

Women vanishing from the job market [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

After spending the past several decades fighting for an equal place in the job market, women are suddenly dropping out in large numbers. They're doing so just as the big generation of baby boomers begins to retire, creating the prospect of a severe labour crunch. Indeed, this could be starting already: the percentage of Canadians in the job market actually fell last year.

Most of the disappearing women, ironically, are in Alberta, which has an unemployment rate of 3.4 per cent and already suffers from Canada's most serious shortage of workers.

Quebec is still bucking this new development, with more women seeking jobs every year, possibly because of a big provincial day-care program.

"We honestly don't know what's happening," says Philip Cross, Statistics Canada's top economic analyst, although he does suspect that day-care availability plays a role.

But Cross notes that while the percentage of working-age Canadian women in the job market - their participation rate - began to fall only last year, it's been dropping in the United States since the late 1990s. Some American observers attribute the phenomenon to a new wave of social conservatism. It's unclear if this might be a factor in Alberta.

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Geoff Bowlby, chief of analysis at Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey, returned from a recent trip to Edmonton scratching his head.

So many women have dropped out of the job market in that city the percentage of adults with jobs actually dropped quite sharply in the past year, he says. This is contrary to the trend across Canada, where this so-called employment rate has risen to an all-time high.

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Quebec is a big exception to this reversal, however. Its participation rate for the key 25-to-45 age group of women has shot up by 5.4 percentage points since 1998, the year that Alberta's rate began falling.

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More interesting, Cross points out, is that when you look at women with young children under six, this trend reversal is greatly accentuated.

Quebec women with children under six are far more likely to be in the job market than women across Canada; Alberta women with such children far less likely.

It seems reasonable to speculate there's a link to another recent finding by Statistics Canada: Quebec has Canada's highest percentage of young children in child care: 63.4 per cent in 2003-04. Alberta has the lowest percentage: 42.6 per cent.

As well, over the eight years studied, Quebec had the biggest increase in child-care use, while Alberta had the smallest.

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- reprinted from the Sudbury Star

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