

BRIEF: HOW IS COVID-19 IMPACTING THE TALENT PIPELINE OF MARKET SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES?



Key Takeaways

- The impacts of COVID-19 on MSD practitioners are wide-ranging and if not addressed will have a **negative impact on the diversity of future senior leaders**.
- COVID-19 has triggered a **reprioritization of what is personally important to MSD professionals** and many are downshifting their career ambitions, particularly women.
- Mid-career professionals, especially expatriate and headquarters (HQ)-based women, will face **challenges in meeting requirements for future senior leadership roles** because they are missing out on critical career-advancing opportunities.
- Travel restrictions—resulting in fewer expatriates on the staff of MSD activities—and work-from-home mandates may be **opening new opportunities for local talent development**.

The detrimental impact of COVID-19 on the [workforce participation and career ambition of women](#) and [ethnic or racial minority groups](#) is well documented across many sectors, but there is notably limited evidence from the international development sector. USAID, as part of a larger set of learning initiatives around social inclusion on the [Feed the Future Market Systems and Partnerships \(MSP\) Activity](#), sought to remedy this oversight by investing in **understanding the specific ways in which the global pandemic is impacting the current and future pipeline of senior leaders on market systems development (MSD) activities**. This research tested the hypothesis that COVID-19 has disproportionately negatively impacted women's workforce participation and the career ambition of both senior managers and aspiring senior managers on MSD activities. This brief presents the gendered findings of the research. The complementary [full study](#) includes a deeper analysis of intersectional considerations.¹ The target audience for this work includes USAID staff and implementing partners who work in market systems development.

Diversity. Systemic thinking—seeing connections and interrelationships across disciplines, functions, organizations, people, trends, and cultures in ways that lead to insightful analysis and innovative, sustainable solutions—inherently [requires and values diversity](#). Unfortunately, diverse leadership is too often neglected on MSD activities, hindered by factors such as [restrictive criteria in job descriptions](#). This matters because the highly adaptive and facilitative nature of most MSD activities means that senior managers can have an outsized influence on strategy and partnerships, which in turn may determine who accesses activity-facilitated services and benefits. To ensure MSD activities empower a diverse range of market actors and achieve broad-based and equitable impact, diversity of perspectives and experiences on senior management teams is essential.

Research Methodology

The research methodology combined a literature review with primary data collection from an online survey, followed by in-depth interviews with a subset of survey respondents. Challenges to the research included the non-random sampling approach, limited sample size, short data collection period, reliance on participants' recall of pre-COVID-19 perceptions, and only one respondent identifying as being gender non-binary, which restricted the gender analysis to focus exclusively on cisgender men and women.

¹ The researchers analyzed the dataset to explore the outcomes of multiple individual sub-groups, including by gender, professional position, minority identification, presence of dependents, and status as a cooperating country national or expatriate/headquarters staff. The analysis also explored intersectionality by disaggregating the data by more than one demographic variable (for example, gender and presence of dependents).

The **Feed the Future Market Systems and Partnerships (MSP) Activity** is advancing learning and good practice in market systems development (MSD) and private sector engagement (PSE) within USAID, USAID partners, and market actors. For more information, access to technical resources, and opportunities to engage, visit www.agrilinks.org/msp.



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SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS



128 men, 128 women, 1 gender non-conforming respondent.

Among those who chose to disclose this information, 19% identified as being part of a racial or ethnic minority and 81% did not.



