

# On child care, politicians are doing exactly what they said they wouldn't. Women are paying the price <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

It looks like the collapsing job market has bottomed out and turned the corner for some people — namely men, and especially those without high incomes.

Mothers of children under six? Not so much.

And of course those women aren't going back to work because, in too many cases, even if their prospects are looking up, they can't figure out what to do with their kids.

It wasn't supposed to happen this way. From the prime minister on down, we were assured on a near daily basis by federal, provincial and business leaders that safe, reliable and accessible daycare was integral to the recovery.

But instead of having child-care options at the ready as companies restart their operations, we have federal-provincial negotiations that are gummed up in arguments around funding.

If we know anything about the economic impact of this pandemic, it's that it swipes repeatedly at the same people – women, often working in services sectors, often at low hourly wages. The pandemic robs them of their jobs or pushes them into dangerous positions with inadequate protections from the spread of the virus.

And now, as the economy reopens in bits and pieces across the country, it's men who are going back to work first.

A few facts:

Statistics Canada reported on Friday that after some provinces began easing up on the COVID-19 restrictions in May, the labour market saw the creation of about 290,000 jobs – a huge number for just one month but only a small fraction of what's been lost since the pandemic began.

Using StatsCan's measure of people who are without work or not working as much as they normally would – what they call the labour underutilization rate – the pandemic undermined the jobs of 34.8 per cent of the workforce in May, which was just slightly less awful than the 36.6 per cent in April.

The headline numbers mask a lot of dynamics. It's very hard to measure exactly how well we're doing because so many workers believe they have a job but aren't working many – if any – hours, and aren't completely sure they'll get their jobs back.

Taken at face value, we've erased about one-tenth of the losses that we've suffered since the pandemic set in. Men have regained about 15 per cent of their pandemic losses; women, about five per cent.

Generally, men gained back jobs at twice the pace of women.

The pattern is starker among low-wage workers. Employees who earned less than \$24 an hour were hit hardest in March and April. There's been a rebound in May, but low-wage workers are still working fewer hours than high-wage earners. And low-wage work rose 11 per cent for men, but just four per cent for women.

For mothers of children under six, employment levels rose just two per cent. That's better than nothing, but a far cry from fair.

Part of the reason is the nature of the employment that is springing back to life. Goods-producing industries, with their male-dominated workforces, have had an easier time getting back to work than services, where staff is dominated by women.

And let's not forget the household reality of the confinement. Kids in many parts of the country are not in school. Summer camps are iffy. And many daycares remain closed, at risk of never reopening because the math just doesn't work for them.

Margins are so thin for many daycare centres that operating at half-capacity is a recipe for going under. It makes more business sense to

simply stay shut. And once a daycare spot is erased, it's really expensive to create a new space from scratch.

So federal and provincial officials have been meeting with experts to figure out how to make sure child-care facilities don't stay shut for good, and are able to find a way to operate at less than full capacity for the next six to eight months. Ottawa would help finance the gap, sending money to the provinces, which would then increase subsidies for early learning.

The goal is to keep existing daycare spaces at the ready and facilitate a gradual return to work.

But progress on those talks is not keeping up to developments in the workforce.

On Friday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau put \$14 billion on the table, but not just for child care. The money is meant for a range of provincial needs, including municipalities, testing, tracing and health care.

Premiers have already signalled the funding is inadequate. And regardless, there's no word about how much child care would receive while competing against all the other spending items.

Despite all the goodwill of officials and the commitments from politicians and business leaders, they've done exactly what they said they wouldn't do: opened the doors to recovery without opening the doors for parents, especially mothers.

It doesn't work for families, it doesn't work for employers who need a broad range of employees to come back, and it certainly doesn't work for a fair recovery.

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** economics <sup>[4]</sup>

Women <sup>[5]</sup>

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