

She-cession felt during pandemic will be difficult to overcome during recovery ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Six months in, it is abundantly clear how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed life as we know it — especially so for many women.

As non-essential businesses closed down, the disparities became clear how sectors that mainly employed women — retail, the food and service industry, gyms and nail salons, charities and non-profits — were the hardest hit with several announcing permanent closures.

Armine Yalnizyan, an economist and Atkinson Fellow on the Future of Workers, has been watching these trends closely.

She speaks of the term “she-cession,” a recession in which more women are losing work than men. This is historically unusual and undoing decades of progress of women entering and remaining in the labour market.

In Windsor-Essex, a she-cession is especially concerning. The 2016 census showed almost one in four children — 24 per cent — live in poverty in our region.

Single parent families had a higher rate of being low income at 34.3 per cent. United Way Windsor-Essex’s 2014 “Cost of Poverty” report pointed to an even more concerning intersection: 41.8 per cent of low-income families in the Windsor CMA are led by a female lone parent.

What does this mean during a pandemic, which has accelerated many of our pre-existing disparities and widened the economic, racial and gendered gaps in our society?

“Poverty is going to deepen, particularly for women,” Yalnizyan says. “The choke point in she-covery is the lack of safe childcare and safe schools. Women will not be able to safely return to work without this.”

If this is a key aspect for the economy to recover, what has the government done to address this since March? With schools re-opening in a few days — almost half a year after the pandemic began — it seems not nearly enough.

“The only thing they’ve come up with is online teaching which puts the burden on teachers and assumes children have access to the technology (they need),” Yalnizyan said. “We’re talking about millions of children and their parents and there is no plan.”

Speak to any parent with school-aged children and the anxiety as the school year creeps closer is palatable.

Will class sizes be reduced? Are more teachers and support staff being hired? Will other public spaces be used to physically distance students? Are outdoor classes a possibility before the colder months? Masks and young children, air filtration systems, aging facilities, testing capacity and contact tracing — the questions keep coming.

“Many governments are behaving as if the best policy is to keep their hands off the wheel, like before the pandemic,” Yalnizyan said. “This choice is just going to end up with all of us in the ditch.”

Some parents have the luxury of not sending their children to school. Many others may choose to send their children to school, while some have no choice but to send their children to school, potentially adding further layers of inequities to schooling and in resources.

As Yalnizyan notes, “we have had public education for 150 years. We have rolled back the clock by over a century and we’re okay with that as a public policy situation?”

And for those parents who may have no choice but to watch or homeschool their children — with the majority of burden falling on female parents — their departure from the labour force may become permanent.

Those jobs, even if low-paying, may have been the difference between their household staying above the poverty line.

“Poverty was always getting feminized, but expect a galloping rate of feminization of poverty in the next few months,” Yalnizyan predicts.

Proper re-opening of schools and childcare in a pandemic does not just take millions of dollars, it also requires well-thought-out plans.

Not investing at this point (even as late as it seems) means the alternative is contributing to an oncoming recession and potentially exacerbating the cycle of poverty for many families, including children who especially need the supports and tools schooling provides.

"We are not likely to see the full impact of the lack of public policy until November [and] we may be in a full recession by that point." Yalnizyan said. "There is no recovery without a she-covery and no she-covery without childcare."

Sarah Mushtaq is a millennial who writes about race, gender and life in today's changing world.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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