

What's at stake when women leave the workforce during COVID-19?^[1]

TVO.org speaks with U of T's Sarah Kaplan about the unequal toll of the pandemic — and the actions we need to take to protect women, families, and the economy

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EXCERPT

When it comes to the effects of the COVID-19 crisis, all things are not created equal. By all accounts, women's finances and career growth have been disproportionately affected. The lion's share of domestic responsibilities — taking care of children, helping with virtual school, looking after ailing family members — has also fallen to women.

TVO.org speaks with Sarah Kaplan, director of the Institute for Gender and the Economy at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, about the so-called she-cession, how women can guard against losing their hard-won place in the workforce — and how the pandemic could create meaningful change.

TVO.org: I read that many women are considering leaving their jobs due to child-care issues, among other stresses. One year in, how are women faring?

Sarah Kaplan: In the beginning of the pandemic, many of the first people to lose their jobs were women. And it was a kind of a double-whammy: first, there were a lot of women in the sectors that closed down, like hospitality and the travel industry and retail — all heavily female-dominated. And the second was when schools closed, and children were at home. We live in a society where we tend to expect that women will be the ones who take care of children. Many were leaving the workforce because they just couldn't balance work and family responsibilities. And this, of course, was especially true for women of colour and single parents.

Men also lost jobs at the beginning of the pandemic because sectors were closed. Statistics show that men recovered quickly, and women's jobs have, to a certain extent, also recovered. Unemployment for women has gone down: however, what those unemployment figures fail to account for is that unemployment only counts people who are seeking work and haven't gotten work. There are a lot of women who are no longer even seeking work, because of the uncertainties associated with child care and schooling. So, while some people are saying women's jobs have recovered, once you look at the whole picture, you don't see the same level of recovery for women as for men.

We need to worry about getting women back into the workforce to make sure we don't lose a generation of women from the economy.

TVO.org: What is at stake for women when they experience an extended period of no or low income or stress-related issues that require them to take time away from work?

Kaplan: This pandemic and the recession is really setting back most of the progress that we've made over the last 30 years. And what's at stake, even if women just pull out of the workforce for a period of time or go part-time for a period of time or focus more on their family so they're not able to deliver as well on their work — even if that's just what happens, they are going to be slowing their career trajectories.

And what does that mean? That means for a man and a woman of the same age, the same number of years out of university or out of high school, the chance that they're going to be earning less and that they'll be further away from being promoted to the next level is that much greater. We're going to see less access to more senior roles and higher salaries. Long term, we can anticipate that this will increase the rate at which women live under the poverty line, including senior women and retired women — which is always greater than the rate men live under the poverty line.

TVO.org: It sounds pretty bleak, so far.

Kaplan: Oh, I am the doomsayer — but I really do think that this is the path that we're on.

TVO.org: Would a national child-care program make a difference?

Kaplan: Of course, child care is the answer. And I believe we have a very brief window of opportunity right now where we could make it happen. And it's very interesting to me — I was speaking with some government ministers, who shall remain unnamed, quite recently, who said the problem with child care is that its constituency is just women who have small children. And that's completely wrong.

The constituency is, of course, mothers with small children and fathers with small children — and, of course, parents of young women who want to see their daughters succeed and achieve their potential, grandparents of young women who want to see their granddaughters thrive, and small and large businesses that don't want the disruption of workers having to leave the workforce.

The constituency for national child care, if you frame it correctly, is extremely broad, and yet when you do political polling, child care never shows up in the priorities. I think we're at a moment where people are aware of it, and I'm really, really hopeful that we'll make the kind of commitment that we need to make — according to the OECD, at least 1 per cent of GDP should be invested by government in child care. And we're not even remotely close to that even with what the federal government has committed over the past year. It was the answer before COVID, and it's even more the answer now.

TVO.org: Is that a silver lining?

Kaplan: Yes. I can tell you that analysis that's been done in the United Kingdom shows that if you spend 1 per cent of GDP on construction versus 1 per cent on child care, you create many more jobs across the economy in child care, not just because its available to help women work but because the people who are working in child care, predominantly women, then have more spending money. You create many more jobs and much more economic growth investing 1 per cent in child care than in, say, construction. So that is my silver lining — that this might be the moment we can get nationally supported child care.

TVO.org: In her wage- and power-gap investigation, Robyn Doolittle said forget the glass ceiling — women are having a hard time getting past middle management. From where we're sitting now, how long will it take for women to recover from the economic and career effects of the pandemic?

Kaplan: If you lose a year out of the work force, you've lost a year out of the work force — you're literally a year behind. We do need employers to step up and say, "What can we do to reaccelerate the progress of people who've had to drop out or take a break or go part-time or do a little bit less or not take that promotion because they just can't handle it?" I think there's so much awareness of it, and when you have something like Robyn Doolittle's reporting coming out showing the power gap, I think many employers are going to be very interested in making sure that they don't lose this generation of women. There's a whole bunch of positive things that could come out of it. Otherwise, there's going to be a certain percentage of women who just aren't going to make it back into the workforce. That's a generational effect, and yes, we're going to see a blip. I'm guessing 10 years from now, we're going to see all kinds of impact of what's going to be basically two years of disruption.

TVO.org: Do you have any words of encouragement for women who are thinking of dropping out or who have had to drop out?

Kaplan: One: try to think of it as a sabbatical and not a permanent drop-out. Stay in touch with your employers or your network as much as you can, given the other burdens that you have. Ask your employer to what extent you can negotiate some type of plan to get back to work when you're ready. Don't assume that you have to make this choice on your own. It's only a choice in that it's being forced on you by social structure.

And then the second thing I would say is, you can't be hard on yourself. This is such a stressful time for 8 million reasons. Everyone's experiencing loss in one way or another, so just do the best with what you can and know that what you're experiencing is not your fault and you're doing a great job, even if you feel like you're not.

This interview has been condensed and edited for length and clarity.

Region: Canada ^[3]

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