

Opinion: The economy won't heal till women are back at work ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

In January, not long after she'd immigrated to Halifax from Nigeria to join her husband, Ogochukwu Enebeli began looking for a job. A lawyer in her home country, she thought she might find some kind of law-adjacent work, perhaps as a clerk in a lawyer's office. She sent out resumés. No dice.

She began sending out resumés for any kind of job, in customer service or retail. Still nothing. "It was very discouraging," Ms. Enebeli said in a phone interview from Halifax. "I'd see all these job openings and think, why aren't they calling me back?" Then the pandemic hit, "and it became even more difficult." Her spirits fell further. One day, as she was searching online, she came across the Halifax YWCA's Launch Atlantic program, an employment-training course for women under 30. She signed up.

Women are out of work all over the country because of the pandemic. The phrase "she-cession," made popular by economist Armine Yalnizyan, is commonly heard along with its hopeful twin, "she-covey." Women who worked in the service industry, or whose employment was already piecemeal, saw their jobs evaporate as COVID-19 shut down parts of the economy.

Others were forced by a crumbling child-care landscape to make an impossible choice between their jobs and their children. According to a poll conducted for the Prosperity Project, a third of Canadian women surveyed considered quitting their jobs because the business of juggling household tasks and child care had become too heavy. Advocacy groups, already stretched thin, hustled to meet the unprecedented new threats to women facing violence, homelessness and unemployment.

At the Halifax YWCA, that meant scrambling for funds to expand their 13-year-old Launch program.

With an emergency injection of \$1-million in federal funding, it was able to bring the program to Moncton and St. John's as well. Miia Suokonautio, director of YWCA Halifax, reels off the course's success rate: 70 per cent of women enrolled in the course find jobs (of the other 30 per cent, some have to drop out because they don't have child care). A third of the women taking the course are racialized, one-quarter disabled.

When the pandemic hit, "newcomer women who are often concentrated in the lowest income work force, those were the jobs that were eliminated right away," Ms. Suokonautio said. "Women want to be working. That's what this program is about."

But even one successful program is not going to help enough women. An entire systemwide renovation is required. That's what the YWCA and the Institute for Gender and the Economy at the University of Toronto recommended recently in their Feminist Recovery Plan, which called for robust investment in child care and jobs training - but also, crucially, a new reckoning around the racial and social inequalities that led to so many women being precariously employed in the first place."

"It took a pandemic for the country to see what was already broken," the report says. "We cannot ignore the historical context that has created the unstable foundation for the harms we are seeing play out in this current crisis."

It seems as if the federal government is listening. This week's Throne Speech acknowledged that "women, racialized Canadians and young people have borne the brunt of the job losses." Crucially, the Liberal government promised to pump money into a new child care and early education plan to ensure "highquality care is accessible to all."

Details were scant and won't be known at least until budget time.

We should keep in mind that proponents of a national childcare system have been listening to similar promises for decades, and would be forgiven if they feel like Charlie Brown waiting for Lucy to pull the football away yet again. But in this case, perhaps the government has realized, as U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren so wisely put it, that good, universally accessible daycare is actually infrastructure for the economy. It's the bridge that gets parents to work.

The Liberal government also promised an Action Plan for Women and the Economy, in order to "ensure a feminist, intersectional response to this pandemic and recovery." I fear that this language, vital and true as it is, will be a red flag to certain bulls, who will huff and snort about "woke" politics. Well, they can just sit this one out: They are not the ones disproportionately losing jobs and being harmed by the pandemic.

This is not some feministMarxist plot to drain the government coffers (that's next year). Listen to Tiff Macklem, Governor of the Bank of Canada, who recently warned about the dangers of pandemic-exacerbated inequalities: "The lost jobs for women, youth and low-wage workers is a problem for us all. If these workers become discouraged and leave the labour force or lose valuable skills over time, their reduced economic participation will lower our potential growth, limiting living standards for everyone."

Back in Halifax, the YWCA is hoping that the one-time injection of cash into its Launch program becomes a permanent investment in women in the community. It certainly worked for Ms. Enebeli. She joined a group of 10 women to learn about polishing resumés, preparing for interviews and connecting to local mentors.

Most important, she says, the program taught her to look at job-hunting in a different way. "They told us to look at our strengths and weaknesses, and also our values," she said. "The program helps women get their confidence back." The course led Ms. Enebeli to a paid placement with the local branch of the Elizabeth Fry Society, an advocacy group for incarcerated women. She started her job this week.

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