

The Coronavirus Crisis and Women in the Labor Market: Permanent Damage or a Short-Term Setback with Long-Term Potential

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Introduction

Over the last decades, Israeli women have made major strides in the labor market. The average employment rate among Israeli women is 75% (among non-Haredi Jewish women it is 84%) — a rise of 20 percentage points over the last 30 years. This rate is higher than the OECD average which stands at 66%, and is growing at a faster rate than the OECD (Fuchs & Epstein, 2019). Israel also stands out in another way: it has the highest birth rate in the developed world, at 3.1 children per woman — and employment rates among mothers of young children are high (Bowers & Fuchs, 2016). Arab and Haredi women have experienced some of the greatest increases in employment, a testament to the fact that the labor market has been incorporating economically weaker populations.

Figure 1. Employment rates by population groups and gender Ages 25-64



Note: Data are for the first quarter of 2020. In 2012, the CBS survey methodology changed, resulting in a break in the data series. Data are without fixed samples.

Source: Liora Bowers, Taub Center | Data: Central Bureau of Statistics

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The last decade has also seen a reduction in the wage gaps between men and women in Israel, as in most OECD countries. In Israel, the hourly wage gap decreased from 17.3% in 2008 to 15.8% in 2017 (Figure 2). When examining total monthly earnings, much of the 31% gap between the genders is due to differences in work hours between men and women as well as differences in the occupations in which they tend to work (Fuchs, 2016; UNECE, n.d.). In 2018, about a third of Israeli women were employed part-time compared to 13% of men; even among those Israelis working full-time, women work about 10% fewer hours than men (OECD, 2020a).

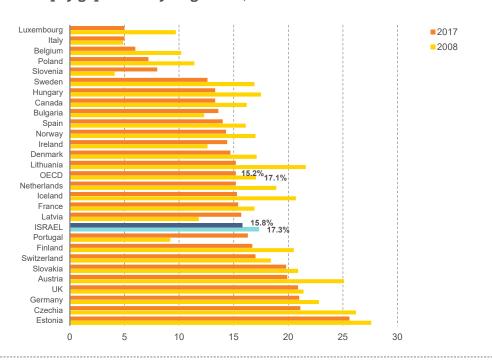


Figure 2. Gender pay gap in hourly wage rates, 2008 and 2017

Data: Liora Bowers, Taub Center | Source: UNECE

The coronavirus crisis in Israel now threatens these labor market gains across population groups in Israel. The economic shutdown and social distancing measures mandated in response to the crisis have resulted in a sharp rise in unemployment rates, which reached 27.8% by May 10, 2020, though that figure is now falling as the market reopens.¹ Furthermore, the complete closure of schools and daycare for a two-month period, between mid-March and mid-May, and targeted closures of schools since then have led to additional challenges that are unique to this crisis.

Research has shown that workers who lose jobs during downturns experience particularly large, persistent reduction in their earnings.² A critical goal for policymakers must thus be to ensure that as many workers as possible experience only temporary joblessness rather than persistent disengagement

 $^{1\}quad \textit{Globes} \ \text{newspaper} \ \text{reports on June 10, 2020 that according to the Israeli Employment Service, since April 19th, 318,262 individuals reported that they have returned to work while 114,843 have registered as job seekers — suggesting a net return of about 200,000 individuals to the labor market since the re-opening of the economy (Bramly-Golan & Lavi, 2020, update June 10, 2020).$

² Among full-time workers who lost their jobs in the US recession in 2008, the average wage among those who were able to find work again was 17% lower than the salary they earned prior to losing their job (\$3,640 per month before versus \$3,030 after) even a full two years after the recession (Greenstone & Looney, 2011). Research published in 2011 estimates that men who lose their job during a period of high unemployment lost the equivalent of 2.8 years of their salary over the following twenty years, versus only 1.4 years of salary for those who lost their job in a period of low unemployment (Davis & von Wachter, 2011).

from the labor market, which could erode labor force participation and wages in the long-run. Given the higher rate of job losses among women since the start of the coronavirus crisis, there is a real risk to the employment and wage gains made by Israeli women in the past decades.³

