

Justin Trudeau says he's committed to gender equality. He just missed a chance to prove it ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

There's never been a more important time for a feminist approach to governing, but the federal Liberals missed an opportunity on Friday when they passed over Carolyn Wilkins to be the country's top monetary policy-maker.

Wilkins is the senior deputy governor of the Bank of Canada, the right-hand woman to Stephen Poloz and a deft, insightful expert on financial crises and markets with an eye on inclusive growth and the digital economy. Poloz has been grooming her to succeed him for years.

Instead, the Trudeau government chose Tiff Macklem. He's the dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto and a longtime senior official at both the Department of Finance and the central bank. He's a sharp analyst, a clear and steady thinker and a genuine person. He will slide seamlessly and competently into the job.

But if there were ever a moment for Justin Trudeau to signal his government's commitment to gender equality in the economy, it's now. Because we're in trouble here.

Who has been most heavily penalized by layoffs and reduced hours during the pandemic? Women.

What demographic group is disproportionately on the risky front-lines of long-term care homes, nursing and cleaning staff? Women.

Of those working from home and trying to take care of children at the same time, who carries the lion's share of that burden? Women.

Of those stuck at home with abusive spouses, who is most at risk of escalating domestic violence during the lockdown? Women.

And when the crisis passes and we turn to economic policy-makers to plot our way back to prosperity, who normally benefits most from traditional stimulus that pump billions into construction and infrastructure to nurse an economy back to life? Men.

Let's not do that this time.

Employment numbers crunched by Carleton University public policy professor Jennifer Robson show that women with children saw employment levels drop by 17.8 per cent at the outset of the lockdown, compared to just 9.9 per cent for men with children, and 7.8 per cent for men without children. It's an even starker pattern for furloughs and reduced hours.

In other words, working during the pandemic — in the workplace or from home — is extremely difficult if you're a mother of young children. There's no successful, inclusive reopening of the economy unless child care is considered first.

Shovel-ready projects, government lending facilities and subsidies may have worked in the past, but they won't go far if a fair chunk of the workforce is taking care of the kids most of the day.

If school is not in, summer camps are cancelled, and daycares are either closed temporarily or have gone out of business, employers will have a great deal of trouble gearing up again.

And more often than not, it's women who pay the biggest price, especially if the rescue plans emphasize construction rather than the service-oriented, female-dominated sectors that have been hard hit.

Government planners have realized this in Hawaii, of all places, where they are implementing a formal feminist economic recovery strategy. Consultations with women are central, especially those from marginalized groups or those who have been directly affected by the pandemic. There's a focus on adequate housing and social supports. Stimulus funding will be funnelled towards helping low-paid women find better-paying jobs and diversifying their skills. And child care is central.

In Canada, as the provinces start to roll out their relaunch plans, child care and the ability of women to participate fully in the relaunch are often afterthoughts, says child care guru Martha Friendly, the executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

Her research shows a hodgepodge. Some jurisdictions say it's safe for just five kids to be together, others say 15. Some provinces are calling

workers back but are keeping schools and summer camps closed. Quebec is opening its primary schools but has not yet convinced the public that the reopening can be done safely. Some provinces say essential workers shouldn't have to pay for daycare, but they're not covering the losses for the daycares, putting them at the edge of bankruptcy.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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