An aging Canada can't afford to have women out of the labour force [1]

Kevin Carmichael: We should all take a lesson from Quebec's policy of heavily subsidized daycare

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EXCERPTS

The thinking class has the COVID-19 crisis surrounded.

A full recovery will require a vaccine, which probably won't be widely available until 2021 at the earliest.

In the meantime, the debate about potential shortcuts has been settled: There are none. You can suck it up and live with lockdowns until you crush the infection rate, or you can roll the dice on your health system's ability to cope with waves of COVID-19.

But as we hunker down, data show clearly that the recession has hurt women more than men. An effective recovery plan therefore must counter the economic and societal forces that caused that to happen.

Women dominate the services side of the economy, where businesses such as restaurants, advertising firms and real estate brokerages were effectively closed during the lockdown. Producers of tangible goods tended to be deemed essential and stayed open, while construction sprung back to life quickly because social distancing was easier to manage. Advantage: men, because we've failed to reassign gender roles that are as old as the Industrial Revolution.

"Household roles are playing a little bit of a part in women not getting into trades," said Kayla Fehr, a certified mechanic and co-chair of the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology's Women in Trades and Technology Committee. "Girls are growing up and they aren't being told that the trades are an option."

Women accounted for about 60 per cent of new unemployment between February and June, and the percentage of women over 15 years of age working or seeking employment — the participation rate — has fallen below 60 per cent for the first time since the early 2000s.

A study by Royal Bank of Canada's economics department concluded that many of those women are in danger of being left behind by the recovery, since the industries in which they work will be the last to get back to normal, and because women represent Canada's backup plan for when its daycares and schools can't open and its approach to caring for the elderly fails.

Those realities should be corrected because they are blatantly unfair. If women start dropping out of the labour force, they will lose ground in a workforce that already is top heavy with men.

But those gaps also should be closed because we will all suffer in the longer run if they aren't.

Tiff Macklem, the Bank of Canada governor, acknowledged this month that the "burden of this challenge falls disproportionately on women" not because it is the politically correct thing to say, but because an economy that doesn't fully engage half of its population will generate significantly less economic output.

Counterintuitively, that would put upward pressure on interest rates because we'd be less able to create faster growth without stoking inflation, which is what guides the central bank's decisions about where to set borrowing costs.

"It is imperative that this proves a short-term diversion," Royal Bank's Dawn Desjardins, Carrie Freestone and Naomi Powell said in their report, referring to the sudden gap between the involvement of men and women in the economy.

This gap was already too wide before the crisis, especially since an aging economy like Canada needs to maximize all the resources that it has.

But at least we know what to do about it, thanks to Quebec's policy of heavily subsidized daycare. The program, which has been in place since the late 1990s, had essentially closed the gap between the participation rates between men and women aged 25 to 54 at around 90 per cent ahead of the current recession.

No other province comes close, and no other province does anywhere near as much to lower the cost of child care, although British

Columbia is headed in that direction.

“The challenge of child care, it’s a total nightmare,” said Vicki Saunders, the founder of SheEO, a Toronto-based venture that backs women-led startups. “It’s just so painful for women entrepreneurs who are at home, or women who are working from home, just that extra workload.”

I asked Saunders what policies were needed for the recovery. Daycare and eldercare was first on her list. She started to muse about other possibilities, then decided to stop there. “We have pulled back the curtains on who keeps society going during times of crisis,” she said. “A focus on the care economy is absolutely critical. It shows the sickness of society when they don’t look after things like this and don’t recognize that value.”

We can’t take for granted that an academic consensus will automatically turn into policy, even when the federal government indicates it’s listening by running all its policies through a feminist analysis.

> Signals aren't substance
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> - Kate Bezanson, Brock University

Kate Bezanson, associate dean of social sciences at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont. and co-researchers determined that $2 billion would be needed to restore daycare capacity to pre-crisis levels. Instead, the federal government’s $19-billion Safe Restart agreement with the provinces allocated only $625 million for childcare.

“Signals aren’t substance,” Bezanson said on the latest episode of political consultant David Herle’s Herle Burly podcast.

The crisis has exposed the fragility of an economy that fails to spread opportunity equally. A strong recovery will require setting up childcare spaces as quickly as possible.

And then a durable economy will need even greater investment in childcare, along with policies that help Fehr coax more women into the trades and technology, learning skills that translate easily into entrepreneurship. More entrepreneurs will translate into more wealth.

But we have to get more of those women off the sidelines first and into technical schools.

“Unfortunately, this doesn’t mean that we can fix the economy right now,” Fehr said from Calgary. “But it does mean down the line we can prepare, slowly, by getting more girls into the trades and showing them that this is an avenue they can take.”

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