WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY: CREATING A HOPEFUL FUTURE FOLLOWING THE COVID-19 DISASTER

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Relevance

The COVID-19 disaster has resulted in feelings of isolation and trauma, as well as hope for the future. It has highlighted a number of issues that were previously devalued by society: gender equity, equal access to health care, and emphasis on systems that work well for a certain segment of society but not for all people or the environment. Two international studies were conducted in April-May 2020 and September-December 2020 to measure the impacts of these issues on participants during the pandemic. Results showed that feelings of isolation and stress were at a high level, especially in the second survey, and overwork resulting from remote work, children at home attending school via computer, and unequal access to healthcare was noted. However, respondents also expressed significant levels of resilience and hope for the future. They have a desire to use the window of opportunity following a disaster to make changes that do not merely return us to a pre-pandemic time but allow us to emerge from the pandemic such that everyone can flourish.

Purpose

This article discusses our survey results through a disaster recovery-sustainability transition framework that reflects the philosophy of hope relayed by the respondents. **Methodology and Organization**

Two surveys were developed by a group of educational sustainability researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, using Qualtrics v. 2020, an online survey tool (Qualtrics, Provo, Utah). Responses from international participants were received: 482 in the first survey (open from April 3 to May 25, 2020), and 127 in the second survey (open from September 10 to November 25, 2020). Most participants were from the United States, with representation from other countries including Australia, Colombia, Estonia, and Ukraine. In addition to demographic information, participants were asked questions about their outlook toward the future beyond the pandemic.

Results

Most respondents expressed feelings of isolation, concerns for the economy, and a heightened recognition of the need to improve their country's health care system and gender and racial equity. At the same time, they were also optimistic about the future. A slight reduction in those feeling

somewhat or strongly optimistic about the future was seen between the first survey (66.7%) and the second survey (56.2%). However, there was significant agreement among participants that we have an opportunity to build a better society after COVID-19 (85.9%). Table 1 shows responses to five questions asked on both surveys and the responses to the second survey.

Table 1 – Likert Responses

Question	*N*	*Strongly Disagree*	*Somewhat Disagree*	*Neutral*	*Somewhat Agree*	*Strongly Agree*
My life will go back to normal (same as pre-COVID) after the COVID-19 crisis is over.	*121*	*12 (9.9%)*	*58 (47.9%)*	*9 (7.4%)*	*30 (24.8%)*	*12 (9.9%)*
I am optimistic about the future.	*121*	*4 (3.3%)*	*19 (15.7%)*	*30 (24.0%)*	*55 (45.5%)*	*13 (10.7%)*
My country's public health policies will need to change as a result of this pandemic.	*121*	*9 (7.4%)*	*7 (5.8%)*	*4 (3.3%)*	*32 (26.5%)*	*69 (57.0%)*
It will take years for my country's economy to recover.	*121*	*7 (5.8%)*	*20 (16.3%)*	*8 (6.6%)*	*50 (41.3%)*	*36 (29.8%)*
We have an opportunity to create a better society as a result of lessons learned.	*121*	*4 (3.3%)*	*2 (1.7%)*	*11 (9.1%)*	*35 (28.9%)*	*69 (57.0%)*

Three areas were prominent in terms of stress levels and feelings of trauma as the pandemic dragged on, both from an individual and a societal, systemic viewpoint: remote work, gender gaps, and mental and physical health inequities. Feelings of isolation from people vital to normal routines such as family and friends, as well as missing regularly scheduled events like exercise classes and dinners out, were mixed with needs to balance working from home with keeping things at home going and overseeing school studies by children now being undertaken at home. Levels of increased anxiety were reported, with one respondent saying she was taking anxiety medication for the first time.

A desire for better health care for everyone and increasing healthy lifestyles were clear themes during the first round of data collection and continued to be mentioned as part of respondents' visions for a post-COVID-19 future. Many participants in the surveys said they did not miss commuting to work and valued the additional time spent with family, including more time

to experience the outdoors. They said these were valuable aspects of their lives and worth keeping in post-COVID-19 times, which, aligns with the desire for more flexible work hours and schedules with some continued remote working.

This chance to learn from our experiences during the past year was a theme throughout both survey responses, particularly in the second survey. A window of opportunity to create greater social, economic, and environmental resilience in a systemic way was part of the hope that respondents expressed. "I think most people have become more resilient in this time and all we need to do to reap the benefits is support each other to foster that growth," said one respondent. "I think it [the pandemic] might be the catalyst that many needed to wake up and do more...for the economy, country, environment, and all the people. I hope we can take the momentum that we have gained during this and push forward to make changes," said another. "The growth is recognition that we came out the other side, experiencing trauma yes, but also proving that even through difficult times (if not all times) we were resilient," noted a third participant. Figure 1 shows a word cloud of the ten most common words mentioned in the surveys.

