

Lack of child care holding women back in Nova Scotia ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The schools are closed, summer camps are mostly cancelled and when child-care centres open in a week, they'll operate at just 50 per cent of their capacity.

Nova Scotia's NDP says the provincial Liberal government simply doesn't understand the struggles working families face as the province reopens its economy.

"It is incoherent for the government to be . . . reopening the economy without a comprehensive plan for child care, especially for school-aged children. There is an urgent need for action on this issue," NDP Leader Gary Burrill said last week.

Not surprisingly, the lack of available child care has a disproportionate negative impact on working women. Statistics Canada released numbers last week that show jobs began to return in May, but those jobs went overwhelmingly to men.

Following precipitous job losses in March and April, Nova Scotia rebounded in May by adding 8,600 jobs.

But, even as employment began to recover, Nova Scotian women continued to lose out. StatsCan also reported that 14,600 more Nova Scotian women were unemployed in May than in April.

Burrill said the job numbers indicate that the economic hardships created by COVID-19 are not equally shared. Women are facing deeper job losses, and the lack of child care is a barrier to their return to the workplace.

"The reality is that women still do the lion's share of work caring for dependents. Without plans to address child care, elder care and other forms of care work, thousands of women across our province will not be able to return to work," Burrill said.

While the unemployment rate for Nova Scotian men dropped from 12.5 per cent in April to 12.1 per cent in May, the unemployment rate among women increased from 10.8 per cent in April to a whopping 16.4 per cent in May.

It's not the only factor, but a lack of available child care contributes mightily to the uneven economic recovery experienced by men and women.

And the 10-day lag between the provincial economy "reopening" on June 5 and child-care centres reopening, at half capacity, on June 15, suggests that the provincial government didn't make child care a priority.

Most sectors – child care included – developed plans to safely reopen, and those plans were then approved by provincial public health officials. While most economic sectors were approved to reopen June 5, approval of the child-care centres' plan was delayed while the province and the centres hammered out some final details.

Had the province deemed it a priority, child care would have been moved up in the queue to make sure those details were finalized in time to allow the centres to reopen along with other economic sectors last Friday.

The New Democrats' business critic, Claudia Chender, said the rapid increase in unemployment among women highlights the need for the province to address the concerns her party is hearing from parents, early childhood educators and community groups.

"More and more women and families will be facing difficult decisions about returning to work in the coming days when they have no child-care options, especially for school-age children," Chender said.

Nationally, the May jobs picture didn't look much different from Nova Scotia's. There were almost 290,000 jobs created across Canada last month, but two-thirds of them went to men.

The disparity between how men and women are weathering the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic has some financial experts calling it a "she-cession."

Federal Employment Minister Carla Qualtrough said the job numbers show "the disproportionate impact that this pandemic has had on women, whether it be increased child-care responsibilities, precarious work to begin with or undervalued work."

"We absolutely know as a government that a successful recovery from this will necessarily involve a deliberate focus on supporting women," she said.

As the economy reopens, the NDP is gathering stories from parents about the lack of child-care options and the impact it's having in their lives.

A parent from Dartmouth wrote: "I'm a single mother who is self-employed. This creates a major challenge for me. I won't be able to return to work until I have safe child care in place for my daughter."

Climbing out of the economic hole left by the coronavirus will require all hands on deck, but many female hands will be missing from the workforce as long as adequate child care is missing from the province.

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