-Career
319	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 20 Hours	Mid-Career
320	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 40 Hours	Late-Career
321	Female	Yes	Yes	Less Than 20 Hours	Decline
322	Female	Yes	Yes	At Least 40 Hours	Decline
323	Female	Yes	Yes	Less Than 20 Hours	Decline

For this research study, a framework was adopted to define each of the five stages

of career development referenced (see below), as this helps to explain professional

growth through purposeful, long-term career development strategies (Walsh et al., 2016).

Five Stages of Career Development

1. Exploration. The exploratory stage is the period of transition from college to work or the period immediately before employment.

2. Establishment. This career stage begins when one starts seeking work. It includes getting one's first job.

3. Mid-Career. During this stage, the performance may increase, decrease, or remain constant. While some employees may reach their goals at an early stage and ultimately achieve greater heights, some may be able to maintain their performance.

4. Late-Career. This stage is usually pleasant because, during this stage, the employee neither tries to learn new things nor improve her performance over previous years.

5. Decline. Since this is the final stage of one's career, it ends in the employee's retirement after putting in decades of service full of continuous achievements and success stories.

The Coding Process

After each participant validated their transcription verbally or through email, the transcription was entered into Microsoft Excel and uploaded into NVivo. The coding process included coding passages, performing horizontalization, reducing, eliminating, clustering, validating, identifying emerging themes, and managing findings (Moustakas, 1996), as outlined at the start of this chapter.

Findings and Analysis of Data

Each participant was assigned a numerical identifier during the data analysis phase to ensure confidentiality. For example, the participants were provided a number ranging from 301 to 323 and were referred to as P301, P302, P303, P304, P305, P306, P307, P308, P309, P310, P311, P312, P313, P314, P315, P316, P317, P318, P319, P320, P321, P322, and P323. Each section and table was created utilizing Moustakas' (1994) Modified Van Kaam Method.

The primary investigator applied Creswell's (1998) direction regarding phenomenological data analysis, which includes employing the methodology of reduction, analyzing specific themes, and exploring possible meanings. Additionally, the primary investigator set aside prejudgments when interviewing and transcribing data, known as epoché (Moustakas, 1994). The primary investigator bracketed the information by interpreting the meanings of phrases that spoke directly to the phenomena in question and extrapolated from them what information emanated from responses to the questions asked.

The primary investigator transcribed, coded, and reviewed transcripts from the interviews, in an effort to discern emerging themes. During this process, the primary investigator applied Moustakas' (1994) Modified Van Kaam Method, including horizontalizing the data for every question. The next step was to create groups based on emerging themes (or common characteristics and recurring statements). The clustered themes and meanings were used to develop the textural descriptions of each experience. After reviewing each question that was presented to the participants, there were several clusters that surfaced with almost every question. The following tables, labeled Table 2

through Table 14, show the emerging themes from the interview questions through the reduction and elimination process.

Research Questions Results

1. In March 2020, California was the first state to order residents to stay home because of COVID-19 Pandemic; tell me about your experience during that time.

Table 2

Emerging Themes – Question 1

Emerging Themes	Participants
Uncertain	P301, P303, P304, P305, P306, P308, P313, P315, P318, P319, P320, P321, P323
Stressed	P305, P306, P308, P313, P321, P323
Determined to Conquer	P314, P317, P322

Based on the findings, (see Table 2), 10 participants felt uncertain about what to expect when California ordered residents to stay home because of COVID-19 Pandemic. Seven believed stress was the best way to describe how they felt. P314, P317, and P322 felt determined to conquer whatever was ahead of them.

P301 stated,

> *During that time, there was a lot of uncertainty. We had thought that the*
>
> *pandemic would be short. We had timelines, at least within our organization, just*
>
> *based on information in circulation and that it would be a temporary*
>
> *displacement. Of course, two years later, we've lived and learned from the*
>
> *experience not to underestimate any of the upcoming pandemic challenges. So, in*
>
> *March of 2022, we had to pivot from a physical structure as a college professor to*
>
> *a fully online platform. Physical and social distancing had to be in place for*

safety and security reasons. So, I would say there are some positive benefits

because I was already teaching some classes online. So, I was not necessarily

challenged with moving entirely to an online platform, unlike some of my

colleagues. But the physical and social distancing was a challenge, especially

when you have to maintain in the same household and work from the same

household. So those challenges include having to share space and then balancing

work and home versus just work as one space. Home is one space. So, you live

and learn. The uncertainty was overwhelming at times. I think I've grown during

that process as a result and surviving.

P308 stated,

It was quite shocking. I felt a lot of stress because this was something I never

thought would happen in my lifetime. I've never been through the Great

Depression like scenario, but it felt like that was happening, or it was the end of

times. I was afraid of what my future would look like regarding the job that I was

working and gathering products and things that we might need for the home

because there were so many rumors of things being out of stock, so I wasn't sure

of what to do. All I knew was to be obedient, listen to what was being told to me,

and stay in the house and avoid others. I had no idea what would happen, so

stress took over. So, I knew to be obedient, go home and wait.

P314 stated,

So, when California residents were asked to stay home and work because my

workplace was closed down, the employees were sent home with computers and

told to work from home. And there was no work to do at home from the start, no

organization, but that's what we were told to do. I thought I would just do

whatever was asked of me. I wasn't sure how long it was going to last. Were they

still paying us to stay home was my biggest concern, and when my leadership

team confirmed that we would be paid, I became more determined to go with the

flow. But yeah, that's what I did for a while.

2.   How did your work life change after California residents were asked to stay home?

Table 3

Emerging Themes – Question 2

Emerging Themes	Participants
More Work	P309, P312, P318, P320, P322
Less Work	P303, P304, P308, P310, P313, P320
Same Workload	P301, P302, P305, P314, P317, P319

Based on the findings (see Table 3), five participants said they had more work, six

participants had less work, and six participants had the same workload.

P309 stated,

Oh, everybody stayed home. Even my kids. It changed a lot, and I had more

work to focus on because I had to juggle now being a working-from-home mom

and a teacher.

P322 stated,

I know a lot of people really hated COVID and the shutdown and being at home.

But it allowed me to work more hours, make more money, and I don't mind

helping people.

P320 Stated,

> *My employer didn't know what to do with us the first few days in the beginning.
> So I feel like it helped with my transition because I feel like some of us didn't do
> very much for a while because they didn't know what to do with us. They didn't
> know whether they wanted us to do trainings or telephone support for our
> customers. So for a long while, there was far less work than I would normally do.*

P305 stated,

> *Work life changed because there was just a lot of uncertainty. I do not feel I had
> more or less work, my workload felt the same. But it was a little scary because
> we had to go to work, even in times of uncertainty, like we couldn't just work from
> home. That was not an option. I mean, there's so much that goes into play with
> law enforcement and emergency work. So. work itself didn't change. I mean, our
> calls changed. There was a lot of fear among people, many people calling in
> about their neighbors or people gathering, and us just figuring out how we would
> then instruct the public. So we had a lot to figure out ourselves about how we
> were going to remain safe while still going to work. But then also us being aware
> enough and educated enough on various things. The world and how things will
> be then able to tell people because whenever people are in need, me and my team
> would be able to help them.*

3. Was it easy for you to adjust to California's COVID-19 Pandemic restrictions, why
or why not?

Table 4

Emerging Themes – Question 3

Emerging Themes	Participants
Yes, because ambiguity was understood	P301, P302, P305, P308, P309, P310, P314, P315, P316, P317, P318, P322
No, because there was too much uncertainty	P303, P304, P306, P307, P312, P313, P320

Twelve participants said it was easy for them to adjust to the COVID-19 Pandemic restrictions because they understood things were unclear, and seven felt the opposite. P315 stated,

> *Yes, I know. I mean, more frustrating than anything. And obviously, everybody has their stance on COVID and social distancing, the masks, and so forth. I had COVID early on; fortunately, it didn't affect me much. And so, I didn't have the same fear that others felt.*

P318 stated,

> *I would say it was easy for me because I consider myself a professional in the workplace. I work 12-hour shifts and to work a 12-hour shift during COVID times, you couldn't get stuck in fear, especially in my line of work.*

P320 stated,

> *It was hard because there were so many unknowns. I couldn't interact with my coworkers in the same way. So here we are, working long hours, but we had to stay apart from each other. And I feel like I started to question so much, but there were no immediate answers. Obviously, it's hard to have that stability in something like this. But in the early COVID days, I struggled. It was just the*

ever-changing guidelines that really just sucked and made me feel like I didn't

have any control over myself and my work life.