PERSONNEL CATEGORY



CAREER



DEPENDENTS



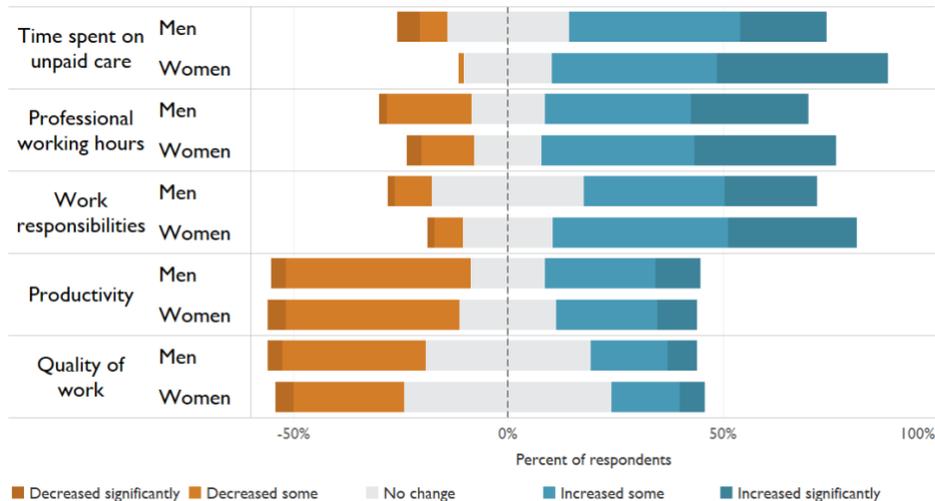
Key Findings



MSD professionals, and women in particular, are being stretched on and off the job and some are at risk of burnout.

Survey respondents were on average likely to report an **increase in professional working hours, work responsibilities, and unpaid care work, while also reporting a decrease in productivity and quality of work**, albeit to a smaller degree. As shown in Figure 1, women were more likely than men to report an increase in time spent on unpaid care work, professional working hours, and work responsibilities, consistent with [broader workforce trends](#).

Figure 1: Responsibilities and Productivity/Quality of Work



Women were more likely to report an increase in unpaid care work, professional working hours, and work responsibilities.

Women and men also experienced increases in unpaid care work differently. The majority of MSD professionals with dependents reported an increase in unpaid care hours during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women were more likely to report increased hours than men, and women with dependents under the age of 13, senior-positioned women, and non-cooperating country national (CCN) women were the most likely to report an increase.

“I thought that [the lack of commute] was a benefit, but then again work quickly filled it in [...] there is a blurring of time zones [...] whereas before, time zones were respected.”

– Senior-positioned man, CCN, dependents, identifies as a minority

“I went from working in an office environment and having help at home and kids being in school, to [relocating to my home country] with no help at home, kids at home, and all the responsibilities [which] that entails.”

– Senior-positioned woman, expatriate/HQ staff, dependents, non-minority

Among those who reported increased unpaid care hours, **56 percent of women—compared to just 21 percent of men—stated that they were “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with the increase in unpaid care work.** Respondents attributed their dissatisfaction to an increase in household responsibilities, such as home schooling, and unsustainable demands on their time.

Of the 25 percent of respondents who expressed satisfaction with the increase in unpaid care hours, **men were more likely to state they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the increase as compared to women.** Men reported that the reduction in travel or commute times has allowed them to spend more time with family and has made it easier to manage household responsibilities.

The effects of these substantive changes—from increased working hours and responsibilities, to greater demands from unpaid care work—are **pushing some MSD professionals, particularly women, to the brink of burnout**, many of whom feel like they cannot reach out to their organization and ask for help.

“Now, **I spend more time with the kids** and am quite happy about it. I think that there is a substantial bias towards women [handling] care for kids, so adding more to it probably doesn’t make it easier. Whereas men probably think of [this] as an opportunity—because they weren’t really expected to have to do it anyways.”

– Senior-positioned man, expatriate/HQ staff, dependents, non-minority

“The good thing was that **COVID helped me to be at home more.** So it was easier to [take on] care responsibilities.”

– Mid-career man, expatriate/HQ staff, dependents, non-minority

“I’ve been kind of **trying to keep my head above water on my own** because I feel like if [I] show weakness, they will [attribute it to me being a woman with children]. So I haven’t wanted to make it known how difficult it’s been.”

