

# Child care key to women's recovery from economic impacts of COVID-19: report <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** CTV News

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 9 Sep 2020

## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

TORONTO — Flexible work arrangements, affordable child-care offerings and training for new jobs are all key to helping women recover from a "she-cession," says the Ontario Chamber of Commerce.

Those ideas are among dozens of recommendations the provincial business organization made in a report it released Wednesday that is meant to combat the outsized impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on women.

The health crisis has so far pushed women's participation in the labour force down to its lowest level in three decades.

About 1.5 million Canadian women lost their jobs in the first two months of the pandemic and 45 per cent of women in the country experienced a decline in hours worked, the Royal Bank of Canada said in July.

"This is not just a concern for women but for everyone and for the economy as a whole," said Claudia Dessanti, a senior policy analyst at the Ontario chamber.

"It's definitely time to go beyond the platitudes and...to develop a strategy."

The OCC suggests a plan be created to rapidly increase child-care spaces and allow for physical distancing, earmark funding for a potential second wave of COVID-19 and enhance resources for parents to support their children with remote learning.

The organization would also like to see the long-term affordability and accessibility of child care addressed by the federal and provincial governments through investments, tackling the shortage of early child-care educators and exploring workplace-based child care.

Several of the chamber's recommendations centre on child care because many women are having to quit their jobs, decrease their working hours or ask for special arrangements to juggle parenting and their career while some kids remain home from school, said Dessanti.

"Home and work life have collided over the past few months, and a lot of parents will tell you that those two obligations were always a challenge for them to balance, but now more than ever, there is no clear line," she said.

"We know that mothers tend to take on more of that family care responsibility, so it becomes a gender equality issue as well."

Her report suggests women be given more flexible work opportunities and chances to retrain in areas where there are shortages identified through labour market data, like the skilled trades, technology and engineering.

Those areas see high growth, but are not always marketed as jobs that offer flexibility or creativity that women need, said Dessanti.

To prepare women for work in those areas, the OCC recommends Ontario partner with colleges and employers to offer loans, scholarships and child-care subsidies for women acquiring new skills and support programs that advance women along the career pipeline, including school outreach, mentorships, apprenticeships and counselling.

Financing, legal advice, digital literacy, access to trade, mentorship, professional networking, procurement and child-care opportunities should also be offered for women entrepreneurs, who often struggle to find funding for their ideas, the OCC said.

The organization hopes that all businesses will consider setting collective targets around diversity and inclusion, introduce a diversity component into procurement and supply chain processes and include women in all decision-making bodies and when forming policies.

The suggestions are "heartening," said Wendy Cukier, the founder and academic director at Ryerson University's Diversity Institute and a research lead at both the Future Skills Centre and Women' Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub.

"I find it really ironic that women are in the trenches, when it comes to COVID-19 and leading the public health response, but when it comes to the discussion of the economic recovery, innovation or entrepreneurship...you don't see a lot of women," she said.

The report, which her institute consulted on, pushes women's needs to the forefront and gives her hope that often-ignored aspects like

procurement strategies and training can be better suited for women, she said.

However, she pointed out there is a challenge: getting people to take action and quickly because neither the pandemic nor the recession is easing up.

Dessanti said people should feel there is urgency around these issues, but "not see this as a laundry list of recommendations."

"This is a broad strategy. These aren't all things that will happen in the next two weeks, but some things will start now and some things will start later," she said.

"It seems like we're boiling the ocean, but it's all about small steps."

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