4. Do you, or did you, provide care for anyone beyond yourself at any point
throughout COVID-19 Pandemic? If yes, who?

Table 5

Emerging Themes – Question 4

Emerging Themes	Participants
Yes, parent(s)	P303, P307, P310, P317, P318, P321
Yes, child(ren)	P301, P309
Yes, parent and child(ren)	P315, P319
Yes, spouse or other	P308, P311, P313, P320, P323
No	P302, P304, P305, P306, P312, P314, P316, P322

P301 stated,

Yes, my son. My son has physical and intellectual challenges. So when he is a

student on campus, he's more interdependent on his support team. At home, he is a

little bit more reliant on me.   I have to provide most of the tutoring because tutoring

was not necessarily available in the first year. We're still struggling in that area to

provide him with the resources that he needs. There were lots of things that I

already had in place for him on the campus that were gone, so I had to take on all of

that. So in between my own teaching and work, I had to provide the services he

needed because tutoring was not necessarily the first thing accessible. That came

later and even then was limited, restricted to the level of services he needed. I

definitely have to have some more things in place to be able to make sure that his

needs are met. So, yes, absolutely.

5.   Describe your biggest challenge with balancing life, in general, with COVID-19
     Pandemic and work.

Table 6

Emerging Themes – Question 5

Emerging Themes	Participants
Not having enough financial resources	P303, P306, P307, P308, P309, P315, P316
Not knowing what to expect day-to-day	P301, P302, P304, P305, P306, P307, P308, P309, P310, P312, P313, P317, P318, P319, P320, P322
Not Knowing Myself	304, 306, 308

Seven participants said not having enough resources was their greatest challenge, and 16
alluded to not knowing what to expect day-to-day as their greatest challenge.

P306 stated,

> *During that time, I was. I was trying to figure so many things out. I guess I was*
> *just trying to balance myself and stay caught up financially. I guess you can say*
> *the work and all that stuff were important, but I felt my life was spiraling out of*
> *control. My whole head was caught up in something. I guess my biggest*
> *challenge, and even to this day, is trying to find myself and make sure I can earn*
> *enough money not to have to stress about how I will care for myself financially.*

P308 stated,

> *I guess the biggest challenge I experienced was my own mental health, getting*
> *through all of the unknowns and getting past the fact that people are sick and*
> *dying. I kept asking myself questions like, How do you get out there? How do you*
> *keep yourself healthy? How do you fulfill your job needs? How do you be a good*
> *wife? Is there enough money coming in to pay for the essentials? It was getting*

past my own mental abilities and not wanting things to go back, but accepting the

new norm. My mind is a very powerful thing. And I feel that if I could really

change my perspective and have a renewal of the mind, I believe I can get

through anything. And the mind battle of all of the uncertainty and what was

going on in the two years thus far has been the most challenging thing for me to

get through.

6.   Did you maintain the same employment level (full-time, part-time, laid-off) from

the start of the start of COVID-19 Pandemic to now? – Describe your journey.

Table 7

Emerging Themes – Question 6

Emerging Themes	Participants
At least 20 hours per week	P306, P308, P319
Greater than 20 hours per week	P301, P302
Less than 20 hours per week	P311, P313, P321, P323
At least 40 hours per week	P303, P304, P305, P307, P309, P310, P312, P314, P315, P316, P317, P318, P320, P322

P312 stated,

Yes, I was full-time from back then to now. It stayed the same even for our part-

timers unless they wanted to switch from part-time to full-time because there just

weren't enough people willing to work because of the fear of catching COVID.

7.   What satisfies you about the work you do?

Table 8

Emerging Themes – Question 7

Emerging Themes	Participants
Helping People	P301, P302, P303, P304, P305, P307, P308, P309, P312, P313, P315, P318, P322
Good Employer	P305, P309, P310, P314, P316, P317, P322
Growth Opportunity	P301, P305, P306, P307, P308, P314, P320, P322

Based on the findings (see Table 8), 13 participants said they enjoy helping people and this gives them the greatest satisfaction. Seven participants believe they work for a good employer, and eight participants said the growth opportunity made for their satisfaction. P307 stated,

> *Well, I mean, I'm very outgoing. I enjoy helping people. I think the times we live in are unpredictable, and if there is one constant, I can offer it to help someone else along the way. I make it a point to, at the very least, help at least one person a day. Sometimes hard to measure if I succeeded, but I keep helping others in front of my mind. I work in the banking industry, and we never had a breakthrough in the pandemic. In the beginning, people were so afraid that their money was unsafe, so they withdrew lots of money to have cash on hand. It satisfied me to know that the work I was sacrificing myself for was for the benefit of being able to help people. I also was on the other side of things when people didn't have enough money, and I put myself in a position to reassure many people and to make as many people as possible feel like we are all in this together and to trust help is on the way.*

P314 stated,

What satisfies me about the work that I do is in my role, I have the ability to impact the working conditions of employees and consumers. I work for a good employer. An employer that pays well and offers excellent benefits, and I am led by a leadership team that I respect, and they respect me. I think that I find that satisfying in that I can maintain a space for people to come. A place that I enjoy going. I am also satisfied with the room for growth at my current employer and the growth opportunities in my industry. There is a lot to be said, especially during all the changes COVID introduced in our lives, to like my job. Still, I hear so many people complaining about what they do and where they work. During COVID, I was considered a frontline worker, and I am thankful my leadership managed the workers in the best way, right from the start, in my opinion, of course.

8. What dissatisfies you about the work you do?

Table 9

Emerging Themes – Question 8

Emerging Themes	Participants
Leadership Ineffectiveness	P307, P309, P312, P320
Leadership Expectations Not Aligned	P312, P314, P316, P319, P321
Could Not Think of Anything	P301, P302, P304, P305, P310, P311, P313, P315, P317, P318

Based on the findings (see Table 9), four participants cited leadership ineffectiveness and a source of dissatisfaction. Five participants said leadership expectations were not aligned with their expectations, and 10 participants did not respond to this question with an answer.

P312 stated,

> *My management team dissatisfies me because they lack compassion for the staff.*
> *The management team sees everything as a number, and they lack compassion for*
> *people in many cases. COVID presents many challenges and obstacles, and when*
> *we distance ourselves from being compassionate, empathetic, and demonstrating*
> *concern for another person or group of people, we are in trouble. I believe*
> *managers should be focused on doing the right thing for people, and money will*
> *follow because the employees are often willing to work harder for an employer.*
> *Sometimes management expects more than what makes sense and there is no*
> *measurable value in exchange. It is too bad that management fails to understand*
> *that people should come before money. Just as many people my job hires through*
> *the front door, many more are quitting and walking out the back door. Based on*
> *what I hear, most people quit because they don't like how the management team*
> *talks to them. The management team wants to cite policy when not every situation*
> *can be managed based on a policy. I think managers should understand the*
> *importance of leading people by seeking to understand what they want too.*
> *Working today is not a one-way street. The employer is not in total control. So*
> *as you may be able to hear, i am all about employees using their voices and*
> *management teams being respectful toward the employees they manage, allowing*

them the benefit of the doubt when deciding how to accommodate employee

needs.

