

We can't let COVID-19 destroy economic gains for women^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It would take a cynical averting of the gaze from some glaring realities not to learn from the coronavirus pandemic about deep injustices in the way we live.

As well as claiming more than 600,000 lives around the world and devastating the global economy, COVID-19 has cast a spotlight on harsh economic, structural and social inequality in this country and others.

As ever when the earth moves and trauma occurs, people of colour, the poor, the marginalized have paid the highest price in death and sickness.

And in economic terms, it has been women more than men who have been hit especially hard by the consequences of the coronavirus.

Just as we are all amateur epidemiologists now, and just as more of us are committing to fighting racism, more of us, too, will need to become feminists in the long recovery ahead.

The Canadian Human Rights Commission has already called on governments to ensure that social and economic recovery efforts “take a feminist approach.”

Recent research makes clear why such a course is needed.

The coronavirus crisis has, the commission said, “put women at greater risk of job loss, poverty, food insecurity, loss of housing and domestic violence.”

Yet there is opportunity in its aftermath, the commission said, to address long-standing inequalities with new commitment and more open minds.

“As we emerge from this crisis, Canada has an opportunity to design an approach to recovery that promotes gender equality and a more inclusive society,” it said.

There’s plenty to do to meet that tall order.

An alarming new study by RBC Economics finds that the pandemic has cut women’s participation in the Canadian labour force to its lowest level since the mid-1980s, and threatens to undo decades of gains by women.

About 1.5 million Canadian women lost their jobs in the first two months of the crisis, the report says. The sectors in which women dominate – accommodation, food services, retail, education, travel — have been hardest hit and slowest to rebound.

“From March through June, the unemployment rate of women surpassed that of men for the first time in over three decades,” says the RBC research team.

It is by now axiomatic to also note that women historically carry most of the domestic burden and responsibility for elder care, and once again this is confirmed by the study.

It finds that employment among women with toddlers or school-aged children fell seven per cent between February and May, compared with a decline of just four per cent among fathers with children of the same age.

Single mothers were particularly hard hit, with employment down 12 per cent from February to June compared with a seven-per-cent decline among single fathers.

Worse still, women shouldering the responsibilities of child-care are more likely to “fall out” of the labour force entirely, says the report.

For women in Canada, the slowness of reopening in women-dominated sectors combined with the uncertainty of school reopenings in September have made finding new positions less likely or returning to low-wage work less practical.

“It has taken several decades for women to garner enough heft in the labour market to finally bring economic equality within sight,” says

the RBC report. “Prior to the pandemic, women had become a force in this area like never before, earning 42 per cent of household income.”

But the size of the setback and shape of the recovery so far “suggests a return to pre-COVID levels won’t be easy.”

In all this, Canada is hardly alone.

“Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID -19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex,” said a United Nations policy brief.

“Across the globe, women earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs, are more likely to be employed in the informal sector. They have less access to social protections and are the majority of single-parent households. Their capacity to absorb economic shocks is therefore less than that of men.”

COVID-19 is not only a challenge for global health systems, the UN report said. It is “also a test of our human spirit. “Recovery must lead to a more equal world.”

These findings reinforce the urgency of two fundamental measures in Canada.

To ease the load on women, governments need to find a way to get schools back full-time as soon as possible.

August looms and Ontario has been slow to provide parents with much-needed clarity and eager to hand the tough decisions off to local school boards. Parents, and women in particular, will find it very hard to get back to work if their kids still aren’t back in class this fall.

Second, for women to participate fully in the workforce, affordable, quality childcare, under new safety protocols, is essential.

It has taken a global health crisis to make clear just how necessary, and how fragile, such supports are. A recent report by a national advocacy organization says \$2.5 billion is required to meet the need.

In an era of crisis, when money has seemed to be no object, it would be dollars well spent.

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