

Employers should help workers struggling with child care during COVID-19 ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The media abounds with stories of how working parents across Canada are struggling with caring for their young children during the COVID-19 pandemic while daycares and schools closed or operated part-time.

So what is the responsibility of employers towards employees who have children during the pandemic? Are organizations responsible for their employees, and if so, what does this responsibility involve?

I examine these questions using the social connection model that the late Iris Marion Young, an American political theorist, developed in her book *Responsibility for Justice*.

Child care difficulties

Child care can be difficult to access. It can represent a substantial financial expense for parents relative to their salary. It can also be challenging to reach from where they live and work, and it can be incompatible with work hours.

Child care that is difficult to access has serious consequences. For example, when the financial cost of child care is overwhelming, one parent stops working, entirely or partially, to care for the children. That parent is often the mother.

Women, in fact, are still stereotyped as caregivers; according to Statistics Canada, they do more unpaid care work than men. At the same time, they are less likely to do full-time paid work, and those who do work full-time earn lower pay and are less likely to be in leadership positions.

For lone working parents, most of whom are women, alternative accommodations for child care can be more challenging to find, and can require working part-time or stopping work, or relying on family members.

The consequences from difficult-to-access child care are unjust: individuals, more often women than men, need to make painful choices that others with more resources do not have to make.

These injustices are structural because they aren't specific to one individual. Instead, they are widespread, since many individuals, more often women than men, are limited in how they can act due also to conditions like cultural rules and norms regarding child care.

Women most affected during COVID-19

As the COVID-19 pandemic started to spread across Canada in March 2020 and daycares closed, structural injustices related to access to child care were exposed.

Women across Canada who had not already lost their work took over care work and stopped their paid work.

The social connection model is concerned with the responsibility not of an organization, but individuals in the organization. Their responsibility arises not because they're to blame for past actions towards employees, but because they can contribute to unjust structures, typically unknowingly, as they go about their professional lives, making decisions and taking actions.

For example, business leaders make decisions about hiring, performance evaluation and promotion, which can be perfectly reasonable according to long accepted rules, norms and cultures.

But those rules, norms and cultures are often unjust — for example, parental leave rules that differ based on gender and unconscious gender bias during performance evaluation.

Accordingly, decisions can contribute to injustices faced by employees with children, notably by maintaining the gender gap in pay and women's relatively lower pay, making child care less accessible.

Shared responsibilities

In the social connection model, the responsibility of individuals to address structural injustice towards employees is shared.

Because all individuals at an organization contribute through their daily practices to this structural injustice, no one can, single-handedly, solve structural injustice. Instead, responsibility can only be discharged collectively when employers and employees join forces.

Some people have a more significant role to play: those with more considerable decision-making powers and those with more extensive means since they are better-equipped to address injustice (organizational leaders, for example), as well as those who know the injustice well because they witness or experience it (for example, employees who are parents or child care associations).

In practice, organizational leaders, child care associations and parents can act together to appeal to the government to make childcare more accessible, a challenge that is still very real in Canada and that's resulted in recent calls for action.

Hopefully, organizational leaders will step in and rise to the occasion. They have been able to work together to address other societal challenges, including climate change — so why not the challenges faced by their employees when it comes to childcare, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: female labour force participation ^[4]

work/life balance ^[5]

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