What COVID reveals: The mother load [1]

COVID-19 created a crisis of care - and working mothers bore the burden
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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.

There was a day in November of 2020 when Amy Lazar Kleiman got up before the sun.

She hoped to get in a few hours of work before her children awoke and needed to be fed and helped to log in to school and find their classes and download their worksheets, and fed some more. She squeezed in an hour of crucial emails to clients at lunch while her husband took the kids outside to play. Then she returned to second-grade math and a kindergarten craft project, and more snacks and then games and dinner and bath time. Finally, she tucked the kids into bed and, when it was dark outside again, she sat down in front of her laptop, stared at the screen and tried to muster some crisp, shiny words for the copy she had promised to deliver. It was the day she thought, 'Actually, I can't do this. This is not going to be possible. We cannot go on like this. I cannot go on like this.'

"The scales are going to tip," Lazar Kleiman, 40, said, assessing her world, as she tried to maintain her career as a copywriter and also get her children through a second pandemic lockdown, no longer trusting that they might go back to school that year. "Either I'm just going to stop school or — I guess, I stop working."

Rebecca Tucker's moment came much earlier: It was March of 2020.

Halifax, where Tucker was studying clinical psychology, was just a few days into a lockdown that closed offices and schools. And Tucker, 34, found out she was being offered a residency, a crucial last step in finishing the doctorate she'd been working toward for more than a decade. But the residency spot was in Ottawa, a city where Tucker, a single mother to a then-10-year-old, knew no one and had no support system. She couldn't afford to hire private child care on the stipend residency pays. If her son's school and after-school program stayed closed, there was no way she could accept the position. But without the residency, she couldn't graduate. And without the degree, she couldn't start work. Her student loans and line of credit were exhausted. She was stuck. "I had to turn it down. I couldn't do it."

COVID-19 also upended Anne Merritt's professional life last spring.

In June she lost a job she loved, but it took longer, nearly nine months more, for Merritt to take full measure of how the pandemic would alter the trajectory of her working life, and with it her sense of self. In March of 2020 Merritt taught academic English to foreign students at an Edmonton university. With borders closed, her rolling contract was not renewed when the school year ended. Merritt had a toddler, and was pregnant; when she lost her job, she also lost her parental leave benefits and her daycare subsidy was cancelled. In January, she gave birth to twins. And as she contemplated the months and years ahead — needing to pay for child care for three children — she began for the first time to think that she might not seek a new job when the babies were nearing a year old, but rather spend some years as a stay-at-home mother, something she never imagined for herself. "My going back to work may have to be reconsidered."

So many working mothers across Canada have had some version of this moment in the past year.

The day the frustrated fifth-grader who couldn't calculate the radius of a circle burst into a crucial Zoom meeting with the boss. The day they arrived to pick up the toddler at the home of a friend-of-a-friend who was the only emergency child care option — and encountered an unmasked stranger, hanging out on the sofa in what was supposed to be a 'bubble.' Suspecting the ninth grader in the next room was playing Overwatch all day on the laptop, but unable to do much about it without sacrificing her own work. Cancelling a presentation because a lonely, angry child who missed her teachers and her friends and her sense of security had started to cry and just couldn't stop.

Plenty of fathers had these moments, too, of course, but one of the many things that COVID-19 laid bare was how little fundamental assumptions about gender and care work had changed by March of 2020. Before the pandemic, Canadian women already reported spending 1.5 hours more each day on domestic and caregiving tasks than men. Then, in the great majority of households where the pandemic created a crisis about care for children or elders, it fell to women to make a plan. It was women who took on the bulk of the burden, it was women who tried to juggle online school or baby care with a job, or reduced their hours, or stepped away entirely from work.

In the year from February 2020, 12 times as many women as men stopped working because of child-care responsibilities.

These women lost income, obviously; many also lost medical benefits, including access to costly mental health support that they or family members needed more than ever. And they lost other employment related benefits such as Merritt's parental leave.

Women who stepped away from paid work experienced a career interruption that history shows has a lifelong impact on earnings and retirement income. But they lost something else, too: as women literally went back into the kitchen, there was a decline in their participation in social, civic and political life (such as it was in the pandemic), the long-term effect of which will take time to become clear.

And as the stories of Merritt, Tucker and Lazar Kleiman make clear, the pandemic extracted a price in women's well-being. One year into the COVID crisis, a large study reported in the journal Lancet Psychiatry found that the pandemic had increased depression and anxiety in women broadly — researchers went back to women they had followed over five years after a longitudinal pregnancy study and found a new, sharp drop in mental health since the onset of the pandemic. And they found it was worst for women who had lost income, were struggling to obtain child care or trying to manage home-schooling while working.

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