9. Describe how you feel about your professional growth during COVID-19 Pandemic, from beginning to present?

Table 10

Emerging Themes – Question 9

Emerging Themes	Participants
Hopeful	P301, P303, P304, P306, P308, P309, P314, P319
Satisfied	P301, P302, P305, P313, P315, P317, P318
None Existent	P307, P310, P311, P312, P316, P320, P322

Based on the findings (see Table 10), eight participants felt hopeful, seven participants were satisfied with their professional growth, and seven believed opportunities for professional growth were non-existent during the COVID-19 Pandemic through the present.

P319 stated,

> *I think my professional growth is to learn to use sincere faith integration in my*
>
> *life. You know, everybody talks about faith integration, but not many really*
>
> *practice sincere faith integration. Since the pandemic started, I think my*
>
> *professional growth and development have come from trying to be sincere in how*
>
> *I talk about integrating faith. Especially during these times, faith is essential, and*
>
> *I am hopeful that my professional growth will happen if I stay close to my faith.*

P312 stated,

> *As far as I'm concerned, there was no professional growth. We were too busy*
>
> *trying to put out fires. We had no time for professional growth that didn't exist,*
>
> *nor does it exist now.*

P301 stated,

> *I would say my growth has hit a level of satisfaction on a positive note because of*
>
> *access to various webinars and workshops that I did not have to travel to*
>
> *physically. The opportunities were limitless. So when I had the opportunity to*
>
> *participate in training and webinars, I did it. I understood that my institution was*
>
> *not necessarily a safe space to participate in focus groups on anti-racism,*
>
> *diversity, equity, and inclusion, most often referred to as DEI. So I found spaces*
>
> *where I could commune with other professionals and freely talk about my*
>
> *experiences, the feeling of being burnt out. You can't discuss those things and be*
>
> *safe in my workplace. So I found a lot of spaces in webinars that the*
>
> *professionals across the United States taught, so it was no longer limited to the*
>
> *state of California. So I still have an inexpensive connection with people I would*
>
> *never have connected with outside COVID 19. So I just didn't have the time, and*
>
> *the space and Zoom were not necessarily the most accessible before COVID 19.*

10.   Do you imagine yourself changing your career within the next 12 months? Why?

Table 11

Emerging Themes – Question 10

Emerging Themes	Participants
Yes, Change in Career	P306, P314, P318
Yes, Tracking Toward	P301, P305, P309, P312, P317, P320, P322

Promotion	
No Desire for Change	P302, P303, P304, P307, P308, P310, P311, P313, P315, P316, P319, P321, P323

Based on the findings (see Table 11), four participants affirmed that they imagine themselves changing careers by July 2023. Seven participants imagine getting promotions by July 2023, and 13 participants do not imagine themselves changing careers by July 2023.

P314 stated,

> Yes, I do. I think that with so much opportunity out in the world right now, it is a good time to make career changes. The skills I picked up during this time have made me more confident in my ability to lead during tough and unfamiliar times. COVID also allowed some benefits of relaxing and working or being at home. And it also forced me to be very detail-oriented. The skills I picked up have made me feel more prepared to take on a new job with a likely new employer. I would like to take on more responsibility. I have more determination, more detail oriented. I think I'm ready for a career change. So, I can see myself getting out of this line of business.

P303 stated,

> Gosh. As of right now, no. Yes, I don't know what my future holds, but I am good for now. I would love to see some growth within even my current position. So that's something I want to work toward. About COVID, it has changed the way that we do business where I work. It changed the way we do business. A lot of things have changed or are different, and I am not ready to take on trying to figure out anything else right now.

P323 stated,

> *Oh, no, I love my job. I get the opportunity to be an independent thinker and*
> *innovator in my own right, under my own control. My schedule is very flexible. I*
> *have no desire to upset my life with change now.*

11. Describe the support your employer provided during COVID-19 Pandemic? How does this make you feel?

Table 12

Emerging Themes – Question 11

Emerging Themes	Participants
Very Supported, Feel Valued	P302, P303, P304, P308, P309, P310, P311, P317, P318, P319
Not Supportive. Demonstrated No Understanding of Employee Needs	P312, P315, P316, P320

 Based on the findings (see Table 12), 10 participants felt very supported and valued, and four participants felt the employer did not demonstrate understanding of their needs.

P308 stated,

> *Very supported. They kept our wages 100% and made sure that we were aware of*
> *the additional supports we had access to, like mental health, because they knew*
> *many people struggled with mental health during and even now. They ensured we*
> *understood all the benefits they provide and how we could take advantage of them*
> *if needed. Also, I felt valued, and I know many others did too. I also think it was*
> *not easy to make people feel good while working through COVID when so many*
> *families were also losing loved ones to death.*

P310 stated,

Very supported. My managers were being, how shall I say, more personable with people, like if your kids were out of school, they gave employees time to plan things because they knew everybody was under a lot of pressure. And so, you know, because kids were now thrown out of school and parents didn't have anything lined up. And typically, when you work for the police department or fire department, something like that, you're supposed to have something in place for a natural disaster or whatever because you got to come to work. So they were kind enough to allow people to try and fix whatever they needed to fix or do. If that meant taking some extra days off, it was granted. So they were supportive in that way for you to get your life in order because they knew this had come down on everybody.

P314 stated,

Well. My employer provided us with abundant care and support. I spent lots of time from work from home, where the expectations weren't very high. I felt valued. Since we've gone back to work in the workplace, whenever anyone feels like they have symptoms of COVID, we're told not to come into work, and we're paid out of a special bucket of sick time. I know several people in the business who have very particular situations, and they're being paid to stay home. My company has been very accommodating. So, in that way, I feel like they were very supportive. When at work, I do frontline work with lots of risks. But still, I think my company did an awful lot to help to take care of us during that time.

P316 stated,

> *My employer was not very supportive. I mean, whatever it is that which we needed*
>
> *to make our jobs easier to cope with and to do was definitely made available to us,*
>
> *for us and of course with us. I didn't really have a challenge with not having the*
>
> *support from my leadership team. I believe that the greatest challenge when I think*
>
> *about my leadership team is just simply the communication which they perhaps even*
>
> *fail to give. So not knowing what it was, that could be expected in a position of a lot*
>
> *of ambiguity.*

12. Can you name three things employers can do to make their employees' work-life more balanced when catastrophe emerges and forces change?

Table 13

Emerging Themes – Question 12

Emerging Themes	Participants
Communicate	P301, P302, P303, P306, P307, P308, P309, P314, P315, P316, P319, P320, P322
Demonstrate Empathy	P305, P306, P309, P310, P313, P314, P317, P318
Be Flexible	P301, P307, P308, P311, P314, 316

Based on findings (See Table 13), 12 participants shared perspectives on the importance of communication, seven participants cited empathy, and six said flexibility when offering suggestions for what employers can do to make employees' work-life more balanced when catastrophe emerges and forces change.

P303 stated,

> *Three things. Well, I think. I go back and forth with this. As someone in a*
>
> *leadership position, I think there was so much ambiguity that leadership had to deal*

with, sort through, and work out, and the stress of figuring out many situations was challenging. That said, if the company was unionized, making policy decisions would be very cut and dry. However, without a union, I think constant communication is key to success for all employees, regardless of position. Meeting often to ensure everyone is aware of what is happening in the workplace. I also think there needs to be one messenger for the most critical communications, to ensure the messages land the same way. Next, I think empathy is a big deal. Where I work, it is part of our company culture to lead with empathy. Putting yourself in someone else's shoes when making big decisions helps demonstrate care when engaging with others, making others feel leadership cares about them and not just focused on the bottom line. Last, I think it is important to be flexible, especially during ambiguous times. For example, instead of talking to a particular employee who thinks they have COVID and they're sharing with me some of their symptoms or they don't have childcare, I have to figure out how to help them all while ensuring business needs are met. Because the same rules indeed apply to everybody, I have to find the right balance in making sure that I communicate effectively and be empathetic and flexible at the same time to show that I care about the person and am not just focusing on pushing policies.