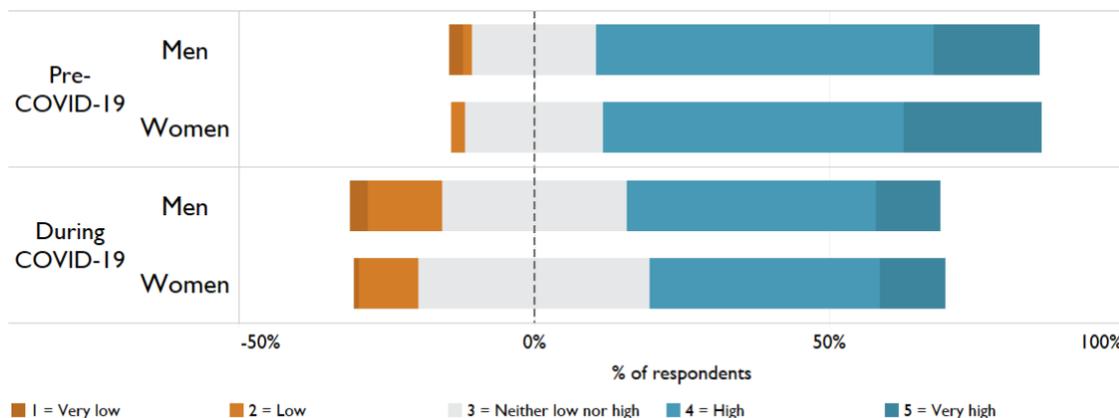
– Senior-positioned woman, expatriate/HQ staff, dependents, non-minority



MSD practitioners are reprioritizing what is personally important: for many (especially women) this means downshifting their careers.

COVID-19 has triggered a recalibration of priorities for many MSD professionals. For some, that means spending more time with family and taking advantage of the reduction in travel or commute times. For others, it means seeking work that is less taxing. Regardless of the reason, **many MSD professionals are downshifting their career ambitions because of COVID-19.** While women, overall, reported a greater decrease in ambition from pre-COVID levels, men were more likely to report having “very low” or “low” levels of ambition during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Career Ambition Before versus During COVID-19



Women reported a greater decrease in ambition than men, but **men** were more likely to report low or very low levels of ambition.

“I just decreased the hours I did [...]. But when you are self-employed, decreasing hours automatically translates into less responsibility because you self-select into jobs where you play supporting roles. **You just don’t know when you will have the time to take on the lead role.**”

– Senior-positioned woman, expatriate/HQ staff, dependents, non-minority

Almost 40 percent of women stated that they wanted to decrease the size and scope of responsibilities in their next assignment (Figure 3). This is a greater percentage compared to men (19 percent) regardless of position, nationality, and presence of dependents.

The unsustainability of balancing work and household demands during COVID-19, exacerbated for many by school closures, and the need for more flexibility, were recurring themes for both senior-positioned and mid-career women.

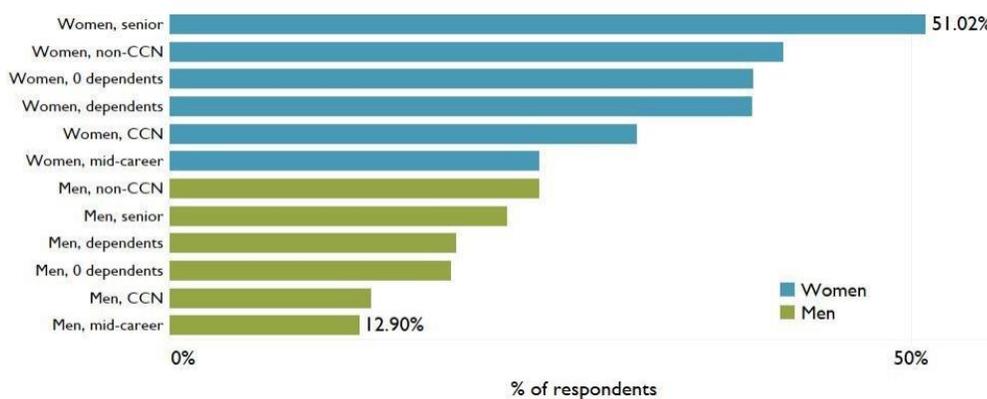
“My children] just need more of me at the moment [because of COVID-19]. And so, I’m not fooling myself that you can keep both things up [...] **Work just got a little bit less important to be honest.**”

– Senior-positioned woman, expatriate/HQ staff, dependents, non-minority

“I am tired from the last year. **I need a change and I want to do something more fun.**”

– Senior-positioned woman, expatriate/HQ staff, no dependents, non-minority

Figure 3: Desire to Decrease Size and Scope of Responsibilities



Women reported a greater desire to decrease the size and scope of their responsibilities compared to men, regardless of position, nationality, or presence of dependents.

