

The pandemic is hurting Canada's working mothers ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The COVID-19 pandemic upended life in Canada as we knew it - including the ways we work. As governments took drastic measures to reduce the novel coronavirus's spread, employment levels plummeted.

And when schools and child-care centres closed down, a stark and urgent question loomed for working parents: Who would take care of the children?

Mothers typically spend more time caregiving than fathers, even when both are employed full-time, and are often the default parent to sacrifice their job if necessary. However, industries that have been designated as essential are also primarily female, while men's jobs tend to be more flexible. Perhaps, some wagered, the pandemic would result in men stepping up on the home front, paving the way to more egalitarian gender divisions of working and caring.

Statistics Canada's Labour Force survey, however, suggests otherwise. In our paper in *Canadian Public Policy*, we examined trends among those who were employed (or had been recently) when the pandemic hit, revealing which Canadians lost their jobs - the worst-case scenario - either because their employer laid them off or because they had to quit in the face of untenable caregiving responsibilities. And it turns out that mothers have been hit much harder by the pandemic.

This was especially true for parents of elementary schoolaged children (between 6 and 12).

In February, mothers' employment had trailed fathers' by only one percentage point, but by May, that gap had doubled among parents of preschoolers and multiplied seven times among parents of elementary-school-aged children. If the closing of child-care centres was bad for gender equity in employment, homeschooling has been a killer.

We also found gender inequality increased more among lesseducated parents. Highly educated workers, who usually enjoy greater job flexibility, appear to have been more able to juggle child care, schooling and employment - and while it was surely exhausting, it didn't push more mothers than fathers of preschool-aged children out of their jobs altogether. (For those with school-aged children, the gap existed, but grew much less than for those with less education.) But jobs typically held by workingclass women - retail, hospitality, restaurants - were hit hard, and even when they remained available, they weren't easily combined with watching kids. You can't bring your child along to the store where you work as a cashier, after all. With no school, no child care and no option to juggle at home, someone had to step back from their job - and mostly, it was mothers. Among those with a high-school education or less, the employment gap between fathers and mothers with schoolaged children widened more than 10 times, reaching 16.8 percentage points by May.

As the Canadian economy starts to reopen and service jobs return, there is the hope that gender gaps will shrink back to their previous state. But with care options still limited, we fear that the gap will only widen further as parents reach their breaking point.

Even before the pandemic, child-care centres operated on tight margins; COVID-19 restrictions on capacity and operating procedures make it even harder to achieve financial viability. This threatens to devastate a sector that is critical to our economic recovery and to mothers' re-employment. And what are parents to do if schools do not open fulltime in the fall? Little has been said about how parents are supposed to cope with this or what alternative care arrangements, if any, will be offered.

Moreover, while most provinces have extended job-protected leaves for those caring for family members in the pandemic, these provisions are temporary. If job protections for caregiving are rescinded before child care and schooling are fully available, mothers' employment will only continue to plunge.

Governments should be plowing resources into supporting and expanding early-childhood education, and working flat out to find creative and safe ways to provide caregiving for schoolchildren if they are not back fulltime. Parents need to know that they won't be hung out to dry. Job protections for caregivers also need to be assured so parents who are forced to stay home have jobs to return to, so careers aren't derailed. COVID-19 caregiving provisions also need to be structured to empower and incentivize men to use them, as blindly offering more generous provisions may actually encourage employer discrimination against mothers.

Instead, policy makers appear to be sending the message that parents should muddle through as best they can, and that if women's work is

sacrificed - well, too bad. This is simply unacceptable.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made this apparent: More than ever, child care is an essential service. The disproportionate employment toll borne by mothers will not automatically disappear when the economy opens up.

Mothers, especially working-class ones, need concerted policy support to help them return to and stay in the labour market.

Related link: COVID-19 and the gender employment gap among parents of young children

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