

Advocates, organizations call for provincial plan to end Ontario's 'she-cession'

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EXCERPTS

Advocates and organizations from across Ontario have issued an open letter to the provincial government and other political parties calling for a plan to end the "she-cession," which has impacted the participation of women in the labour market during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We are a coalition of 11 member associations across the province, and we've gathered together to draw attention to some of the pressing social and economic issues that our communities face, who are primarily women," explained Jasmine Ramze Rezaee, director of advocacy and communications at YWCA Toronto.

"We recently launched our 'SheCovey' campaign to draw attention to the uneven impact of the pandemic on various communities of women in Ontario and to call for a gender responsive, inclusive, economic recovery plan for the province," she added.

The letter, dated Oct. 13, 2021, notes, "We made it through the most trying days of the pandemic thanks to the work of women, both paid and unpaid."

"We have been waiting to hear tangible solutions for tackling the she-cession ... This economic crisis requires transformative intervention. Task forces and tax credits are not enough," reads the letter, circulated by 11 YWCAs from across Ontario.

Shabnam Shekh is a single mother who came to Canada from India nine years ago.

Shekh, who has two university degrees from India, including a Bachelor of Education and professional teaching experience, has been having difficulty finding work that fits with her skill set and expertise, partly because of a lack of accessible and affordable child care.

"I'm a single mother, Canada gave me opportunity to live as a single woman, but as well I want to do some professional work and I need a daycare where he's safe," she said.

Shekh has been using YWCA Toronto employment services to try and find a job in her field but the pandemic has presented more challenges.

"In February 2020 I get my permanent residency in my hand ... and in March 2020 it's lockdown so it was so difficult," she said.

The Ontario YWCA Coalition's 'SheCoveyON' campaign outlined three key recommendations for the Ontario government to end the she-cession.

"We're urging the Premier to sign the federal child-care agreement because we know so many women, and families more generally, stand to gain from access to affordable child care and we know that for women in specific, child-care access is closely linked to labor market participation," said Ramze Rezaee.

According to Carolyn Ferns, policy coordinator at the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, the child-care crisis has only gotten worse during the pandemic.

"When the pandemic hit we saw the labour force participation rates of mothers just plummet," she said.

As schools and daycares closed, many women pulled back from the workforce because they needed to take care of their children at home.

"Many people have realized that it's a huge issue and it needs to be central to our social and economic recovery. Everyone seems to have realized that now, except for the Ontario government, so we felt like this campaign was really important to to to put that front and center, to make it part of the of this call for a SheCovey and that child care is at the core of it," said Ferns.

Ferns is hoping child care will be a central issue in the 2022 provincial election.

"If we want the economy to come back, if we want to power the reentrance of women to the workforce, we're going to need to have child

care and we're going to need to address it," she said.

The second recommendation in the open letter is around greater investment in women's employment and training programs "so that women impacted by the pandemic can upskill and reskill to access jobs of the future," said Ramze Rezaee.

Women, like Shabnam Shekh, who said she struggles just to get someone on the phone who can explain to her which documents and files are needed so she can get her teaching license in Ontario and return to the classroom.

"Everything is online so I'm not getting in person someone to tell me which documents they need from back home," said Shekh.

The third recommendation is for better working conditions to improve labour and employment standards in feminized industries.

"Most of the jobs that were furloughed or gone were in the service sector. Most of them were poorly paid. Most of them were held by women," said Armine Yalnizyan, a Canadian economist and Atkinson Fellow on the Future of Workers.

"The thing that we saw for the first time in this recession was the degree to which the essential economy rests on the foundation of a care economy. All three care sectors have been thrown into crisis; elder care, child care and health care wherein staffing shortages before the pandemic began and we're in a full-blown crisis now," she added.

Yalnizyan said she signed the YWCA's letter because after coining the term She-cession she has been eager to see how a SheCovey can happen.

The YWCA's letter points to the upcoming 2022 provincial election, noting "We will be watching each party's platform and reporting back to our communities ... We will not let these pressing issues fade into the background.

"Now is the time to make a difference."

Yalnizyan shared advice for Ontarians in the lead-up to the election.

"I would encourage any voter to take a really hard-eyed look at what the proposals are to make things better, make sure that these are the things that you think will make a lived difference in people's lives. And then we can move forward together in confidence that it isn't just lip service, carefully crafted lip service, but something that is going to change lives in a meaningful way," said Yalnizyan.

"It is totally up to us now in our collective interests and with our collective power to change the way we do things, we are government so who we vote for is going to make a huge difference," she added.

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