

Struggling child care and work, single moms were 'off the radar' in pandemic. Some say they're still struggling ^[1]

Child-care support, flexibility key to getting single moms back to work, experts say

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EXCERPTS



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From left, Melissa Gorecki, seen with her two sons, and Ramona Gnanapragasam are both single mothers who have struggled to manage work and parenting responsibilities during the pandemic. (Submitted by Melissa Gorecki; Submitted by Ramona Gnanapragasam)

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What working single parents faced in the pandemic

As pandemic restrictions have eased, Melissa Gorecki has tried to bring clients back to the eyelash extension business she runs at her Brampton, Ont., home. But that's been "almost impossible" for the single mother of two young boys.

"I'm trying to juggle, like, if I can take one or two clients, and I'm breastfeeding, I'm trying to help my son with his first year in school," said Gorecki, whose sons are five and 15 months.

Within a few years of starting her business, Gorecki had paid off the bulk of her debt and was prepared to buy a house. Then COVID-19 restrictions significantly reduced her bookings. She signed up for pandemic financial assistance, but says it hasn't been enough to make ends meet. She's been forced to dip into savings and slip back into debt.

Gorecki is among the single parents who have been "off the radar" in the pandemic response, experiencing large-scale losses since spring 2020, according to Katherine Scott, a senior researcher at the Ottawa-based Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Single moms struggling

"While most other groups started to rebound by the fall of 2020, single moms, particularly those with young kids under six, have struggled ever since," Scott told The Current.

Analyzing Statistics Canada's December labour force report, Scott found that the employment rate for single mothers (with children younger than six) was down 36 per cent between February 2020 and the end of 2021. For mothers with partners, and children in the same age group, employment during that same period was up 4.5 per cent.

Is the 'she-cession' over? Statistics point to recovery, experts aren't so sure

There's "a long-term risk that these families won't come back economically," Scott said, noting the longer women are out of the workforce, the harder it is to re-enter at anything above low-wage or part-time, precarious work.

"That has consequences [for] one's whole life: the amount of money you would earn over your lifetime, the amount of money you might be able to save for a child's education, or your own retirement," she said.

"That's true for women generally, but it's particularly true for single moms."

According to 2016 census data, more than one million children aged 0 to 14 lived with just one of their parents, and more than 80 per cent of those lived with their mother. More recent figures on lone-parent families will not be available until July, StatsCan said.

Single parents today tend to be older and have higher levels of education compared to the last 20 years, Scott said.

But there are many different types of single-parent families, she noted, and the problems they face can be amplified by other factors such as poverty or institutional racism.

'It seemed like survival for the family'

In Alberta, a single mother lost both her jobs in March 2020, but could only find factory work that involved long shifts, with no child care for her then 10-year-old son. The Current is not revealing her name to protect her child's privacy.

"In the moment you make the decisions that you think are the best ... it seemed like survival for the family, like, 'OK, I need to do whatever I can to bring in money,'" she said.

Amid pandemic restrictions, her son was left home alone all day, figuring out online school. As time passed, she noticed mood swings and a decline in his mental health.

"It was after a couple of months that I was at work and I got a text from him saying like, 'I can't do this anymore,' and he shared that he was feeling suicidal," she said.

Shocked, she asked to be reassigned to a more flexible position, which gave her more time to care for her son. She's since relocated to Edmonton with a new job that gives her greater flexibility and more options for child care. She says her son is now doing much better.

Scott said that in the pandemic, many families have faced the stress of limited child care, isolation from family and friends, and curbs to community services and supports.

However, she said single mothers felt them more acutely because there's "only the one parent on the front line."

Child-care support 'makes this country money'

Nearly all provinces and territories have signed on to a federal plan for \$10-a-day child care. Last month, Premier Doug Ford said Ontario was "very, very close" to joining.

That system could be key to getting single mothers back in the workforce, said Allison Venditti, founder of Toronto-based Moms at Work, which offers both fee-based and free online networking and education for its 11,000 members.

"If we have \$10-a-day daycare, we now have more people who can go to work at Starbucks and other places because they don't need to be making \$80,000 for it to make sense," she said.

Venditti pointed to the high cost of child care in some Canadian cities, which can force lower earners – usually women – to leave jobs that don't pay enough to justify child-care fees.

"If we change that dynamic and then those women are going back to work and they're paying taxes and they're buying more groceries ... [then] child care makes this country money, because it increases our female participation in the workforce."

Upskilling should lead to better jobs: expert

Last year in Toronto, Ramona Gnanapragasam decided to move on from her two jobs – one in retail, one as a canteen server in a care home – and retrain as a personal support worker.

She had to venture as far as Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., to find a spot in the six-month training course, which started just five weeks after the birth of her second child in March last year.

Cutting her maternity leave short and putting her newborn son in daycare was a sacrifice, but one she decided to make for their future.

"You can't really be working in retail, it doesn't pay the bills," said Gnanapragasam, whose mother helps care for her older child, a five-year-old daughter. "It won't get me anywhere, especially with inflation now."

Venditti said training to help single mothers upskill should have more flexibility, and be offered on a part-time basis. Those programs should also focus on teaching skills that lead to better paid work, she said, rather than just "helping women with their resume."

Similarly, she suggested that employers struggling to fill a full-time role could create two part-time ones, or a job share, and might end up with two well-trained employees ready to go full time down the line, if the need arises.

"What I want employers to know is this is not like a permanent commitment," Venditti said. "Single parents [are] not going to have little kids forever."

She also proposed a women's grant program for employers, similar to the Canada Summer Jobs Grant, which offers financial incentives for businesses to take on and train young people.

"We have employers who need staff and would love that, and we have women who need actual work experience ... and to get that gap in the resume closed," she explained, adding that the funding could prioritize smaller businesses still recovering from the pandemic, rather than big companies.

Employers would commit to a certain term of paid employment, which would give mothers the funds and confidence to sign up for daycare, she said.

In a statement to The Current, Employment and Social Development Canada [ESDC] outlined a number of programs aimed at helping working women, including single mothers.

The department pointed to the Sectoral Workforce Solutions Program, which connects workers with the training needed to fill skilled roles in sectors facing labour shortages; and the two-year \$50-million Women's Employment Readiness (WER) pilot program, which will test new ways to provide pre-employment training for women who face barriers to employment. Both prioritize women as an underrepresented group, including women who are Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC), those who are living with disabilities, LGBT, or who have been out of the workforce for an extended time.

As the pandemic fades but its impacts linger, Venditti hopes the problems it has highlighted won't be ignored in the rush to return to normal.

"I hope that people have seen how hard this is, and how hard it is to try and [juggle] kids and work, and that we leave this with more empathy," she said.

"Stop just doing the best thing for the economy and start thinking about the people whose lives have been really significantly impacted by this, which is far and beyond single parents."

Region: Canada ^[4]

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