

What COVID reveals: Women's work undone ^[1]

The pandemic set working women back decades, but it also created a rare opportunity

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AVAILABILITY

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About the series

What COVID Reveals is the 2020-21 Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy series on the COVID-19 crisis and inequality. The Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy awards a seasoned Canadian journalist the opportunity to pursue a year-long investigation into a current policy issue. The fellowship is a collaborative project of the Atkinson Foundation, the Honderich family, and the Toronto Star. In What Covid Reveals, award-winning journalist Stephanie Nolen tells the stories of people in Canada who were vulnerable to COVID-19, or made newly vulnerable by the virus, and how public policy shaped their pandemic experience. Nolen followed working women, migrant workers and asylum seekers, and those who had no place to "just stay home" as the virus surged. Through the story of their pandemic year, she charts what COVID showed us, and what we've chosen to do about it.

So why have women borne the brunt of this recession?

This recession, the first to be driven by public health responses, hit women hardest for two reasons. The first is that far more women than men were employed in the sectors which shut down first and stayed closed. Many of these were "people-facing" jobs — in retail, tourism, education, entertainment and hospitality. Women predominate in those sectors — they held 56 per cent of hospitality jobs in early 2020, for example, although they were only 48 per cent of the total workforce. In addition, women are far more likely than men to hold one or more part-time jobs, to work precarious hours, to be part of the "incremental workforce." These "non-standard jobs," as economists call them, were most vulnerable during the pandemic.

The second reason? As schools and daycares shut down and stayed closed, someone had to take care of children, and in the majority of households, that person, in 2020, was still a woman. Twelve times more women than men left paid work to care for children.

"Women lost more jobs, and they lost more hours, and it's because they were vulnerable in a number of different ways," said Jim Stanford, an economist who heads the Centre for Future Work. "The areas where women are overrepresented were hit harder and hit faster. And women were more likely to have precarious work, to be treated as a contingent workforce. And it had the biggest impact on women in the age group that has young kids: it chased a whole lot of them right out of the labour market."

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