

Recovery depends on childcare strategy to get women back to work ^[1]

COVID-19 Six Months Later: A conversation with Armine Yalnizyan

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Excerpted from interview

Sept. 11 marks six months since the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic of COVID-19. We're using this milestone to take stock of the policy response so far and consider next steps as Canada continues to move from reaction to rebuilding. As part of this, First Policy Response is speaking to several policy experts to gather their thoughts on the key policy developments of these past six months, and what they think our next priorities should be.

This interview with **Armine Yalnizyan**, an economist and Atkinson Fellow on the Future of Workers, is part of a series of interview transcripts that will continue to run this week. This transcript has been edited.

First Policy Response: Over the last six months, you've become known for coining the phrase "she-cession." For people who haven't been following as closely, can you summarize what that means and what makes it so different?

Armine Yalnizyan: Well, for most of human history, whenever we've had an economic downturn, it's been men who have lost most of the jobs. And throughout the 20th century, particularly the second half of the 20th century, it's often been men working in goods-producing sectors like construction, manufacturing, mining, forestry who lost their jobs. So men have lost more jobs in the goods-producing sectors first in a recession – and those jobs have been higher paying than a lot of other jobs. And then historically in Canada, what has happened is that women have picked up the lesser-paying jobs, often in service-sector work, in the wake of that job loss by men, because it stabilizes household income. And those women never went back to work once their men got another job. That's historically been the pattern. So to stabilize household income, women have increased their employment rate, and the biggest source of growth in employment in the wake of every economic downturn has been in lower-paid service-sector jobs.

That pattern was completely turned on its head because of COVID-19 because we shut down non-essential activities – and most of those are in the service sector, in travel, in tourism and bars and restaurants, in some forms of retail and in personal services, but also specifically in childcare and schools – to be able to contain the contagion. We found most of the people who lost their jobs were women, and most of the people who lost their jobs were low-paid workers. And the path to recovery is not through he-covey, but that's what's happening first. More women lost jobs than men in the first month post-COVID, then the men caught up to the women, but the people who got back to work fastest were men. And the path to recovery for women, the she-covey, is blocked by the limiting factor of safe reopening of schools – which is unknown right now, we're just in the process of doing that – and availability of safe childcare. And we have lost a good deal of capacity in childcare. And that is a real issue, because 40 per cent of household incomes for families with kids come from women [according to Jennifer Robson of Carleton University].

So if women aren't going back to work, and if households with children are the biggest chunk of spenders in the economy – and they are – and if household spending is the biggest driver of GDP, then we have a macroeconomic problem on our doorstep that has, as yet, not been dealt with by public policy. We continue to stand by while childcare capacity craters, essentially, because of loss of revenues and user fees, because it's primarily a market-driven [service] rather than a public good [delivered through an education system], ... and higher costs because of smaller class sizes, more need for [a higher] adults-per-child ratio, and more cleaning and physical space. All of these things lead to higher costs, but at a time when there's lower revenues, so more and more childcare spaces are being withdrawn from the capacity in a community. And that is a limiting factor on women being able to accept whatever paid work is out there.

And also, if schools turn out to not be safe, then more women who are currently working from home will be unable to juggle what they've been juggling for the last six months – which is childcare, homeschooling and paid work. For those who can afford to make that tradeoff, more women will just throw in the towel on paid work. Or their bosses will throw in the towel for them, saying, "You can't do all of these things and still deliver on your job." So we are looking at a more protracted and deeper recession than would have been necessary should we have been paying attention to the social infrastructure that is required for a growing share of the workforce – which is women, who made up half the employed workforce before we went into COVID – making sure that they can get back to work and that path isn't blocked.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: economic recovery ^[4]

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