JOB LOSSES DURING THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

Between March 1, 2020 and May 10, 2020, an unprecedented 875,231 unemployment claims were filed by individuals in Israel ages 20-67. Of these, 56% — about 487,000 claims — were by women (NII, 2020).^{4,5} This is in comparison to the share of salaried employees who are women, which is estimated at about 49% before the crisis (NII, 2020; CBS, 2019, Table 2.1).⁶ It appears that this disparity is driven by the "Jewish and Other" sector, wherein women went from representing 51.7% of job seekers in January-February to 58.8% of job seekers in March-April. In contrast, the share of women among Arab Israeli job seekers (which even in regular times is lower due to the lower employment rate of Arab Israeli women relative to Arab Israeli men) decreased slightly from 43.8% to 42.2% in the months before the crisis versus March-April 2020 (Yehiel, 2020). Among Jews, Haredim have been hit particularly hard; a Ministry of Finance analysis that examined job seekers between March 1st and April 5th showed that 30% of Haredi women who were employed in 2017 had registered with the Israeli Employment Service compared to 20% of non-Haredi Jewish women and 18% of Arab Israeli women (Ministry of Finance, 2020).

Alongside job losses, it is important to mention other changes in employment that occurred during the crisis as well. One survey revealed that in addition to 30% of workers who have been placed on unpaid leave, another 11% have had their hours reduced (Flug et al., 2020). The Central Bureau of Statistics' 4th wave Survey of Businesses During Coronavirus in early May (representing a select group of industries that employ about 30% of workers in the economy) revealed that 9% of employers had actively cut wages as a result of the crisis (CBS, 2020b).

Figure 3 shows that while the youngest women have been most severely affected relative to men (60.5% versus 39.5% of job losses for those ages 20-24); across all age groups women represent a substantially higher share of job losses during this period.⁷

³ The figures discussed here relate to the 88% of workers who are salaried, as much more data on the coronavirus' workforce impact is available for this group. Approximately 15.2% of men and 9.4% of women in Israel were self-employed in 2018 (OECD, 2020b). A survey by the Israel Democracy Institute in early April 2020 showed that 60% of the self-employed had shut down their business, either temporarily (53%) or permanently (7%) (Flug, Aviram-Nitzan, & Kedar, 2020).

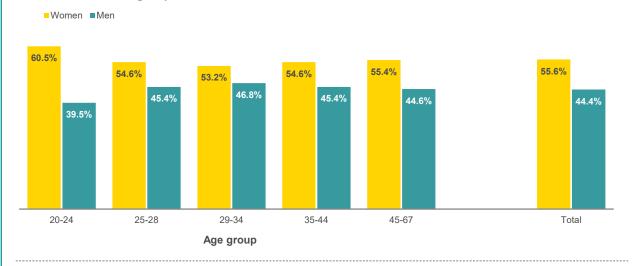
⁴ According to the Israeli Employment Service, there seems to be a slight reversal in April, as 48% of new job seekers registering were female as compared to the 57% in March (Israeli Employment Service, 2020). Nonetheless, the March toll was much higher overall; with about three-quarters of job losses through May 10^{th} coming in that month (NII, 2020).

⁵ While women represented about 55% of unemployment claims with the National Insurance Institute in 2019, this breakdown in regular times may be due to a policy that allows women, under various circumstances, to resign within 9 months of childbirth and have the resignation considered justified for purposes of the National Insurance Institute Law (for more on this subject, see the NII website, https://tinyurl.com/yb55y78r). Given the sharp increase in unemployment claims in the wake of the coronavirus, it is likely numerous other factors at play are causing the disproportionate share of claims by women. This is further bolstered by data from the Israeli Employment Service, which show that in January and February of this year, the breakdown was 50% and 51% of new job seekers being women, as compared to 57% in March 2020 (Ilan, 2020; Israeli Employment Service, 2020)

⁶ Similar data is seen for the US, where women make up 49% of the workforce but 55% of the over 20 million unemployed in the March-April timespan (Ewing-Nelson, 2020).

⁷ NII data on unemployment claims filed by women, age distribution of such claims, and claims by industry are very similar to those found in the Knesset Research Center's Report on the subject, released May 12, 2020 (Prager, 2020).

