

Fiscal snapshot supports calls for a gendered approach to economic relief ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

OTTAWA -- Among the many findings of the federal government's fiscal snapshot released Wednesday, is the glaring conclusion that women have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

The document's gender-based analysis – a breakdown of how COVID-19 has affected men and women differently – shows women have severely felt the weight of COVID-19 both from a health and socio-economic perspective.

This supports the mounting call by advocates for governments at all levels to approach their relief strategies through a gendered lens.

SNAPSHOT CONCLUSIONS

Beyond the sheer fact that more women than men are losing their lives to the disease, they're also experiencing deep socio-economic hurt.

Women faced a much steeper decline in job loss between March and April with 1.5 million out of work. This was attributed to the fact that women hold more precarious, part-time jobs.

When looking at the uptake of the essential workers' wage top-up – a deal struck between the prime minister and the premiers in early May to support workers on the front lines making minimum wage— the majority of beneficiaries were women.

"At the national level, Statistics Canada data indicates that women represent 80 per cent of health-care workers (including employment in long-term care facilities) and more than half of retail, and accommodation and food services workers," the snapshot states.

While employment numbers evened out in April, the transition back to work has once again exposed inequities. In May, men rebounded at a rate twice as fast as women, with child care being a major factor.

"Going forward, employment might be expected to increase somewhat faster among men than women in the coming months given the more rapid increase in goods-producing industries in May and the fact that women are more likely to continue with caregiving responsibilities while child-care facilities remain closed and while school is disrupted."

CHILD-CARE NEEDS

Kate Bezanson, the associate dean of social sciences at Brock University in Ontario, told CTVNews.ca on Thursday that in order for the country to find some economic relief in the months ahead – women and child-care needs must be at the forefront of decision-making.

"Staying out of this recession requires us to invest in social infrastructure, not built infrastructure, social infrastructure, that will create jobs for women and allow women to return to the labour market," she said. "We'll have all those great ripple effects like decreased childhood poverty, decreased women's poverty, more taxation revenue."

Bezanson said the unequal division of labour in the home has meant women have experienced a loss in productivity and now face job insecurity given the lack of available childcare options and uncertainty around sending kids back to school in the fall.

"I think all of us know families that are sitting down and saying well if schools don't go back full time, which one of us is going to leave our jobs or reduce our hours, and we know usually it's women," she said.

"There is a palpable level of anger and frustration among parents and I think also among employers that we said let's open the economy but we haven't figured out how we care for our kids and it's not sustainable."

A new Statistics Canada survey released Thursday echoes this sentiment. Respondents said their top concern related to family and the pandemic was around balancing their personal and professional life.

Around 80 per cent of those with children aged 11 and younger who rely on schooling as a primary source of childcare, report being "very

or extremely concerned."

PATH TO RECOVERY

Like the myriad of once relatively unseen social inequities uncovered throughout the pandemic, Canada's fractured child-care system is also exposing itself.

"Those kinds of demands of parenting and homeschooling and care up until now hasn't been visible in the same way, so I think we have a moment now where we have a consensus understanding that childcare really is at the centre of what permits us all to undertake all of the other things that we do," said Bezanson.

Even with a common understanding of the problem after four-months of pandemic adapting, she notes that the need for a more unified, national approach to tackling this issue remains pressing.

In early June, the Trudeau Liberals offered provinces and territories up to \$14 billion to cover the mandatory 10 days of paid sick leave provision for workers, to help acquire and stockpile personal protective equipment, and to help child-care facilities reopen safely.

Finance Minister Bill Morneau touted this initiative on Thursday during his speech in the House of Commons.

"We are proposing to invest in a safe, sufficient and adequate supply of childcare, so that parents, especially mothers, don't have to choose between going to work and ensuring their children are taken care of."

But ultimately it's been up to the provinces and territories to dictate the trajectory of childcare delivery in their jurisdictions.

"We end up with really significant variation in access to certain supports depending on where you live," said Bezanson. "So it becomes evermore important to have a coordinating mechanism if we want to equalize that kind of access to services."

Three national early childhood education and child-care organizations have created a petition to lobby the federal government for action. The Canadian Child Care Federation, Child Care Now, and Childcare Resource and Research Unit want to see Ottawa adopt a plan to sustain the child-care sector through the pandemic.

"If it collapses, the federal government's promise to turn the fragile patchwork of services into a robust, fully effective comprehensive high-quality system will be that much more difficult," reads their website.

Bezanson and her colleagues have also pressed the Liberals to quickly adopt a national "Childcare Secretariat" to ensure childcare is a core component of any economic recovery strategy and recognized as a priority at the highest levels of government.

"I'm hopeful we can all get on the same page and do the right thing and not stunt, stall, make impossible, or least make slower, the kind of economic recovery we need," she said.

Related link: Economic and fiscal snapshot 2020: House speech ^[3]

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