

More than 200,000 Canadian women are now long-term unemployed – how will we find them jobs? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Françoise Cabau moved to Canada in January 2020, planning to open a business with her husband in Niagara, Ontario.

Those plans were foiled by the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic so Cabau, who has French and Canadian citizenship, started applying for jobs to stay afloat – at Starbucks, at a winery, for various assistant positions and more.

But she found the job search difficult for many reasons. For one, the pandemic had an impact on many of the businesses she was applying to work for. But Cabau also found that the language barrier (French is her first language) and her qualifications limited the jobs she was able to apply for.

Meanwhile, her husband also struggled to find work in his field of computer science. And because neither earned income in Canada in 2019, both were unable to access federal funding and ended up getting Ontario Works, which, Cabau says, is only just keeping them afloat.

Cabau is planning to take English classes, hoping that will make it easier for her to land employment.

“It’s very, very difficult now to find a job,” she said, adding the jobs they are applying for often have hundreds of other applicants.

“We have to change our plan if we want to continue here.”

Cabau and her husband are not alone. They are among the ranks of the long-term unemployed in Canada, many of whom are women – a group that has expanded under the weight of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It’s no secret the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women, especially racialized, low-income or recent immigrant women; women lost twice as many jobs or hours as men during and after the March lockdowns, and have recovered those jobs or hours much more slowly. In July, women’s participation in the labour force reached its lowest level in 30 years.

From widespread job losses in female-dominated jobs to the pileup of work in the home, women have been hit harder since the beginning of COVID-19, and experts and advocacy groups have warned that there will be long-term fallouts from this imbalance.

One year in, that longer-term impact is already starting to show. According to Statistics Canada labour force data analyzed in a new RBC report, almost half a million women who lost their jobs due to the pandemic hadn’t returned to work as of January, and more than 200,000 of them were considered long-term unemployed. Another 100,000 above the age of 20 have exited the labour market, meaning they’re no longer looking for work.

The report by RBC argues that the longer women remain unemployed, the harder it will be for them to re-enter the labour force. For many, the jobs they lost won’t exist anymore, through shrinkage of the sectors or permanent adaptations of the way companies operate. Many will experience what the report calls “skills erosion,” and find that the longer they’ve been unemployed, the harder it will be to re-enter the sector they once worked in.

“We call it the scarring impact,” said Dawn Desjardins, RBC deputy chief economist and the report’s co-author. “People who are out of the labour force for a long period of time, we see some of their skills deteriorate, some of their networks deteriorate, so it’s just harder to move between jobs.”

Many of these women worked in hard-hit sectors, like hospitality, retail, food or tourism.

“These are the industries ... that have been lagging and continue to be under pressure,” said Desjardins.

Many were also low-income – employment among women earning less than \$800/week for full-time work has fallen by 30 per cent, compared to 24 per cent among men in the same category, according to the RBC report. Data also shows that 10 times more women older than 20 than men have completely left the labour market, meaning they’re not looking for work anymore, said Desjardins.

“Consistently, the message is that more women are leaving the labour market than men are,” said Desjardins.

Younger women were harder hit, data shows, as were visible minority women, and women who arrived in Canada in the past decade.

As well, the number of women who are long-term unemployed — unemployed for more than six months — has tripled compared to December 2019, Desjardins said.

Desjardins said that while there are more men who are long-term unemployed right now compared to women — around 272,000 compared to more than 200,000 — the rate at which this number shot up is much higher for women — more than tripled compared to December 2019, while for men it more than doubled.

As the economy begins to reopen, many of the jobs these women held won't exist anymore, said Desjardins, whether it's because of structural changes like the rise in e-commerce, or the sheer number of shuttered businesses in hard-hit sectors — at least 10,000 restaurants in Canada have permanently closed since March 2020, according to a tally by Restaurants Canada.

“This poses a challenge for Canadian policy-makers and business leaders—to retrain the most affected workers for new ways of working in rapidly changing industries, or to help them transition to new sectors,” the report states. “Ultimately, Canada’s overall economic health depends on the broadest possible recovery.”

The government has already made some steps in the right direction, the report notes, such as promising funding to the provinces for training and re-skilling programs, helping businesses survive through subsidies and loans, and promising national childcare, which could not only help bring women back to work, but also provide more jobs, said Desjardins, noting Quebec’s child care program significantly raised the percentage of women in the labour market.

“It really does alleviate some pressure and allows women to be more fully engaged in the labour market,” she said.

It’s important to have as many people as possible employed in order to contribute to Canada’s GDP and facilitate a strong economic recovery, said Desjardins.

“That just makes the pie bigger.”

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