

Alberta women shoulder disproportionate economic toll as pandemic forces mothers out of workforce ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In early May, Calgary lawyer Melody Rodger walked away from her six-figure salary job to become — at least temporarily — a stay-at-home mom.

An associate at a mid-sized Calgary firm specializing in family law, Rodger had spent the previous two months futilely attempting to keep up her billable hours while juggling the demands of her five-year-old son and two-year-old daughter, whose daycare had shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic and who were now home full-time.

She stuck it out as long as she could, but the fatigue, stress and guilt — combined with her children's unhappiness and her husband's need to devote more time to his own business — eventually became overwhelming. For the good of her family, the 33-year-old made the decision to take a leave from her job.

"It just wasn't working. I was trying to do full-day mediations over Zoom from the bedroom, trying to make it look professional, and the kids would be asking for me, wanting me, crying for me. If your kids are downstairs crying for you, how productive are you upstairs trying to work?" Rodger said. "I just felt like I was not doing a good job with anything and it was really upsetting to me."

Rodger's experience is just one example of the myriad ways the COVID-19 pandemic has derailed the working lives and economic prospects of Alberta women. While many men have suffered job loss in the face of economic shutdown and a simultaneous collapse in oil prices — and many fathers have had to struggle with work-life balance and child-care demands in the wake of school and daycare closures — the numbers clearly show a disproportionate burden has fallen on women.

Women's employment slower to rebound

While the level of total employment in Alberta remains about 10 per cent below where it was in February, according to new data released by Statistics Canada last week, men's employment hovers at nine per cent below pre-pandemic levels while women's employment is 12 per cent below pre-pandemic levels.

And while the unemployment rate has risen for both women and men, it seems that it is women, not men, who are making the decision to opt out of the workforce entirely. The labour force participation rate — the section of Alberta's working-age population that is currently employed or seeking employment — has remained relatively steady for men before and after the start of COVID-19, but for women, it has declined by 3.1 per cent.

Part of the explanation for the discrepancy between the genders is that female-dominated sectors — such as retail, food service and accommodation — were most impacted by COVID-19 and the resulting shutdown of the economy. According to a new report from RBC Economics, a total of 1.5 million Canadian women lost their jobs in the first two months of the recession, and women's employment has been slower to rebound. Despite absorbing 51 per cent of job losses in March and April, nationwide, women accounted for just 45 per cent of job gains in May and June as economic activity restarted.

'It all feels impossible'

A second, critical factor is motherhood. According to the RBC report, employment among mothers with toddlers or school-aged children fell by seven per cent between February and May while the decline in employment among fathers with children of the same age was five per cent. In June, despite more mothers and fathers returning to work, the divergence persisted, with employment levels for fathers returning to near pre-crisis levels while levels for mothers still hovered three per cent below February employment.

Alexa Briggs, a 43-year-old Calgary mother of two girls aged 3 and 5, understands exactly why women are dropping out of the workforce. She and her partner have been working from home and juggling child-care demands since the start of the pandemic and are, in her words, "mentally and physically exhausted."

"There's no point during the day in which you're not doing something. It's all frenetic," Briggs said. "You're managing your children, you're

managing your job, and trying to find any time left over to sleep and eat. It all feels impossible.”

While Briggs said her partner pulls his weight, she — like Rodger — feels a hefty dose of “mommy guilt.”

“Even though I feel like we balance it out fairly well in terms of workload, when the kids are here, I am unable to tune them out in the same way that he can. I just cannot switch it off,” she said. “I don’t know how women without support are managing. Without my parents, who are taking the girls a few days a week now, I don’t know that I would have made the decision to stay at work.”

Lost ground could become permanent

It’s one thing to take a career break of a few weeks or even a couple of months, but the problem with COVID-19 is that no one knows how long a “break” might last. While Alberta has said it will reopen schools in September, that is subject to change if case counts rise. If intermittent school and daycare closures continue over the course of the next several months, it’s possible that women who thought they were taking temporary leaves may find themselves facing a much more permanent situation.

Marlene Cameron, president of BPW Calgary — the Business and Professional Women’s Club of Calgary — said a recent survey by industry advocacy group Women in Capital Markets indicated women finance professionals are 16 per cent more likely than men to report a decrease in mental health since the start of the pandemic and 10 per cent more likely to report increased stress levels.

The same survey indicated nine per cent of women in finance had considered asking for a leave of absence from work, while the same number had considered quitting their jobs.

“These women are well-educated professionals, so that would be a big loss to the industry and to their own potential in their career,” Cameron said. “It’s taken quite some time for women to make inroads, especially in some of these male-majority fields like finance, law and accounting. We were just kind of inching up, and now there’s this potential for losing ground.”

Charles St-Arnaud, chief economist for Alberta Central, the central banking facility for the province’s credit unions, said the long-term impact of COVID-19 on women’s economic prospects poses a potential risk to the overall economy as well as to women themselves.

“There’s a real concern about are we, in some ways, exacerbating inequality between the sexes? It’s something we may have to think about,” St-Arnaud said. “There may be a segment of the population that will be permanently hit by this.”

Searching for solutions

Alberta Minister of Children’s Services Rebecca Schulz said the UCP government is aware that women are bearing the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic. She said the government’s economic recovery plan, unveiled in June, will create jobs for women by investing in diversification and creating opportunities in sectors like tourism and technology. She said the government is also encouraging child-care centres to be more flexible in meeting the needs of working parents, whether that’s by offering extended hours or ensuring testing and tracing protocols are in place so that daycares can reopen rapidly in the event of a case of COVID-19 on-site.

“We’re encouraging really common sense things, like enabling parents who have a child in a traditional child-care centre that targets ages 0 to 5 to bring in older siblings,” Schulz said. “We want to make sure there is care available in the system and that there is flexibility.”

However, Janis Irwin, NDP critic for the status of women, said that doesn’t go far enough. She said the government’s decision to cancel the former NDP government’s \$25-per-day child care pilot program shows it doesn’t understand the importance of affordable child care when it comes to getting women back to work.

“Child care is not the only thing we need for an effective economic recovery, but it’s a huge pillar,” Irwin said. “Without child-care support, without affordable quality child care, we know that the economy won’t recover the way it should.”

For her part, Rodger has found her home life to be going much more smoothly since making the decision to step away from work. She has enjoyed many aspects of this summer at home with her children, her husband is able to focus on his business, and she no longer feels like she’s being pulled in 10 different directions at once.

However, spending 24 hours a day with her children — after growing used to having eight hours a day where she could talk to other adults, use her education to perform interesting work and complete tasks without being interrupted — is undesirable in the long run, Rodger says. But with her oldest set to start kindergarten in the fall and so much uncertainty around what that will look like and the availability of child care, the future looks frighteningly hazy. At this point, she doesn’t know when or if she will be able to return to the office.

“I never wanted to be a stay-at-home mom. I’ve been OK with it as long as I think of it being temporary, but if I think about it being permanent, I think, ‘yeah, no,’” Rodger said. “There’s going to have to be a very proactive solution that focuses not just on getting people back to work, but on getting parents back to work. Because right now, even making plans just feels impossible.”

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