13. How would you describe your current professional outlook? What makes you feel this way?

Table 14
Emerging Themes – Question 13

Emerging Themes	Participants
Very Good	P304, P307, P311, P313, P314, P317, P318, P322

| Hopeful | P301, P302, P303, P305, P308, P312, P320 |
| Not Sure | P306, P309, P310, P315, P316, P319, P321, P323 |

Based on findings (See Table 14), eight participants considered their outlook very good, while seven described their outlook as hopeful, and eight were unclear of what their future outlook entailed.

P304 stated,

> *What a heavy question. My pessimistic side would say. I think my professional outlook is very good. I am thinking of basically classes of people, and those with more privilege have the opportunity to do what makes them happy. And I would even put myself in that category that I've had the opportunity to think that way in the last few years and go that direction. And then the people who struggle are struggling more. And I feel like I don't see a lot being done about bridging that gap between classes of people. I think the middle class doesn't even exist anymore. I also feel like many people are growing weary of the hustle. It's like, for what? I just want to live my life in peace. I've seen a lot online, like with the anti-work movement and with a lot of people going toward more of a simple life. Like I have so many friends moving to Alabama or Arkansas, getting a farm and like literally living a life with almost no hassle. The idea of living a simple life makes me think my outlook is very good because my generation will make this a priority.*

P307 stated,

> *Okay, my outlook is very good. My company is growing and expanding. They are in the middle of a process of an acquisition of another bank, which means*

thousands of more customers that require our services and products. This means

more opportunities for me to grow professionally. I have already started talking

to my boss about what is next for me.

P311 stated,

I think from a professional outlook perspective, there is a lot of opportunity that

sits before me, which makes me think to say my outlook is very good. I think that

things have changed since COVID came into our lives, and I have changed the

way we used to do things forevermore. I don't think things have gone for better or

for worse. Many things have just been turned upside down, but I think an

opportunity has presented itself. I think an opportunity has presented itself for

even those that come behind me to be able to do a lot more, even perhaps with a

lot less. So when it comes to professional outlook, we live in a different world.

And I think we must be mindful that catastrophes will bring about change again

and again. With change, we must act and use resources quickly and perhaps even

up to and inclusive of human resources to effect change.

P305 stated,

Hopeful. I would say I definitely feel hopeful. I just want people to come together

more and support each other more. And I mean, obviously, that's going to be

hard, but I just won't lose that hope. I will remain consistent and steadfast in my

thoughts. Hopeful for better days ahead too.

P301 stated,

My current professional outlook. I think I am in a good place in life. I have so

many plans for myself, so I am very hopeful. I enjoy what I do, and despite all the

challenges within my organization, I still find a balance and spaces where I know

I can maintain my well-being. If my organization is not providing that for me, I

can still show up with my 100%, my true authentic self, because I can maintain a

sense of balance. After all, it is hard to go through something like COVID and

not come out better on the other end. My employer will have to keep up with me

as I am on a mission to maintain my hope for a successful professional future.

P312 stated,

I'm looking forward to retirement. I don't see much growth, yet I am hopeful in

my attitude toward the work I do and who I do it for. My company's leadership

needs an overhaul. Their lack of respect and compassion for others is awful. So

with that, I know I am a powerhouse on my floor. I serve my clients well. The

feedback I get from the people I help feeds my soul and helps me maintain my

hope for a better tomorrow. Being recognized in my department as a top

producer keeps managers off me, and I can work more comfortably than most, all

while knowing that if I slump in performance, I will be treated just as bad, if not

worse than others. This saddens me. But, despite all, I am hopeful.

P320 stated,

I think I hope, I hope. I think, and I lean on being a woman during current times.

I feel that we have so much power. I feel like we're born with it. I believe my

professionalism will help me step into my greatness. In a career I am passionate

about, I believe I can do many things to grow myself and do good for others. So

that is how I look at it.

P306 stated,

> *Professional outlook. Okay. I guess I don't really have a professional outlook right now. I am still trying to figure out who I want to be and what I want to do with my career. So, I guess what makes me feel this way is because I haven't achieved much beyond my college degree and working a job in the fast-food industry. So, until I discover more about myself and what excites me in work, I am not really sure what my professional outlook should entail.*

P309 stated,

> *Like how far into the future, because I'll probably be in the same place in the next few years. Do I know if I want to move forward or not? No. It's a lot harder with COVID. We've had to make a lot of changes. So my husband works part-time instead of full-time because we don't have full-time childcare. So right now, my current employer provides my family and me with the most stable environment, and I can't see far past right now.*

P310 stated,

> *Well, I don't know. And it's weird because I'm at a late stage in my career. It's like I let kind of work go in any direction right now. I'm just having fun. You know, a body in motion stays in motion. You know, a body at rest stays at rest. So, I just see myself staying employed until I reach a point where I can retire and not have to work anymore.*

Major Findings

The major findings from this study contribute to scholarly discussion and are related to the following three major themes that emerged from the interview data analysis:

Theme 1: Communication

When the COVID-19 Pandemic crisis erupted in March 2020, organizations across California and beyond were plunged into such uncertainty that it was hard for many organizations to know whether they would emerge intact. Two plus years into the COVID-19 Pandemic, leaders are shifting from whether they can return to work as usual and/or how to do so. Leaders also have to manage unforeseen crises, primarily associated with pandemic disruptions and some associated with social justice changes. These events can affect workers' productivity and mental health as substantive, rapid workplace changes often do (De Henau & Himmelweit, 2021).

Furthermore, in the early stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic, organizational communication focused almost exclusively on external aspects of the pandemic crisis, and internal organizational communication was significantly ignored (Zamfir, 2021). Because the COVID-19 Pandemic is highly complex, organization leadership and co-workers experienced ambiguity and confusion. In the early stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic, there was a dependence on providing instructive information to encourage calm and help employees know or learn how to stay safe while working. Likewise, governments and major media outlets first focused on clear, simple instructions about physical distancing and lockdown guidelines. Companies focused on new operational rules (Zamfir, 2021).

P310 believes the need for communication to inform and make sense of situations and act accordingly was absent from the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic. In addition, P301 said, poorly handled communication turned the initial crisis into a twice-impacted crisis, negatively impacting trust in leadership's ability to manage affectively. As communication continued to shift, adjustment to change and uncertainty grew overwhelming. Several research participants, for example, described how they felt a decline in mental and physical energy during the pandemic's early stages as they acclimated to increased anxiety and the blurring of work- and home-life balance. P303, P305, P309, and P314 reflected on how organizational leadership responded by evolving their messaging from health basics to business recovery.

Workplace trends are underscoring employers' need to focus more on the disruption and adaptation driven by COVID-19 Pandemic-related reasons, ranging from workplace reorganization to reductions in workforce, in a cross-section of industries. Based on findings from this research study, the recovery phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic must include strong changes in and emphasis on excellent communication in the workplace. Research study participants unanimously acknowledged that leaders now have a compelling reason to engage in ways to strengthen communication with employees. Leaders must recognize and address the core human emotions of grief, loss, and anxiety in the workplace, as strengthened communication will significantly help to rebuild organizational health, productivity, and talent retention. As indicated by all the research study participants, clear and inspiring communication is central to making organizational growth post-COVID-19 Pandemic a success.