Figure 3. Share of those filing unemployment claims, by gender and age, from March 1 – May 10, 2020

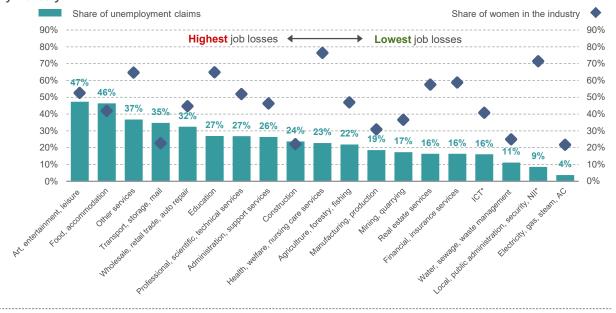


Data: Liora Bowers, Taub Center | Source: NII, 2020

It seems that the disproportionate job losses by women during this crisis is a global phenomenon. In large part, this is because whereas in previous recessions manufacturing and construction sectors have been hardest hit, the coronavirus pandemic is disproportionately affecting female-heavy sectors such as tourism and retail (Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey, & Tertilt, 2020; PEW Research Center, 2020). Further aligning with the assertion that men will be better positioned for job retention during this crisis, 2017 US data also indicates that more men report being able to telecommute and a higher share of men are in "essential" occupations (Alon et al., 2020).

To consider whether this is also the case in Israel, we examine the breakdown of unemployment claims by gender in each industry. Scanning a range of industries with the highest share of job losses, such as arts and entertainment (47%), to the lowest, electricity and gas (4%), there is no apparent correlation between the share of women in the industry and the portion of jobs lost.

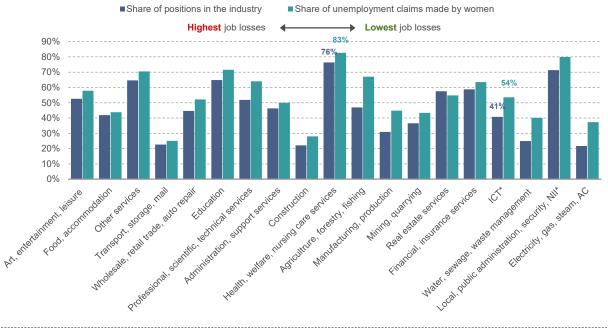
Figure 4. Unemployment claims and share of women employees
By industry



Data: Liora Bowers, Taub Center | Source: NII, 2020

Instead, and disconcertingly, across each of the 19 industries — aside from real estate — more women have filed for unemployment than the share of women in that industry. For example, women represent 76% of the healthcare workforce, but 83% of those in the healthcare industry that have filed for unemployment (Figure 5). Similarly, 41% of workers in information and communications technology are women, but women represent 54% of unemployment claims since March in that industry. It thus appears that the assertion that women have lost more jobs during this crisis because they tend to work in harder-hit industries, does not seem to be the case for Israel.

Figure 5. Share of positions held by women and share of unemployment claims by women By industry

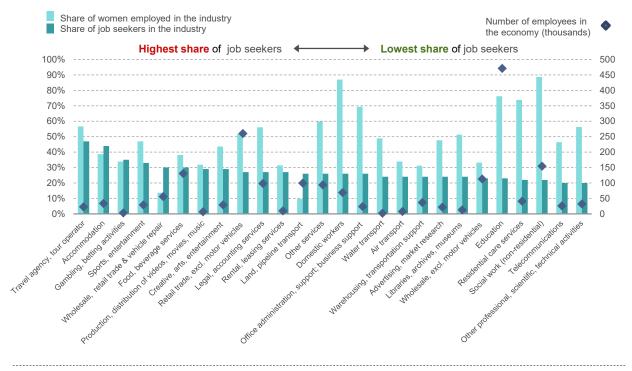


Note: ICT: Information and communications technology; NII: National Insurance Institute. Unemployment claims as of May 10, 2020.