“I had a job opportunity come up and they were like, we want you to do all these [amazing] things and go everywhere. I finally wrote them, I’m like, I can’t, **I can’t do this. It’s exhausting hearing about it. It sounds really cool and I would have said yes before the pandemic, but now I don’t want that.** I want to see my kids; I want to eat dinner with my family.”

– Senior-positioned woman, expatriate/HQ staff, dependents, non-minority

“While school remains closed and I have to take care of the kids, **I can’t imagine expanding my responsibilities.**”

– Mid-career woman, expatriate/HQ staff, dependents, identifies as a minority



Future leaders are missing out on career-advancing opportunities and many are struggling with work-from-home mandates.

Aspiring senior leaders reported that COVID-19 has had a negative impact on key professional areas vital to career advancement. Survey respondents, on average, reported a **decrease in time conducting fieldwork, time spent networking, time spent interacting with their managers, time spent on professional development, as well as exposure to technical work. Women were more likely than men to report a decrease in all areas, but particularly in the areas of fieldwork and networking** (Figure 4).

“We have [a] young team. [For many] this was [their] first or second job, and I could see that **their motivation has suffered tremendously because they rely on guidance and face-to-face interactions.**”

– Senior-positioned man, CCN, no dependents, non-minority

“Field work has almost gone to zero for my team [...] The experiential aspect of technical work has been severely limited because of physical [COVID-19] constraints [...] **technical competence comes from your experience, and experience has quite clearly been severely limited.**”

– Senior-positioned man, CCN, dependents, identifies as a minority

Many aspiring senior leaders are being negatively affected by the pandemic. However, there are some, especially **CCNs and those with fewer family demands, who may be benefiting from the industry shifts:** over one-third of aspiring senior leaders reported increases in learning and professional development opportunities and exposure to technical work.

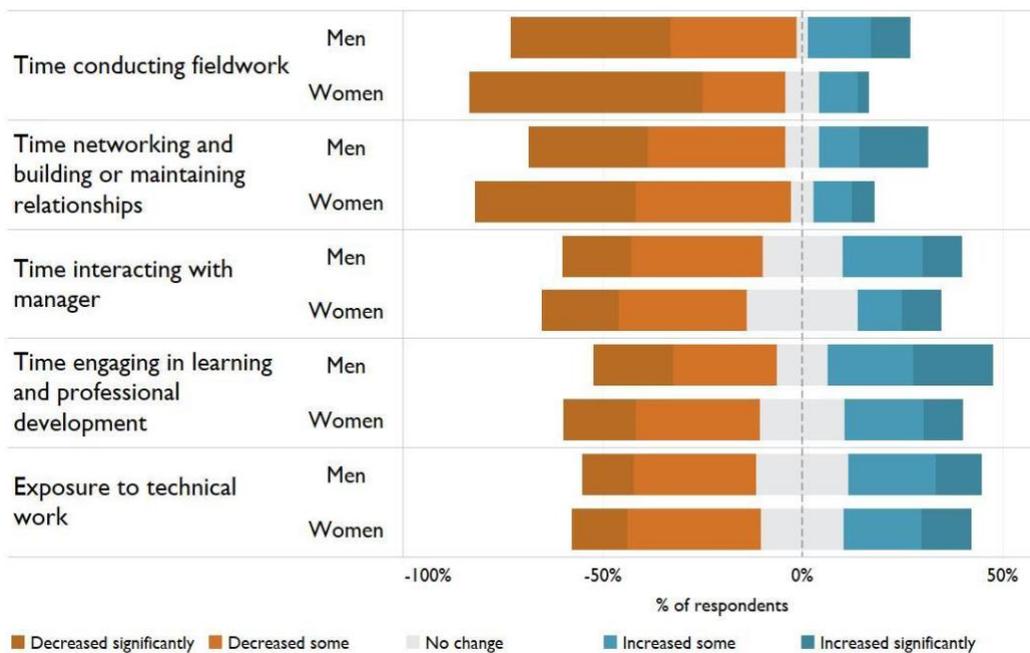
“Networking always came last—now there is no time for it!”

