

The nearly impossible balance for working mothers during pandemic ^[1]

As we stop self-isolation, maybe we should lower our societal expectations of women. Now's the time to rethink our lives with new norms for care work.

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Excerpted from the article

A manager in the health sector in Montreal, Myriam has been juggling work with two young children, who have been out of school for over two months. "I was in my first trimester of pregnancy, which compounded everything", she says. "We were initially in our apartment, and it was very stressful, so we had to leave our house and go live with my mom so that she could help us." (Pseudonyms are being used in this article to allow women interviewed to speak freely.)

Her mother, meanwhile, runs a financial consulting firm, but took time off to help her daughter. Now, she continues to watch her grandchildren two days a week, while managing her own professional duties.

"Thankfully I have a very supportive workplace," she said. "But I have to be very strategic on what I work on, and it's much more difficult for me to plan ahead. All of our work is COVID-19-related right now, and there are some really important projects that I could be contributing to, but I have very little time."

As the pandemic unfolds, it is bringing to light the systemic inequalities of women in work. The impact of the increased workload is being felt, not only at the individual level but also at the national level, where women – and mothers of young children in particular – have been stepping in to fill the void left by school and daycare closures. As a critical part of the work force starts to burn out, addressing this problem also means acknowledging how much pressure working mothers were under before the crisis.

"I don't know what I am going to do" says Alice, a project manager in a global law firm. She is just returning from a maternity leave as social distancing measures are being relaxed, which means that her husband will have to return to the office in a few weeks.

"We live in quite a traditional town," she adds. "Even if he wanted to stay home, he would still be pressured to go into the office – people would not understand."

Helen Lewis reported in *The Atlantic* that working mothers are disproportionately affected in the pandemic because of the increased requirement for care work. Our society is structured in a way that this type of work, whether inside the home or in schools, hospitals and long-term care facilities, is still performed mostly by women.

In Canada, while frontline care workers are mostly female, hospital leadership is still overwhelmingly male. Women make up over 90 percent of nurses and elderly care workers, but only 42 percent of physicians (those numbers are rising). At the Canadian Medical Association, only 23 percent of the board is female. Furthermore, statistics from 2014 (the most recent numbers available) indicate that over 97 percent of early childhood educators and 80 percent of elementary school teachers in Canada are female.

Although this has changed over the last few decades, women have also been the primary provider of childcare inside the home. In 2019, *Forbes* reported that women were eight times more likely than their male partner to take time off work to care for sick children or manage their children's schedules.

Before the crisis, household duties in Canada were already divided along gender lines, where women spent at least 28 hours per week on unpaid work, 50 percent more than the average time spent by men. Mothers were also more likely to take the lead on child-related tasks, such as meal preparation, bedtime and playing. With daycare, schools and extracurricular activities closed, children require at least 40 hours more of childcare from their parents – the equivalent of a full-time job. If this additional childcare is shared equally, this means 48 hours a week for working mothers and 37 hours a week for working fathers – in addition to their jobs.

One argument for asking women to be more flexible in times of crisis is that, if women tend to make less than their husbands, their salary is the one that can more easily be sacrificed. However, when a woman is the higher earner, the narrative does not necessarily change.

An example is Lisa, who works in urban planning for the city of Toronto. She has just returned from maternity leave, and is struggling to get

her career back on track. Planning around her husband's schedule, she works for three hours in the early morning, then two hours again after their son has gone to bed at around 9:00 PM.

Because of her new schedule, she has had to take a step back in a number of areas. "In a different circumstance, I would be hounding my boss, asking for work," she says. "They have asked for volunteers for a number of assignments, including for people to be redeployed to healthcare and help with administration in the crisis, but I just can't take on any extra projects right now."

Myriam, also the higher earner, adds: "I am so powerless right now to seize these opportunities to show my worth."

There are 4 million mothers of young children in Canada, 75 percent of which were in the workforce before the COVID-19 crisis. As Monique Jérôme-Forget, former Quebec Minister of Finance, noted in a recent interview: "Women are finding this crisis extremely difficult, but this only amplifies what is already happening, which is that mothers are carrying the greater load with childcare and eventually decide that, because it is too much, they won't take that promotion. This is an occasion for everyone to take stock of the amount of household duties that are still performed by women."

As we move out of self-isolation, our country will start settling into a new reality arguably destabilized by the pandemic. We will want to consider not only what we are really asking working mothers to do – which is balance work and childcare in nearly impossible circumstances – but also what society would look like if we changed the norms for care work.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: women's labour force participation ^[4]
gender inequity ^[5]

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