Data: Liora Bowers, Taub Center | Source: NII, 2020

There are a number of possible reasons for the disparity seen in the figure, including the specific occupations that women hold in each of the industries. For example, 46% of those employed in administration and support services are women, and this sector has seen about the same level of unemployment as the economy as a whole during this period (26%). However, a subcategory of this industry is the badly-hit travel agents and tour operators, in which 47% of employees were seeking jobs as of April; and women represented 57% of employed travel agents and tour operators in 2017 (CBS, 2019, Table 2.1; Israeli Employment Service, 2020). Note, however, that this figure shows a similar lack of correlation between the share of women's employment and the share of job seekers by sub-industry, suggesting other factors in play with respect to the higher job losses for women.

Figure 6. The share of job seekers in the industry (April 2020), the share of women out of all those employed in the industry (2017), and the number employed in the industry Ages 25-64



Note: For those industries where job seekers represent 20% or more of the industry. Source: Liora Bowers, Taub Center | Data: CBS, 2019, Table 2.1; Israeli Employment Service

An alternative explanation lies in the fact that the most vulnerable workers have been hardest hit by the coronavirus — the average wage of workers receiving unemployment benefits since March is NIS 6,955 compared to a NIS 10,345 average wage in the market (NII, 2020). As such, it may be that women's more precarious position in the workforce — fewer work hours per week, more temporary positions, lower rank, lower salaries, and tenure interruptions due to maternity leave — is leading them to be the first to be selected for layoffs and unpaid leave.

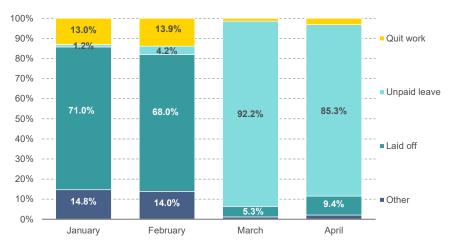
Another contributory factor is that of childcare in the home. With all schools and daycares closed for nearly two months because of the coronavirus crisis, childcare and education responsibilities placed on parents were substantially greater than during regular times. Women are more often the lower wage earner in the family. This may be because of hours — among employed parents with children, the average woman worked 23 hours relative to 36 hours for employed men — occupation or some other reason (Fuchs & Epstein, 2019). As such, they are also the ones more likely to be rationally selected by households during the coronavirus crisis to give up work in order to care of the children.⁸

Indeed, about 46%, or just under 400,000, of individuals between ages 20-67 filing for unemployment had a child under age 18 at home; with 18% having a child under age two (NII, 2020). For the 152,000 single parent households headed by women (in comparison to 20,000 headed by men), the reality of work alongside childcare may be completely unmanageable (Tzameret-Kertcher et al., 2019). Fears of a potential second wave in the fall or winter that could again shutter schools and daycare centers may deter some individuals from reentering the labor market before there is a widely accessible vaccine or treatment.

⁸ The Institute for Fiscal Studies in the UK conducted a survey of 3,500 opposite-sex partner households with children, in the first half of May 2020. Results showed that mothers engaging in paid work before the shutdown are 47% more likely than fathers to have quit or permanently lost their job (Andrew et al., 2020). See also Topping, 2020.

When it comes to the length of time the currently jobless will be out of the labor market, there is some hope. Figure 7 shows that the vast majority of those registering with the Israeli Employment Service in March -92% — left work on unpaid leave, and only 5% were laid off. This is in comparison to about 1% of new registrants in January who were on unpaid leave and 71% who were laid off.

Figure 7. Registration with the Israeli Employment Service, by reason, January to April, 2020



Source: Liora Bowers, Taub Center | Data: Israeli Employment Service

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that the emergency programs implemented by the government early in the crisis allowed employers to place employees on unpaid leave and have them qualify for unemployment benefits, without the employees first using their vacation days (contrary to the policy in regular times). Therefore, even for employers who thought there was a good chance that they would not be able to rehire certain employees, employers tended to put their employees on unpaid leave rather than lay them off.

With the labor market reopening and the return of many employees to their jobs, unemployment in Israel is expected to remain about 10% at the end of 2020 (Aviram-Nitzan, 2020; Lior, 2020), the highest it has been since 2004 (and compared to 3.4% before the pandemic). By one estimate, at least 20% of the newly jobless will not return to their previous employer (Weiss, 2020). This reality is similarly reflected in Israeli workers' own fears: one-third of Israeli employees on leave in early April expressed some or great uncertainty about whether they will be able to return to their employer following the crisis (Flug et al., 2020).

