

The economic impact of COVID-19 has disproportionately hit women ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Although I have turned many a phrase, and sometimes on their proverbial heads with a malaprop, never have I coined a word or a phrase, according to the original meaning of such. In the 16th century, it became quite common to coin or create a new word for something, especially after one William Shakespeare had the namesake of his 1607 play, "Coriolanus," "So shall my lungs coin words till their decay against those measles which we disdain," he states.

There is an eerie similarity to the way Coriolanus describes the pandemic of his day, the measles, and our current pandemic, the Coronavirus. Both are disdained for the decay they brought and bring to our lungs.

Coriolanus's commitment to coining words as long as he survives, also has a parallel universe in our present-day pandemic. Multiple new entries in our dictionaries reflect the multiple new realities in our daily lives.

Freshly minted phrases such as social distancing, physical distancing, flattening the curve, an abundance of caution and, of course, the World Health Organization's coining of COVID-19 itself, are the most obvious of the new expressions in our lexicon.

They might not be in the dictionary yet, but two other words this pandemic has given rise to are, "she-cession," and "she-covery." This follows from the "he-cession," coined in 2009, by Trish Hennessy and Armine Yalnizyan, in a paper for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, describing how the 2008 recession was having a greater impact on men at that time.

This time around, the economic impact of COVID-19 has disproportionately hit women, as Yalnizyan, now an Atkinson Fellow on the Future of Workers, presented earlier this month to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance on the Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Her statement was entitled, "No recovery without a she-covery."

The beginning of the pandemic saw women lose their jobs more quickly than men, triggering the "she-cession," but that part of the gender gap evened out by the time April was over. The problem facing women now is, at least, two-fold. First, without an operational childcare system, women cannot return to work. Second, women more often work in schools, childcare centres, hotels, restaurants and retail shops, the very sectors taking the longest to reopen, if at all.

Yalnizyan believes the current "she-session" is going to result in a "he-covery," since men seem to be returning to work more quickly than women.

I had a conversation with a woman in my neighbourhood recently who gave me a perfect example of how this is playing out in her life and in homes across the country. As a nurse, she is deemed an essential worker. However, without a childcare centre or school for her child to attend, someone must stay home. Since her husband makes more money than her in a different sector, they will be one nurse short at her hospital as she stays home to care for their child. Not a good outcome during a healthcare crisis.

Yalnizyan makes it clear in her advice to the government: "Simply put: there can be no recovery without a she-covery; and there can be no she-covery without childcare. Without a nation-wide strategy for safe protocols for reopening schools and childcare facilities, we cannot fully redeploy our economic potential."

Safety is key here. Stats Can just released new research on childcare, which shows almost 30 per cent of parents will not be sending their children back because of concerns about safety and cost, while upwards of 40 per cent of centres are unsure they can even reopen for the same reasons.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives has released its annual **Alternative Federal Budget** ^[3] and is calling for an immediate investment of 2.5 billion dollars to a universal childcare system. Without that, the system gap may be filled by privately owned companies and we have seen how well that worked out at the other end of the age spectrum. In Ontario, the premier has just announced an inquiry into the province's long-term care system, in which more than 1,800 people died during the first phase of the pandemic, the majority in the privately run homes.

Let's not just coin the phrase, "universal childcare system," let's actually invest in it to make sure a "she-covery," is possible.

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