Figure 1. Word Cloud of the Ten Most Commonly Used Words in Surveys

Figure 1 shows the most commonly used words that participants used in their responses to our surveys. These words reflect their experiences during the pandemic, including what they valued, such as more time at home and with family and less time at work.

Conclusions

Our research is reflected by the window of opportunity framework created by Brundiers & Eakin (2018). These opportunities created by uncertain times following disaster are temporary, opening our political systems to scrutiny and catalyzing political dissent toward changes that may challenge those in power (Pelling and Dill, 2006). In Figure 2, adapted from the Disaster Recovery Transition Framework by Brundiers & Eakin (2018), we show how societal inequities can be heightened during disasters. We show how gender equity, for decades a burning issue throughout society, was raised even higher once the pandemic began and as it became clear that COVID-19 and the resulting restrictions were not going away any time soon.

Yet as reported above, despite the challenges of the pandemic, our respondents still expressed hope for a better future once the pandemic is over, not just a return to what was before, and a recognition that change needs to start now, before the window of opportunity closes. Ambitious targets need to be set to work towards these goals of gender equity and healthier work-life

balances for all. By acting on this meaningful hope, participants are reaching out to the future they want to see happen, trying to draw the good from that future into.

Figure 2. Brundiers & Eakin Disaster Recovery-Sustainability Transition Framework adapted for COVID-19

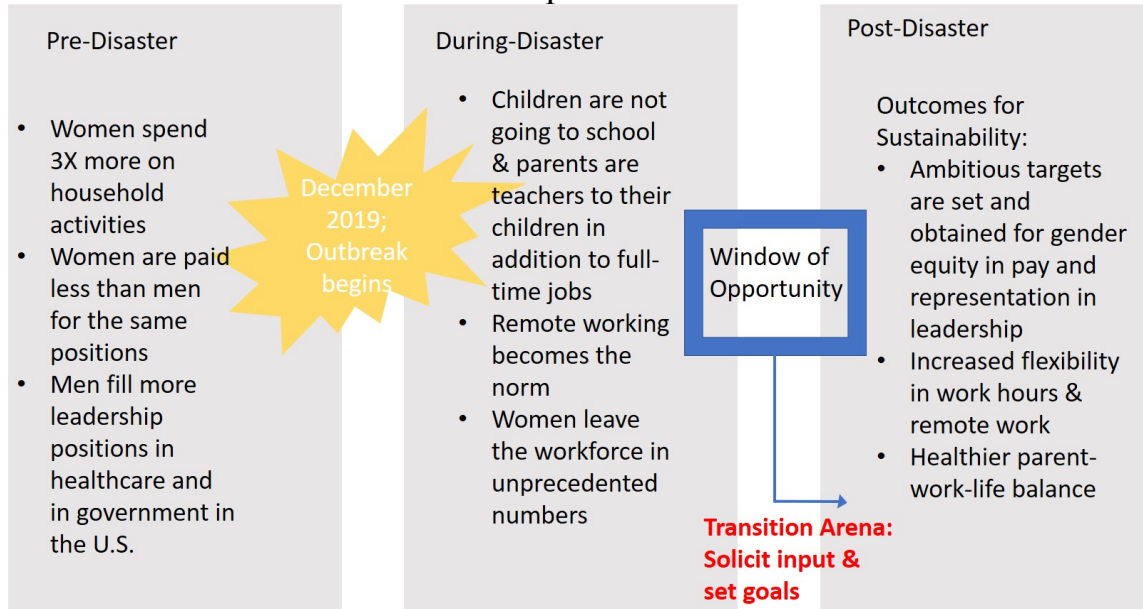| Pre-Disaster	During-Disaster	Post-Disaster
• Women spend 3X more on household activities • Women are paid less than men for the same positions • Men fill more leadership positions in healthcare and in government in the U.S.	December 2019; Outbreak begins • Children are not going to school & parents are teachers to their children in addition to full-time jobs • Remote working becomes the norm • Women leave the workforce in unprecedented numbers	Window of Opportunity Outcomes for Sustainability: • Ambitious targets are set and obtained for gender equity in pay and representation in leadership • Increased flexibility in work hours & remote work • Healthier parent-work-life balance **Transition Arena: Solicit input & set goals**

Figure description: This figure shows three columns of Pre-Disaster, During-Disaster, and Post-Disaster with a window of opportunity between the During-Disaster and Post-Disaster settings. Post-Disaster outcomes include targets for gender pay equity and leadership representation, remote work and increased flexibility, and healthier parent-work-life balance.

What needs to happen now (Chae, 2020). Hope can also give us energy to overcome obstacles, even when we are not exactly sure how to proceed. It can increase our inclination to trust that our fellow citizens share our commitment (Huber, 2019). For our respondents, a desired post-COVID-19 future is finding the good in what the pandemic has brought and carrying it forward so that everyone flourishes.

References:
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