– Mid-career woman, expatriate/HQ staff, dependents, identifies as a minority

“For me, work-from-home has somehow been more productive. I’m more focused. [...] so it has definitely affected me positively.”

– Senior-positioned and aspiring woman, CCN, no dependents, non-minority

Figure 4: Impact on Key Professional Areas



Women were more likely than men to report a decrease in all key professional areas vital to career advancement, particularly fieldwork and networking.

Conclusions

As hypothesized, across all data points this research showed that **women MSD professionals were more negatively impacted** by changes to work life, unpaid care work, and career-advancing opportunities. While career ambitions remained high for both men and women MSD professionals, women were more likely to report a **decrease in their ambition levels**. In addition, women were more likely to report seeking a **decrease in responsibilities in their next role or assignment**.

From this rapid research, it is evident that MSD practitioners are not immune to the impacts of COVID-19. Similar to other COVID-19 survey results, this research shows that **the pandemic has seemingly exacerbated pre-existing, systemic inequalities in the international development sector and in unpaid care responsibilities**.

“I think the real problems are still more systemic and COVID made them worse. There might [also] be opportunities where COVID has created opportunities for improvements that we don’t want to miss.”

– Senior-positioned man, expatriate/HQ staff, dependents, non-minority

Recommendations: We Can't Afford the Risks of "Business as Usual"

How we respond—especially now, as many implementing partners and MSD activities return to the office and to travel—will influence the diversity of leadership in the sector in the medium and long term. As systems thinkers, MSD professionals know that simply treating the symptoms of the impact of the pandemic is insufficient and even irresponsible. Instead, we must seize this opportunity to **address the root causes of these effects**. This can be achieved by reshaping the roles, organizational culture, and support services (e.g., child/elder care) available to international development professionals in favor of working environments (HQ and field) that are truly responsive to the diversity of their needs and by disassembling the systems that disadvantage women, minorities, and CCNs. We must also avoid penalizing future leaders, especially women, who are missing out on career-advancing opportunities during COVID-19 and intentionally create opportunities for "catching up" on missed experiences.

Initial evidence from this survey suggests that **even within the constraints of our operating context, implementing partners can start to lay the foundation of a more diverse and inclusive sector** by taking the following actions.

Meet employees at their "new normal"



Recognize employees' (new or shifted) personal and professional priorities and **realign employee responsibilities and working hours accordingly**. Examples from IPs and the private sector include individually tailored working hours and locations (remote, office, hybrid, etc.), options for part-time or full-time work, periodic company-wide shutdowns, and more discretionary time off.

Set staff up for success



Listen to and support employees, especially women and mid-career professionals, to continue to weather the impact of COVID-19 and, when appropriate, help them to better navigate the return to the office. Recognize that a **"successful return" may be different for employees** depending on a variety of both individual circumstances as well as social and professional identities, including their gender, professional position, minority identification, presence of dependents, and status as a CCN or expatriate/HQ staff. Examples include professional counselling sessions, tele-medicine and mental health services, emergency child/elder care, and child/elder care placement services.

Reduce obstacles to advancement



Seek out and create new opportunities for aspiring senior leaders, both expatriates/HQ staff and CCNs, to acquire career-advancing skills. Intentionally target mid-level professionals (especially women and minorities) for networking, technical learning, and field opportunities. This could be as simple as informal "women in development" networking groups that strengthen connections between senior and mid-level professionals or could be a more formal mentoring program that pairs mid-level staff with senior technical leaders on assignments.

In parallel, it is important that we:

- **Raise awareness and engage the industry in dialogue and action** on addressing the impact of COVID-19 on MSD professionals using an intersectional approach.
- **Deepen and broaden the scope of future research** to (1) include an identification of the types of support being offered to development practitioners by implementing partners and donors and (2) what is still needed (e.g., support services, changes to contracting mechanisms, etc.) to help all practitioners, regardless of identity, to better cope with current challenges and successfully navigate the return to the office.



Curious how others are tackling the new normal? Check out these resources.

- [Responding to burnout](#)
- [Navigating the return to the workplace](#)
- [Supporting women](#)
- [Reimagining the workplace](#)