CHANGING WORKPLACE AND HOUSEHOLD NORMS DURING CORONAVIRUS

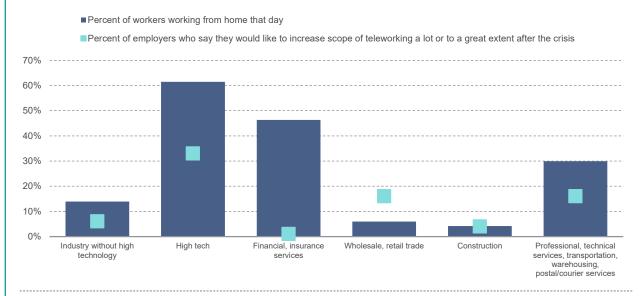
Alongside these gloomy predictions are a few potential factors that may benefit women in the long run. In particular, the rapid, do-or-die adaption of teleworking by companies across the economy has the potential to revolutionize the workplace to the benefit of women. As companies implement tools, technologies and organizational practices that facilitate telework, they are creating a norm around work schedules and locations that helps integrate family and work.

⁹ A study in the US estimates that 42% of jobs lost during the coronavirus pandemic will disappear permanently, as consumer demand changes and companies adjust to the new realities of social distancing as well as adjust for future such events. Even as new jobs in some industries are created, such as restaurant and grocery delivery, home entertainment, and online shopping — these positions are likely to be both lower wages and subject to automation where possible (Barrero, Bloom, & Davis, 2020).

The ability to telework is more aligned with certain industries. The Central Bureau of Statistics' 3rd Wave Survey of Employers During Coronavirus showed that 61% of high-tech workers and 46% of financial services employees working on the day surveyed did so from home (compared to 14% for non-high tech manufacturing and well lower for construction and retail and wholesale trade sectors) (CBS, 2020a). Such practices bode well in terms of potentially drawing women to higher-wage sectors and promoting their success in such sectors. As Taub Center research shows, workers in high tech earn on average 2.5 times the wage earned in other business sectors, and only a third of those employed in the sector are women (Brand, 2018). The average wage in financial services, too, is much higher than the average in the economy, at NIS 16,079 a month (NII, 2020).

Figure 8. Share of employees working from home and share of employers indicating a large interest in increasing teleworking after the crisis

By industry



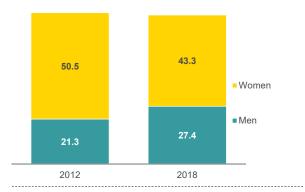
Note: The survey included certain industries, and firms with 5 or more employees; overall representing about 30% of salaried employees. Share of employees working from home is out of the total share of employees who worked either in the workplace or at home that day, and does not include employees out on unpaid leave, vacation, sick, or some other form of leave.

Source: Liora Bowers, Taub Center | Data: CBS, 2020a

This same survey suggested that some businesses desire to continue teleworking practices, as a third of high-tech firms said they would like to increase the scope of teleworking substantially after this crisis. Interestingly, the retail and wholesale trade sector, which had only a small share of its employees working from home in late April, also expressed some interest in expanding this practice. In stark contrast, however, less than 1% of finance and insurance firms said they were interested in doing so. It appears, in fact, that financial services firms are quickly moving their workers back to the office; the share of employees working from home in finance and insurance firms sank from 46% in late April to just 10% in early June, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics' 5th wave of the business survey (the parallel figure for high tech went down from 61% to 39%) (CBS, 2020c). This is concerning, as the lack of workplace flexibility particularly in the finance and business sector has been noted as one of the principle factors influencing the pay gap between men and women (Goldin, 2015).

Another factor that may have a long-term positive effect on gender equity is the changing set of social norms associated with men being exposed to the day-in-day-out responsibilities of 24/7 childcare, as many people shifted to working from home during the shutdown. There is already evidence that in recent years Israeli men are taking on a greater share of unpaid work in the home; in dual working households, between 2012 and 2018 the weekly hours of household and care tasks performed by women decreased from 50.5 to 43.3, while that of men increased from 21.3 to 27.4 (Tzameret-Kertcher et al., 2019).

