

Our essential workers are burning out. Advocates say a lack of basic job protections is to blame ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Stephanie Walker returned to work in early childhood education in March, not long before the COVID-19 pandemic forced her child-care centre to temporarily close.

She had taken several months off from the industry to recover from burnout — time off she doesn't think she would have needed if she'd had better wages and access to supports like paid sick days.

"It would have made a world of a difference," she says.

She's not alone. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the precarity of care work in Canada, the child-care sector was seeing high rates of turnover. Many early childhood educators and child-care workers don't have paid vacation or sick days and earn just above minimum wage, says Walker, adding that pay and benefits are often slightly better at not-for-profit child-care centres.

Walker, 24, of Richmond Hill, feels the work she does is systematically undervalued, evidenced by the instability of jobs in child care — the majority of which are filled by women.

"Just because we choose a role in a care industry like early childhood doesn't mean that we don't deserve to be paid appropriately," she says.

Early childhood educator Kim Bradley agrees.

She sees her field of work continuously misunderstood, often dismissed as "child-minding" or "babysitting." The pandemic is increasing rates of burnout in an industry that already sees high turnover, she says.

"We're done. We're exhausted."

What is precarious work?

Experts and advocates agree, more or less, that precarious work means having no control over hours or wages, resulting in unpredictable earnings. It also involves a lack of basic worker protections such as paid sick leave and health benefits.

The precarity of work is shaped by the relationship between a person's employment status, form of employment and social location, such as their gender, race or immigration status, says Leah Vosko, a York University political scientist and co-author of the 2020 book "Closing the Enforcement Gap: Improving Employment Standards Protection for People in Precarious Jobs."

Though precarious work can occur in any industry, it's most common in accommodation and food service, retail, agriculture and care work, Vosko says. It's also much more common among workers between 15 and 24.

And precarious workers are more likely to be women, people of colour, or recent immigrants, she says.

Alana Powell, executive co-ordinator for the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario, defines precarious work based on precisely what the workers she represents don't have: competitive wages, full-time and stable employment, benefits and pensions.

"They feel like their work is invisible," Powell says.

Workers' Action Centre executive director Deena Ladd says the pandemic has shone a spotlight on "essential work," from child care to cleaning to workers on the front lines in grocery stores. And yet not much has changed about these jobs since the pandemic began, she says.

"These are all superheroes, they're on the front lines, but unfortunately that hasn't translated into systemic changes."

Vosko says COVID-19 has shown deficiencies in many workers' access to paid sick leave and caregiving leave, as well as the fact that anyone considered self-employed is more likely to have limited access to benefits and supports.

“Because so many social benefits and entitlements flow from the presence of an employment relationship between the worker and employer, that means that people who are engaged as self-employed often ... lack social benefits and statutory entitlements,” Vosko says.

Armine Yalnizyan, an economist and the Atkinson Fellow on the Future of Workers, says COVID-19 has specifically highlighted the precariousness of care work, such as in long-term care.

“Personal care, particularly for the elderly, is an industry that is marked by the most inhumane human-resource standards, because it is so dominated by for-profit considerations,” she says.

If someone can’t afford to miss a day of work, they’re less likely to stay home when COVID-19 symptoms appear, she says. “People are dying because of this.”

Some provinces have addressed this better than others, says Katherine Scott, senior researcher with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. For example, British Columbia prevented workers from working in multiple homes early in the pandemic, but also temporarily guaranteed full-time hours to workers and boosted wages, something the provincial NDP pledged to continue if re-elected.

‘This isn’t liberation’

Gig workers, freelancers and the self-employed are often subject to precarious work, and usually don’t qualify for the same government supports as traditional employees.

Over the past several years, there has been a growth in the gig economy, through apps such as Uber or DoorDash, and websites including Fiverr or TaskRabbit.

As the country emerges from the recession caused by the pandemic, reliance on these workers will only rise, Yalnizyan says.

After every recession, there is a spike in on-demand, task-based labour with employers wanting to save money, and more people looking for work or extra cash, she says. This time, that spike in demand will be met with labour over apps and websites, she said.

Jim Stanford, director of the Centre for Future Work, says the gig economy is just the latest version of what’s been happening for centuries: on-demand labour hired through an intermediary who takes some of the profit.

This “triangular relationship” allows companies to classify workers as “independent contractors” instead of employees relieving them of the responsibility to provide benefits and stability, Stanford says.

People will turn to this kind of work when they have no choice, he says.

“This isn’t liberation. This isn’t flexibility. This is desperation.

“And I’m worried because of this big shock that we’ve experienced in our labour market ... especially among marginalized communities, that level of desperation is going to get worse.”

What needs to change?

Experts and advocates say existing safety nets such as Employment Insurance need to be permanently broadened to include precarious workers, and that the definition of a worker, or an employee, needs to change.

The EI system — currently bolstered by a suite of temporary supports for those who wouldn’t otherwise qualify — was created based on a now-outdated idea of what most jobs look like, says Scott.

“The fact that we had to roll out emergency programs is testament to that fact,” she says.

Workers need better safety nets, such as health-care coverage, so they’re not reliant on jobs that treat them poorly, Yalnizyan says. She wants to see a program that would help people with the costs of moving for work, as well as tighter regulations for gig economy companies such as defining gig workers as employees.

New immigrants to Canada should be able to get residency status much faster so they don’t have to rely on low-paid, unstable work and become vulnerable to labour-law abuses, Ladd says.

Vosko agrees.

“When people are engaged doing jobs that are essential for a long period of time, it’s a shame that they don’t have access to pathways to permanency,” says Vosko. Improving overall working conditions such as raising the minimum wage, broadening access to income supports and expanding the definition of a worker, would benefit recent immigrant workers as well, she adds.

The national child-care strategy recently promised by the federal government needs to make care work a “viable career choice” so that workers remain in the field longer, says Powell.

This will benefit not just the workers, but the children as well, agrees Bradley.

Right now, she said, “The field is losing valuable early educators ... the children are losing that support.”

This is part three of an ongoing series looking at the pandemic’s devastating effect on women in the workforce.

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