In addition to incorporating strategic workplace changes, leaders must help employees believe in the future. For many of the research participants, their organizations' leadership has been a source of relative stability throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic. The research analysis also indicates corporate leaders may be perceived as the most trusted source of information, mainly where state and federal government institutions evolved to be less reliable in their responses.

Communication messaging in four overlapping phases will help employees move from a state of uncertainty to renewal. The four steps include: (1) establishing a benchmark of understanding and vision, (2) reflecting on past behaviors to avoid duplication of mistakes, (3) marking the transition from past to present, and (4) anticipating future actions, all of which can help leaders design the most applicable approaches to a communication stance that works best for their organization's culture. Ultimately, communication in the workplace is crucial because it boosts employee morale, engagement, productivity, and satisfaction (Carletta & Garrod, 1998). Communication is also vital for better team collaboration and cooperation. Effective workplace communication ultimately helps drive better results for individuals, teams, and organizations (Perino, 2021).

Theme 2: Empathy

The COVID-19 Pandemic has highlighted the role empathy plays in leadership within companies. As organizational leadership evolved from health basics to business recovery, the desire for leadership empathy played a pivotal role in how participants responded. One thing that has become clear is that leaders who have shown empathy through this crisis have been the most effective. Furthermore, leaders who empathize,

who relate to and feel with their people, can ask them to do difficult things. A second thing that has become clear is that leaders who have shown empathy through this crisis have been the most effective in managing their people.

As described by P309 and P314, empathy is merely another way to provide an understanding of mental and emotional health as topics that are not taboo for workplace discussion because many more employees of all ranks, from leadership down, were now dealing with similar issues. The demonstration of empathy is a way to bridge understanding the feelings of isolation and shame attached to job losses or other employment casualties, especially because leaders had to deal with the same happening to them. They saw their subordinates, as well as themselves, have universal feelings of workplace uncertainty and job insecurity.

Leaders that have pledged to support their employees and are delivering on that promise have demonstrated their reliability. P302 shared her perspective of how leaders must maintain and build on that trust as the focus shifts from public health in general to the specifics of each organization's recovery strategy. Because actual organizational experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic vary among organizations, outcomes will vary depending on where organizations find themselves. This is true ranging from organizations struggling to stay in business, organizations having to change their business models substantially, and organizations that are well positioned because they demonstrated an understanding of employee needs and implemented strategies that helped their employees and their organizations most.

Theme 3: Flexibility

P311 stated, if the COVID-19 Pandemic era has revealed anything, it is that it pays to be flexible. Leaders have had to restructure their organizations, reassess their strategies, and re-examine their expectations—and this necessity is not stopping anytime soon, as described by P305, P313, P317 and P320. One of the best qualities a leader can have in times like these is flexibility. Flexible leadership encompasses a balance to maintain vision while preserving room for adaptability (Munsch, 2016).

At times it can seem like leadership and flexibility are in opposition to one another. But being open to change and willing to adapt are desirable characteristics in a leader, pandemic or not. Navigating uncertainty with agility will strengthen team morale. The future of work is flexible, so it only makes sense that the leaders who thrive in this new environment will possess the quality of flexibility (Coleman et al., 2021).

P309 said that as leaders think about business as usual, they should seek to understand where people are in their mental processes and be flexible in decision-making. A monolithic approach to managing employees may no longer work in most organizations, if it ever did (Poovaiah & Mathew, 2022). Some will be enthusiastic about returning to what is perceived as usual. In contrast, others will not want to venture back because they worry about risks to their health and the safety of their loved ones, much of which could be rooted in a post-traumatic growth phenomenon. Research into post-traumatic growth suggests that leaders who demonstrate more flexibility when addressing employees' feelings toward trauma, grief, loss, uncertainty, and anxiety can rebound more quickly and experience sustainable success (Bruno et al., 2022).

Summary

Chapter 4 presented comprehensive findings from structured interviews with 23 participants who are women, at least 18 years old, and who were California residents in March 2020 and employed. The research design was a qualitative phenomenological study constructed to discover participants' viewpoints, opinions, and lived experiences related to their professional growth trajectory during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The primary investigator also conducted a thematic analysis of responses from the 23 participant interviews and their answers to the 13 pre-developed questions to identify themes in the transcribed text by analyzing the interpretation of words and sentence structures. In addition, the participants informed the primary investigator that they are divided equally about being very hopeful when considering their professional outlook, versus not being sure about what to expect.

Chapter 4 also captured the findings from the structured interviews with 23 women participants, who shared their experiences in their current career levels. The findings were categorized according to reoccurring themes along their career trajectories and the strategies, environments, and resources that impacted their success. This chapter also considered a compilation of responses to patterns and themes, answering the 13 pre-developed questions, all while acknowledging anomalies in ideas discovered in the analysis. In totality, a holistic analysis of the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants was achieved. Likewise, themes emerged in the study that provided a deeper understanding of how each participant navigated her current career level, as reflected in the interview summaries and direct quotes that highlighted the work, the obstacles, and strategies considered during their career trajectories.

Chapter 5 expanded the discussion of the findings in Chapter 4, the responses from the 23 participants, their responses to the 13 research questions, and three emerging themes—Communication, Empathy, and Flexibility. Recommendations are provided based on contributions from the participants, and additional literature is applied to new concepts that emerged from their responses. Theoretical social change and future research implications are also discussed.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the findings presented in Chapter 4 and to interpret these findings in relation to the research questions, the literature framework reviewed in Chapter 2, and practical implications for women's professional growth trajectories in California in times of the COVID-19 Pandemic. This study aimed to answer two research questions:

- Research Question 1: What accounts for women withdrawing from the workforce during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

- Research Question 2: What can women do to mitigate disruption to their career trajectories post the COVID-19 Pandemic?

Findings are presented within the context of Moustakas's Modified Van Kaam Method.

Results

The primary investigator undertook this qualitative research study to explore the lived experiences of women, at least 18 years old, who lived in California from the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic, and who worked at least part-time and at any level in their career (exploration, establishment, mid-career, late-career, and decline). From the onset, the goal was to answer the two research questions to determine the impact on women's professional growth trajectories in California in the era of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The primary investigator sought to answer two questions. First, what accounts for women withdrawing from the workforce during the COVID-19 Pandemic? Based on a participant response analysis, some of the research participants withdrew because there was a lack of communication to effectively explain and mitigate the threat of personal illness for employees in the workplace. In most cases, the research participants were

frontline workers who were never allowed to work remotely. Second, these workers were affected by leaders' inability to demonstrate empathy for others dealing with a crisis at home, and, last, the lack of flexibility in policy adherence. In most cases of withdrawal, participants elected to utilize an indefinite leave of absence benefit or retirement.

The second research question sought to answer what women can do to mitigate disruption to their career trajectories post the COVID-19 Pandemic. While much uncertainty exists, women can mitigate disruption in their career trajectories by re-skilling themselves to pursue career paths that align with the future of work after the COVID-19 Pandemic. Women deemed essential workers in arenas with the highest physical proximity will likely experience similar disruption in their career trajectories if similar workplace crises reemerge. For example, jobs in health care, personal care, leisure, travel, warehouse, office work, and classroom training are fragile because of the high number of women employed. Fewer women than men were relocated to remote work (Fan & Moen, 2022). It is projected that the future of work will require women to rebuild their skill sets and increase their technical skills.

In and after the COVID-19 Pandemic era, sustainable, inclusive professional growth for women will be required. This will necessitate significant workplace changes. In addition, increased attention must be given to women, as they have shouldered more household responsibilities, and more women report feelings of burnout. These problems have been more acute for women because they have fewer opportunities to work remotely and report feeling more significant pressure to prioritize work over family.