Figure 9. Weekly hours of childcare and household work



Source: Liora Bowers, Taub Center | Data: Kaplan, 2012; Tzameret-Kertcher et al., 2019

The unequal division of childcare and housework in normal times (Kaplan & Karkabi Sabah, 2019) raises the probability that during the current crisis women will continue to invest more hours in housework then men. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that in the majority of households, men spent more time than usual taking care of their children. In a survey conducted by researchers from the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, men reported a 10% increase in the amount of time they spend with their children during the coronavirus crisis versus the period before (and this was confirmed by their partners in separate reporting). In households where the man was laid off or put on unpaid leave, a rise of 44% in childcare was reported (Haaretz, 2020).10

In a small subset of families, men for the first time have turned into the primary caregivers, as women who were essential workers — such as doctors and nurses — had to leave for work. Similar trends have been documented elsewhere. A US study estimated that in 9% of families with children, the wife was an essential worker and the husband was not, requiring the husband to become the primary caregiver (Alon et al., 2020). The same study notes that in countries with laws that grant paternity leave also to men, like Germany, Spain, and Iceland, men tend to be more involved in childcare down the line (ibid). The current crisis has thus led a large number of families to experience changes in gender roles that may trigger longer-term shifts within the family.

CONCLUSION

There are numerous factors that need to be monitored in order to understand the effect of coronavirus on women's position in the labor market. In the immediate term, a substantially larger share of unemployment claims since March 1, 2020, were by women — 56% compared to 44% of men — and this has been the case across all age groups. It appears that Jewish women, in particular, Haredi women, have been hardest hit. Furthermore, in 18 out of 19 industries, more women have lost jobs disproportionately to their share of positions in that industry. An analysis conducted by the Ministry of Finance among 877,000 job seekers who registered with the Israeli Employment Service between March 1st and April 5th found that (after controlling for demographic and economic factors), women were 5.5 percentage points more likely to have registered as job seekers during this time (Ministry of Finance, 2020). While the vast majority of job losses have come in the form of unpaid leave, it remains to be seen how many workers ultimately return to their employers.

¹⁰ This picture is apparently not unique to Israel. The Institute of Fiscal Studies' survey of 3,500 opposite gender households show UK mothers doing on average four hours more a day of childcare and housework than fathers during the shutdown, though fathers are now spending almost twice as many hours on childcare then they were in 2014-2015 (Andrew et al., 2020).

A major concern is the potential for long-term damage to both women's employment rates and the gender wage gap, as previous recessions have shown that job losses during a downturn can cause a long-term reduction in future earnings. The impact on employment rates and wage gaps is likely to lead to increased disparities in pension savings of men and women (Bowers & Fuchs, 2018). The closure of schools and daycare was likely a factor in the heavier job losses by women, as households had to choose whose income to forfeit and who would bear the primary responsibility for childcare at home. The impact on single-mothers in the workforce may be particularly damaging. Yet seen through a more positive lens, if the rapid shift towards telecommuting continues past the coronavirus shutdown, such flexibility will be particularly advantageous to women. This may lead to a reduction in the wage gap, particularly if it draws more women into higher pay industries such as high tech and finance. In addition, if men continue their greater involvement in, or in some cases primary responsibility for, childcare that arose from this crisis, this, too, will have an impact on promoting more equality in gender roles, and a more balanced work life for men also.

The main challenge to the labor market is in the short-term. The key area policy makers must emphasize to avoid longer-term damage to employment rates is to ensure that as many workers as possible only experience a temporary pause in employment rather than a longer-term disengagement from the labor market. Indeed, in recent weeks, policies have been implemented to provide incentives for employers to bring back workers from unpaid leave. Since women have experienced a higher share of employment losses during this time and since policy decisions — for example, incentives for employers to rehire full-time or part-time workers — could affect men and women differently, it is important to consider the impact of proposed policies through a gender lens (OECD, 2020c).

For those unable to return, training opportunities focused on enhancing skills for the changing workforce are needed. Public representatives and decision makers need to prepare for effective strategies for continuing education and childcare in case a second wave hits, or for future such events. It is important to encourage and even incentivize employers to maintain and allow flexibility in the workplace and for telecommuting and at the same time to advance policies in areas like paternity leave that promote gender equity.

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