

Canada's economic recovery depends on working moms ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It was always absurd. Even pre-pandemic, the cultural myth that working moms can “have it all” was in the midst of a brutal reality check. Fed up with the impossible task of excelling at parenthood, nurturing relationships and friendships, growing careers, and keeping up with household chores (“me” time, what’s that?!), moms began to reject the status quo. Still, the discontent remained mostly insular: moms talking to other moms by sharing memes or venting in online groups. Decades of social conditioning that equated shortcomings with personal failure kept mom rage more tongue-in-cheek than revolutionary, lest anyone be accused of being a bad mom. Meanwhile men simply assumed women were “handling it.”

Then COVID-19 hit and disproportionately upended women’s lives. Women, who tend to work in highly affected fields such as service and care-giving, represented the majority of job losses (70%), the majority of lost work hours, and took on the majority of childcare.

Circumstances were even worse for single moms and racialized women. While Statistics Canada didn’t bother to collect race-based data in its labour force surveys until July (yes, as in 2020), Sylvia Fuller, a sociology professor at the University of British Columbia says, “We know there are disproportionate racial impacts.” Fuller, who co-authored a study on COVID-19 and the increasing gender employment gap among parents, found moms without a university education — who are more likely to be Indigenous women, Black women living in inner cities, or disabled women — were less able to weather the pandemic because of the types of jobs they tend to have (retail, caregiving) and those jobs’ lack of flexibility. “We saw the gap widen more than 10 times for parents with only a high school education or less.”

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The pandemic’s devastating fallout made one thing perfectly clear: The problem for working moms was never personal; it’s structural. Still, the notion this crisis is solely a “women’s issue” endures — as though we’re a niche special interest group instead of more than 50 percent of the population. (Even the term “working moms” is problematic. It implies the “working” part is optional, reinforces stereotypes about who’s responsible for childcare, and wrongly suggests mothers who work are a small minority rather than an integral part of our society and economy.) The fact is, if moms have a problem, then everyone has a problem. Canada laid no foundation to support women and moms, and now the entire house may collapse.

“Most mothers in Canada are employed in the paid labour force. You cannot just take a significant chunk of them out of that labour force without the economy as a whole really struggling,” says Fuller. “This isn’t just about individual mothers. It’s bad for everybody.”

“The economy will not recover without moms,” agrees Tammy Schirle, economics professor at Wilfrid Laurier University. “If they don’t get back to work, families are going to have to start cutting back their spending. Moreover, losing such a large part of our tax base would make it even harder to pay back the debt taken on to manage this public health crisis.” She’s referring to Canada’s largest budget deficit since WWII, projected to hit \$343.2 billion.

Women contribute over \$250 billion to Canada’s GDP each year compared to the oil and gas sector’s \$108 billion. Yet, while funding aimed at keeping women in the workplace ranges from nonexistent to negligible, Alberta will fund the oil and gas sector’s recovery to the tune of over \$1 billion and Ontario will spend \$2.6 billion to bolster the construction industry. Ontario farmers and the agri-food sector, another male-dominated field, have seen over \$20 million since COVID-19 began on top of hundreds of millions coming from the federal government. The numbers are clear: Women and working moms are more vital to the economy than the oil industry, but the government is much less willing to invest in them.

“I find the lack of investment incredibly surprising. In past recessions we’ve seen governments willing to spend billions more to help save much smaller numbers of jobs in male-dominated fields like construction and manufacturing,” says Schirle. Unfortunately, politics is an optics game mostly viewed through a male lens. When a government funds oil workers or farmers, we’re conditioned to accept it as an investment in the greater good. When it comes to moms, we see it as a niche investment rather than one that boosts the economy at large.

The biggest threat to women’s careers would be schools not reopening safely this fall. Many women, stretched to their limit throughout the spring and summer with no childcare, would have to seriously consider leaving their jobs or further reducing hours if cases spike and schools don’t stay open. Women continue to be the primary caregiver in two-parent heterosexual families, even when both parents work.

It's Mom who changes diapers, cooks lunch, explains why the sky is blue to curious toddlers, and interrupts Zoom meetings to negotiate a truce between warring siblings. When one parent has to drop out of the workforce to take care of the kids, it's often the one who earns less money — and that's typically the woman in a two-sex partnership. Full-time employed women in Canada still earn an average of 19% less than men, and an astonishing 29% less if they're between the ages of 25 to 44 with at least one child. Single parents are also much more likely to be women.

Alarming, in a reversal of normal trends, Fuller's study found the gender pay gap for parents actually widened more during COVID-19 for parents of elementary-school aged kids than it did with parents of preschool children. "Usually, as kids hit school age, some of the gaps that open up in the early years with mothers being more likely to take time out of the labour force or work part-time start to narrow. The employment numbers start to ramp back up, but instead we're now seeing greater barriers to reentry," says Fuller.

Yet politicians seem loath to spend big dollars on protecting schools, despite the likelihood of a second wave with the potential to careen women's economic equality back to the Mad Men era. In Alberta, premier Jason Kenney will cut education funding. In Ontario, despite SickKids emphasizing the importance of more social distancing and smaller class sizes, pleas from teachers, and a petition counting over 220,000 signatures, Premier Doug Ford's government hasn't taken steps to guarantee either. While Ontario will provide \$309 million for school boards' most basic reopening costs and "unlock" an additional \$500 million in reserve funding, it's generally viewed as too little, too late. The \$500 million is notably not new funding, but permission to use existing "rainy day" savings, and it comes less than three weeks until classes restart. Harvey Bischof, president of the Ontario Secondary Schools Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), told CP24 the amount is "a third of what's required."

While some provinces offer the option of in-person or online learning, it's a false choice if parents aren't convinced schools are safe. It's disingenuous, at best, to ask moms to weigh their children's (or immunocompromised family members' or grandparents') health against their careers and salaries and then stick them with the consequences.

Reopening schools safely is only one short-term solution. Fuller says we must also address the economic viability of the childcare sector, which took a major hit during COVID-19 because of lost fees and lowered capacities. Even pre-pandemic, childcare spots were notoriously hard to find and unaffordable for many parents. The median monthly cost of childcare in Toronto is \$1,675 and babies join waitlists as soon as they're in Mom's belly. If parents can't find an affordable spot, it's usually Mom who stays home. "Longterm, we need to move towards a better funded, more accessible national childcare program. Canada is such a laggard in terms of what we fund, how we provide, and how we organize childcare and early childcare education," says Fuller. Only then can moms, and Canadians as a whole, reach their economic potential and fortify our economy against future crises, including possible second or third waves.

While not all voters care about equality or "women's issues," polls show they consistently cite the economy as a priority. That politicians can't bring themselves to invest in working women for everyone's benefit, even as we espouse feminist ideals around the world, shows how deeply patriarchal Canada remains. As it turns out, talk really is cheap.

Related link: [COVID-19 and the gender employment gap among parents of young children](https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/20/08/canadas-economic-recovery-depends-working-moms) [3]

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