Equity Theory

In this research study, predicated on the equity theory, several participants believe they are treated less than equal compared to their male peers, especially in the area of equal pay. Participant 301 stated, "Women have lower positions, responsibilities, and pay." As the California economy recovered from the depths of the COVID-19 Pandemic, gender gaps in employment and pay persist. On average, full-time female workers in California earned 87.6% of what full-time male workers earned in 2020, according to a report released in March 2022 by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Also, as of March 2022, the gender earnings ratio of 83.1 percent, or a gender wage gap of 16.9 cents on the dollar shows a slight improvement. Still, much work remains to be done to lessen the pay gap further or eradicate it altogether.

While the number of women workers increased in California between 2021 and 2020, women's jobs are still below pre-COVID-19 Pandemic levels. Women are less likely than men to work full-time because full-time work is often harder to find in the jobs predominantly done by women and because they are more likely than men to provide unpaid care for family and loved ones.

Dependent care burdens and the impact of the pandemic have been particularly hard on women. More than 50 years since the passage of the Equal Pay Act, the gender earnings gap endures. In the absence of progress on legislative reform at the federal level, many state and local initiatives are making progress by updating equal pay statutes and increasing access to equal pay protections and pay transparency.

California has enacted legislation that improves pay transparency. Research suggests that such laws are making an impact on the gender wage gap. With recent

historic investments in America's infrastructure and efforts to build the foundations for a clean economy through the Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act, there is now more momentum to tackle women's underrepresentation in well-paid occupations, like in the trades. More phenomenological studies should be conducted to speak to the phenomena occurring for women in general. This research may assist leaders in society in understanding what it takes for women to succeed in the workplace and in its leadership.

Gender Role Theory

When the Covid-19 Pandemic forced schools to shut down and many workplaces to move online, research revealed that most parenting and household upkeep fell to women. Although the COVID-19 Pandemic has affected everyone differently, some COVID-19 related challenges have broadly affected women in the same way. The structure of the home and the workplace has taken a more significant mental, emotional, and physical toll on women than men. "Women comprise a huge number of frontline health workers, and they carry a huge burden of frontline care and work-related COVID-19 exposure," Participant 322 said. "We are also seeing restricted access to family planning and pregnancy care services for women during these pandemic times," said Participant 308. The COVID-19 Pandemic is a trauma for women. On top of the trauma of the COVID-19 Pandemic-related sickness and deaths, the COVID-19 Pandemic has exacerbated women's mental and physical problems.

Likewise, a recently conducted study based on gender role theory revealed that women feel they have to work harder to achieve leadership positions and grow in their careers. A study can be conducted regarding the level of education; the sacrifices Californian women have made to further their careers in leadership, and how often they

have been promoted. One study focused on mentoring programs and whether they assist women in their opportunities to excel in their careers could also be of benefit. Some research shows that formal mentorship programs can provide opportunities to address gender stereotypes through shared personal experiences, case studies, or other training (Ragins & Cotton, 1996). Mentorship can provide a platform to share the concerns and create solutions to gaps in gender equity and career promotional challenges.

Strategic Management Theory

Companies in all business sectors are dealing with various challenges, from disrupted supply chains, human resource appropriation, new safety regulations, and overall challenges that can significantly impact business recovery. How to manage a workforce that the response to the COVID-19 Pandemic has fundamentally altered requires a management strategy that will have long-term benefits.

As companies manage operations, there will likely be a temptation to treat the workforce as an asset that can be pressured for efficiency rather than a group of people going through social and economic change. One of the challenges for companies will be balancing the essential need to measure much more than before to obtain operational efficiency without overly imposing production pressure on employees or affecting their motivation.

Participant 307 says, "Managers should assign small, defined tasks to workers, and monitor them closely to ensure they are completed." In contrast, Participant 314 says, "Most employees are motivated to achieve goals, and if organizations treat workers as people and invite them to share their goals; they would work hard to achieve goals in a relatively self-directed manner."

Both perspectives may indicate the need for management strategies that will work for workers, giving them a certain amount of autonomy and flexibility in their work and demonstrating enough support and consistency to help workers complete their work and tasks.

Over one-hundred years have elapsed since the most comparable world pandemic occurred, and nearly three years after the COVID-19 Pandemic emerged, many organizations are grappling with the uncertainty of economic downturns and rising inflation. Furthermore, organizations are also dealing with the ambiguity of discovering new ways to engage employees, improve the employee experience, reduce employee turnover, and make employees' latter work years more robust and sustainable.

In the post-COVID-19 Pandemic era, several research participants stated that organization leadership teams should be more responsible for engaging, training, and developing their employees. One strategic approach is to embrace a strategic management framework that will lend to innovative thinking and examine phenomena through the lens of an established training model that contributes well to bolstering new people management strategies. Together, this will present an innovative means for women to stabilize their career trajectories and gain access to methodologies and tools associated with training and development programs. This will also allow women to improve their positions in a reimagined workplace that recognizes the power of women to influence change, as depicted by the symbol of a butterfly (see Figure 1).

Whereas the butterfly has become a metaphor for transformation and hope across cultures, it also symbolizes growth and new beginnings. The butterfly signifies the power of transformation women are poised to make and the incredible feats they can

achieve when they are able to trust themselves to navigate difficult times and emerge better and stronger than before.

Figure 1

Epperson's Transformational Change for Women in the Workplace
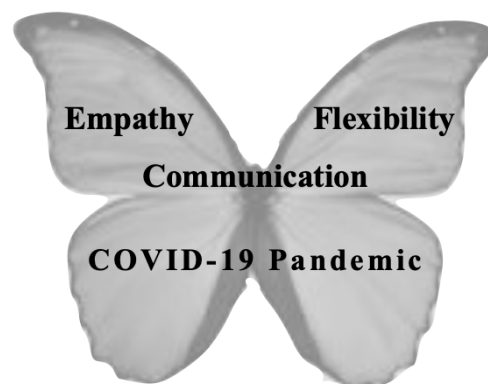
The butterfly has become a metaphor for transformation and hope; across cultures, it symbolizes growth and new beginnings. The butterfly signifies the power of transformation women are set out to make and the incredible feats they can achieve when able to trust oneself to navigate difficult times, like the COVID-19 Pandemic era, and emerge better and stronger than before.

Likewise, this primary investigator believes there is a correlation. Beyond applicability to business entity growth, the Ansoff Matrix principles can also apply to how an individual, in the case of this research study—women—can develop, organize, and deliver professional growth strategies that enhance their career growth trajectories. It is proposed that the Ansoff Matrix four-quadrant principles (market penetration, product development, market development, and diversification) be embedded in human resource management training and development schemes to offer innovative approaches to weighing the different risks involved in making career decisions.

The Ansoff Matrix (see Figure 2) is a framework used by management teams and the analyst community to help plan and evaluate growth initiatives. In particular, the tool

helps stakeholders conceptualize the level of risk associated with different growth strategies. The Ansoff Matrix was developed by an applied mathematician and business manager. Igor Ansoff published his work in the Harvard Business Review in 1957 (Samantha & Garrie, 2015). The Ansoff Matrix is often used to assess drivers of business growth and, in this research study; it has been introduced as a driver of personal and professional growth (Loredana, 2017).

Likewise, the Ansoff Matrix, as a strategic human resource management approach, can align well with the strategic management of people in the marketing scheme as much as it does the management of products and services. The Ansoff Matrix framework can accentuate human growth models to support women's professional growth ideology. In its initial stage, and based on the Ansoff Matrix premise, identifying and evaluating options can help inspire women's professional growth while considering the risks and opportunities.

