

COVID-19 and the gender employment gap among parents of young children ^[1]

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Access full study online [PDF] ^[2]

Attachment	Size
 COVID19 and the gender employment gap among parents of young children.pdf ^[3]	421.44 KB

Excerpted from abstract and introduction

Abstract

Working life in Canada changed dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using Labour Force Survey data, we show that gender employment gaps among parents of young children widened considerably between February and May, 2020 net of differences in job and personal characteristics. Gender gaps grew more for parents of elementary school-aged children vs. preschoolers, and among less-educated parents. To aid post-pandemic recovery and prepare for future disruptive disasters/pandemics, policymakers should focus attention on fostering an accessible, well-funded public care sector and implementing flexible leave policies beyond the period of infancy to help working parents equitably manage caregiving demands.

Introduction

Since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020, working life in Canada has changed dramatically. As governments took drastic measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19, many workplaces were forced to close while others moved as much work as possible online. Employment levels plummeted (Lemieux et al. 2020). For parents of children who are too young to be left unsupervised, the pandemic created additional challenges as schools and childcare centres were closed. Parents able to work from home struggled to juggle childcare and employment duties, whereas others faced stark choices between continuing to go to work and caring for kids. For single parents, maintaining both employment and caregiving is a particular challenge. For couple parents, managing life in the pandemic has meant difficult choices about who cares, who works, and how.

Given extant gender inequalities in the division of paid work and care work, and in parents’ employment experiences (Fuller 2018, Beaujot, Liu, and Ravanera 2017, Fuller and Cooke 2018, Moyser 2017, Moyser and Burlock 2018), understanding how the pandemic has impacted gendered inequalities among parents is of critical importance. The pervasive nature of COVID-19 has led some to characterize the pandemic as a “great equalizer.” This metaphor portrays pandemic as an exogenous shock that limits the economic activity of almost everyone regardless of social location (Jones and Jones 2020). Emerging evidence, however, challenges this view. It shows that the pandemic is exacerbating pre-existing social inequalities by more strongly impacting women (at least initially), less-educated and lower-wage workers, and other groups that face disadvantage in the labour market (Lemieux et al. 2020, Kristal and Yaish 2020, Kochhar and Barroso 2020, Beland et al. 2020, Qian and Fan 2020). We expect gender inequality to grow among parents of younger children as mothers take on a disproportionate share of child care, especially among workers who tend to be positioned at the bottom of the labour market.

Overall gender differences in the impact of the pandemic stem, in part, from pervasive gender segregation in the workplace. As female-dominated in-person service jobs (e.g., restaurant, hotel, and childcare jobs) have been among the hardest hit amid lockdowns, gender impacts of the pandemic on employment are unequal (Lemieux et al. 2020, Kochhar and Barroso 2020). Insofar as education strongly impacts one’s labour market position and occupational gender segregation is higher among less-educated workers (England 2010), these gender effects may also vary across educational groups. Although gender segregation across occupations and industries will contribute to unequal effects regardless of parental status, mothers and fathers face additional constraints that have the potential to magnify these effects. Even if their jobs remained available, parents may be unable to work without schools and childcare centres. Whether employed parents equitably share care work or default to a female caregiver model will have potentially long-lasting repercussions for gender equity as the pandemic ultimately recedes.

The more marginal economic position of mothers versus fathers, such as their greater likelihood of working part-time and in low-wage firms (Moyser 2017, Fuller 2018, Cooke and Fuller 2018), suggests that mothers likely bear the brunt of caregiving and hence employment losses. Even absent economic incentive structures, deeply entrenched gender norms about who is best suited to caring for children push mothers to the fore as caregivers. Preliminary analysis finds that mothers’ employment has been more strongly affected by the pandemic than that of fathers in Canada (Statistics Canada 2020). In this research brief we delve deeper into how the pandemic affects gender inequality among parents. Drawing on Labour Force Survey data covering February to May, 2020, we examine trends in the gender gap in employment among parents in the wake of the pandemic. We focus on the group with the greatest childcare responsibilities, parents with a youngest child aged 0-12 years, limiting our analysis

to those already attached to the labour market (employed or having been employed in the past year) when the pandemic hit. To provide further nuance we disaggregate results by educational attainment and assess both gross patterns and patterns net of differences in job and demographic characteristics.

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