Based on the Ansoff Matrix four-quadrant framework, considering women's professional growth through personal marketing rationale, there are two ways to approach a growth marketing strategy: adjust the product (or person) or adjust the market (or place). Depending on the approach, one of the four quadrants: market penetration, product development, market development, or diversification, will be pursued. When considering the market penetration quadrant, women would revamp their personal marketing strategy by way of enhancing their skills and abilities to target new employer audiences. In essence, they would develop the best personal strategy to introduce what they offer and their abilities to increase the interest of leaders and recruiters in the workplace.

As it relates to the market development quadrant, this presents an opportunity for women to examine threats in the workplace by paying attention to the political, economic, social, technological, cultural, administrative, geographic, and economic landscapes. In essence, this quadrant represents the need to enhance strategic thinking and understanding of internal and external forces that could impact personal performance and outcomes. From the product development quadrant perspective, women should focus on re-tooling themselves, especially if they project a timeline that includes a long-term working future. This can be a time to acquire new skills or update current skills through training and development in a post-COVID-19 Pandemic era. Additionally, this can be a good time to focus on improving staying up to date with market trends to remain relevant in the workplace.

The final quadrant to consider is diversification. Diversification in skills and abilities could be risky in approach. Diversification also helps to limit the damage when one professional pursuit ceases to offer professional growth, especially if professional growth is being sought. There is a minimum scope of leveraging gained expertise in a new or unfamiliar professional pursuit; however, women may need to embrace professional trials to identify what does not work and shift their professional directions.

Overall, the Ansoff Matrix has a strategic management approach that aligns well with the management of people as much as it does the management of processes, not a focus on micro-managing. Instead, it would be prudent to focus on useful monitoring to understand how to support women (people) in reaching their goals while protecting their overall well-being. Businesses must also navigate the COVID-19 Pandemic's financial and operational challenges while addressing the needs of their employees, customers, and

suppliers. Ultimately, the global COVID-19 Pandemic has forever changed experiences for employers, employees, customers and work cultures, and attitudes and behaviors are changing as a result.

Figure 2

Ansoff Matrix

Unexpected Findings

The primary investigator noticed four unexpected phenomena while conducting this research study. These are incidental findings, meaning these unexpected findings are not directly related to the research. However, the findings may highlight important information about participant decision outcomes. The four phenomena are physical proximity in the workplace, remote workplace, a link to the rise in stress and anxiety among women and the emergence of another theory, the Agenda Setting Theory.

Physical Proximity

Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, the most significant workplace disruption involved new technologies and expansion in global trade. This research study unexpectedly found information about the high importance of physical proximity of humans in the workplace. This finding offers a different perspective of onsite work compared to more traditional definitions. For instance, healthcare includes caregiving roles requiring close interaction with patients, such as doctors and nurses. Grocery store employees work in indoor production environments where jobs require exposure to other people.

During the earlier days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the most severely disturbed workplaces were medical care, personal care, onsite customer service, and leisure and travel. The disruptions in working environments with a higher propensity for physical proximity among humans in the workplace are likely to see the greatest transformation due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. This will necessitate that business models shift in response. The COVID-19 Pandemic pushed companies and consumers to rapidly adopt new behaviors that are likely to be upheld, changing how business is conducted on a large scale. Online ordering and drive-up pick-ups are examples.

Remote Workplaces

An apparent impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the workforce is the increased number of employees working remotely. To determine how extensively remote work might persist after the pandemic, employers are discovering that nearly one-fourth of the workforce could work from home between three to five days a week (Fan & Moen, 2022). This shift represents four to five times more remote work than before the COVID-

19 Pandemic and could prompt a significant change in work geography as individuals and companies shift to where work is performed, onsite or offsite.

Rise in Stress and Anxiety

The COVID-19 Pandemic led to increased stress and anxiety for many people, along with changes in how we connect with others, from trying to stay clear of the COVID-19 virus to spending less in-person time with family, friends and colleagues. Evidence of elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and cognitive changes have risen during the pandemic, and a means of recovery is unclear. This study revealed that these women had to make several family sacrifices to excel in their careers. Further studies surrounding women's sacrifices to excel in their careers should occur. Leaders in organizations need to be aware of these existing challenges and their impact on the employees. Leaders must acknowledge and address their existence (Roberson & Kulik, 2007). Studies have shown that women reported job dissatisfaction due to organizational advancement barriers (Raile et al., 2021). Results from these studies can be communicated to organizational leaders and perhaps assist in positive organizational changes with women growing in their careers with less personal sacrifices.

Agenda Setting Theory

The findings from this study also relate to an overall perspective derived from the agenda-setting theory. Agenda-setting theory suggests that media institutions shape political debates by determining the most important issues and featuring them in the news (Harrison & Windeler, 2020). It describes the media as the primary entity that selects what news stories to report and prioritize based on what they think people care about

most. Regarding this research study, the primary investigator examined women's representation in COVID-19 Pandemic news-gathering and news coverage in California.

In some instances, the media continues to call attention to women's challenges at home and in the workplace. An opportunity to address changes needed to help women overcome the hardships and challenges brought to light by the COVID-19 Pandemic was apparent, but not necessarily aligned with media reports. The investigation uncovered a substantial bias toward men's perspectives in news-gathering and news coverage of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Biasness operates against a backdrop of women's political underrepresentation in the COVID-19 Pandemic responses and the socioeconomic, health, and psychological challenges women face. The absence of women's perspectives in COVID-19 Pandemic-related news coverage means that women have limited influence over the framing of the crisis in the news and, consequently, limited influence over policy decisions. As a result, women are at ever-greater risk of being further marginalized amid the most significant global health crisis of our lifetimes.

Overall, agenda-setting theory influences media events, but few policy studies have systematically examined the dynamics of these events (Birkland, 1998). Mass media reporting on the COVID-19 Pandemic can be outlined within the framework of agenda-setting theory. Likewise, the media has considerable discretion when deciding what stories will be published versus which ones are not. Furthermore, agenda-setting theory forms and situates the public's mind on the relevance of the information that is extensively accessible to them. Regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic, accessibility and framing of information are important factors in agenda-setting since they align with life

issues or concerns in people's lives. Ultimately, agenda-setting theory lays a foundation for how the media orchestrates the centrality of information that significantly impacts people's cognition, behavior, and the foundation for how perceptions and norms in society are influenced.

Implications for Actions

The COVID-19 Pandemic has fundamentally changed how women will progress professionally, accelerating immense structural changes in the consumer goods and service industries (Sheth, 2020). Once the threat of the COVID-19 Pandemic passes, organizations will need to consider the future and the impact of these changes on how they design, communicate, and build experiences women need and want. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, most of this study's research participants had to balance the health risks of working outside the home; some had to consider the need for resources to support a family. When making these decisions, research participants reported being the ones who had to balance work schedules with increased family responsibilities. Notably, from a national perspective, men's and women's labor force participation rates were about two percentage points behind where they were before the COVID-19 Pandemic. However, during the COVID-19 Pandemic in California, more women left the labor force. For women, the implications are based on professional trajectory.

Because the COVID-19 Pandemic triggered gaps in employment, employment gains retracted for many women, and they could not advance to the levels they would have before. A strategic management approach is necessary to make the shifts necessary to combat the disruptions in the workplace induced by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Unless a robust re-skilling and re-tooling initiative is put forward, many women may be unable

to push forward their career trajectories. This latency will further widen pay equity among men and women, slowing women's professional growth trajectories and posing long-term negative implications.

Economic recovery will be incomplete until California women feel they have a safety net that protects their professional trajectories. Women's reemergence in the workforce may be a long and challenging process for those who have dropped out of the labor force. It will be more challenging if businesses have in-demand skills that have changed. Moreover, a robust workplace ecosystem will be necessary for an effective and equitable workforce to emerge.

The primary investigator discovered expectations of a workplace ecosystem that builds a culture of communication and transparency, a leadership team that demonstrates empathy and flexibility to job conditions that protect worker health and well-being, and a safety net for those facing unforeseen shocks. The experience of the research participants during the COVID-19 Pandemic reveals the pressures of work in the modern economy. California should continue to address these pressures by extending support for affordable training and development programs. Over the long term, identifying the ecosystem investments that support a strong workforce is critical for California women's economic well-being and, ultimately, the well-being of the State and country.

Recommendations for Further Research

Although this research has many implications, there are still areas to be explored. The research results present a few considerations to address women's professional growth trajectories in California during times of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Yet, more work needs to be done to develop viable solutions for dissolving disruption to women's career

trajectories. The problem emerging is that policymaker expediency and business leaders pushing for greater gender equality is a must to circumvent a more catastrophic outcome for women when another world crisis emerges. Future research should explore more real-life applications and increase understanding of the phenomena that will help determine the most appropriate approaches to dismantle the destructive events that disrupt women from experiencing steady growth in their career trajectories.

Notably, organizations that incorporate training and development programs to inspire thinking, communication, and problem-solving techniques for teams and individuals will add value to post-pandemic professional growth for women and beyond (Hamouche & Chabani, 2021). Furthermore, drawing on extensive research from business, organizational development, and psychology methodology to combine visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles into one uniquely creative approach can help strengthen critical thinking and heighten the communication of ideas for change. The ultimate goal shall be to achieve sustainability of women staying connected and thriving within organizations in a post-pandemic era.

Future research should also look at other ways to expand training and development opportunities for women to strengthen the pipeline of women with applicable skills to meet future industry trends. Another significant research opportunity is a longitudinal study focusing on industries that have projected need far into the future. There needs to be a disaggregation of the current data and an exploration of the lived experiences of a statistically significant number of women represented in the data to understand the implications of gender inequities in the workplace.

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Appendix A

Research Study's Participant Pre-Screen

<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px;">

Informed Consent

I may be selected to participate in a research study on "Women's Professional Growth Trajectory in California in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic. "I am familiar with this study's purpose and nature, and if chosen, my participation will be voluntary. I will also be asked to grant permission for data collected to be used in the process of completing a Doctorate in Business Administration degree, including a dissertation and any other future publication.

☐ By checking this box, you are willing to answer questions to determine eligibility to participate in a research study.

</div>

My name is LaShan Epperson and I am a Doctoral Candidate at California Baptist University. I am currently conducting a research study and in need of participants. Please answer the questions below:

Name: _____   Phone: _____

Email Address: _____

1. Gender (select one):   Male   Female

2. Are you at least 18 years old? (select one):   Yes   No

3. Were you a resident of California in March 2020? (select one):   Yes   No

4. During March 2020, were you employed? (select one):   Yes   No

5. Are you currently working? (select one):   Yes   No

6. If selected to participate in the study, are you willing to participate in an interview via your choice of Zoom Web Conferencing, telephone, or face-to-face? (select one):   Yes   No

7. Do you have any questions?

Date: Month XX, 2022

To: Name

From: LaShan Epperson, Doctoral Candidate
              California Baptist University

Re: **Invitation to Participate in a Research Study**

Hi Name,

As a current doctoral candidate at California Baptist University, I am tasked with completing an extensive research study to fulfill partial degree requirements. My study aims to examine women's professional growth during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

You are eligible to participate in my study if you have successfully passed pre-screening protocols, which include meeting the following criteria: a woman, at least 18 years old, who lived in California from the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic, and who worked at least part-time and at any level in their career (exploration, establishment, mid-career, late-career, and decline).

I invite you to participate in a one-to-one interview with me via your choice of Zoom Web Conferencing, telephone, or face-to-face. Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, please let me know by **Day, Date, Time** what will work for you.

You can reach me via email at lashanm.epperson@calbaptist.edu or phone at (714)349-5032 anytime. Please do not hesitate contacting me if you have questions.

With sincere regard!

Statement of Confidentiality
Any information collected during the course of the study will be maintained on a confidential basis and access will be restricted to only the person conducting the study. Your full name will not be disclosed, nor will details of your answers be given to anyone. With your permission, the interview with the Primary investigator will be recorded and typed up as a written document or transcript. The transcripts will then be examined to ensure that all of the important information has been captured. The transcripts will not contain your name or any information about you that would allow you to be identified. The only people who will have access to the transcript is the Primary investigator. Some of your comments may be included in a report on the study, but these will be completely anonymous.

Appendix C

Informed Consent

I agree to participate in a research study on "Women's Professional Growth Trajectory in California in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic." I understand this study's purpose and nature, and I am participating voluntarily. I grant permission for the data to be used in the process of completing a Doctorate in Business Administration degree, including a dissertation and any other future publication. I understand that a brief synopsis of each participant, including myself, will be used and will include your first name, age, occupation, career status, dependent status, educational level, and any other pertinent information to help the reader know and recall each participant. I grant permission for the above personal information to be used. I agree to meet at the following location _____ on the following date _____ at _____ for an interview of approximately 1 hour. I also grant permission to be recorded during the interview.

_____   _____
Research Participant   Date

_____   _____
Primary investigator   Date

Statement of Confidentiality
Any information collected during the course of the study will be maintained on a confidential basis and access will be restricted to only the person conducting the study. Your full name will not be disclosed, nor will details of your answers be given to anyone. With your permission, the interview with the Primary investigator will be recorded and typed up as a written document or transcript. The transcripts will then be examined to ensure that all of the important information has been captured. The transcripts will not contain your name or any information about you that would allow you to be identified. The only people who will have access to the transcript is the Primary investigator. Some of your comments may be included in a report on the study, but these will be completely anonymous.

Appendix D

Participant Interview Questionnaire

1. In March 2020, California was the first state to order residents to stay home because of COVID-19; tell me about your experience during that time.

2. How did your work life change after California residents were asked to stay home?

3. Was it easy for you to adjust to California's COVID-19 restrictions, why or why not?

4. Do you, or did you, provide care for anyone beyond yourself at point throughout COVID-19? If yes, who?

5. Describe your biggest challenge with balancing life, in general, with COVID-19 and work.

6. Did you maintain the same employment level (full-time, part-time, laid-off) from the start of the start of COVID-19 to now? – Describe your journey.

7. What satisfies you about the work you do?

8. What dissatisfies you about the work you do?

9. Describe how you feel about your professional growth during COVID-19, from beginning to present?

10. Do you imagine yourself changing careers within the next 12 months, why?

11. Describe the support your employer provided during COVID-19? How did does this make you feel?

12. Can you name three things employers can do to make their employee's work-life balanced when catastrophe emerges and forces change?

13. How would you describe your current professional outlook? What makes you feel this way?

Thank You Letter to Participant

Date _____

Dear _____,

      Thank you for meeting with me in an extended interview and sharing your experience. I appreciate your willingness to share your unique and personal thoughts, feelings, events, and situations.

      I have attached a transcript of your interview. Please review the entire document to ensure that this interview captured your experiences accurately. Please feel free to add comments that would further elaborate on your experience(s), or if you prefer, we can arrange to meet again and record your additions.

      When you complete the review of your transcript, please return the transcript via email to lashanm.epperson@calbaptist.edu, or please let me know if I should arrange another delivery method. I will greatly appreciate your reply by _____.

      I sincerely value your participation in this research study and your willingness to share your experience. If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to contact me.

With sincere regards,

LaShan Epperson

Economic crisis caused by COVID-19 hurt women more than men...

Need Women to Participate in a Research Study.

1. Did you experience a change in your career as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. Are you open to sharing your story?

I want to connect with you.
Please let me know if you are interested.

LaShan Epperson
LaShanM.Epperson@calbaptist.edu
(714)349-5032