

The boardroom or romper room? [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Nightmares of perfectly ironed pillowcases flashed through Shaundra Carvey's imagination when she first thought of giving up her career to raise her first-born daughter.

At 31, Ms. Carvey was about to shatter her bedrock assumption that she would spend her life working, even after starting a family. When she first went on maternity leave, that assumption was intact: She would return to work in December, 2005, as a communications manager in downtown Calgary after staying home with newborn Cadence for a few months.

Last summer, with Cadence turning six months old, Ms. Carvey found herself preoccupied with the rapidly approaching return to work, and the prospect of putting Cadence into daycare. She began to contemplate -- with no small degree of panic -- stepping off the career path and starting life over as a stay-at-home mother.

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Ms. Carvey found refuge from that panic in the manner of any driven Type-A professional: She made a list of the pros and cons of staying home. The pros won out, and she became part of an enigmatic exodus in Alberta.

The working women of the province are disappearing, just as the province's superheated economy is becoming increasingly short-handed. Unemployment has fallen to unimaginably low levels, and help-wanted signs plaster the windows of retail businesses throughout the province. Businesses are scouring Alberta, indeed the entire country, for workers, going so far as to launch recruiting drives in prisons.

And while that desperate search goes on, women such as Ms. Carvey are turning away from work to become not-so-desperate housewives. Ten years ago, Alberta had nearly the highest proportion of working women (or women looking for work) with daycare-age children and a spouse, second only to Prince Edward Island.

In the ensuing decade, those numbers changed dramatically as large numbers of working mothers moved into the work force. Quebec, close to the bottom of the pack, rose to near the top, a change largely coinciding with its introduction of inexpensive and near-universal daycare. But the change was not limited to Quebec: Every Canadian province saw substantial increases in the number of working women with children under 6.

In every province, that is, except Alberta, where that number has been declining steadily this decade. Ten years ago, nearly seven in 10 women in this group were working, or looking for work -- above the national average. Now, it's closer to six in 10, and well below the nationwide average. Statistics Canada has documented this decline, but doesn't have a definitive explanation for it. Differences in daycare -- Alberta has among the lowest public funding in the country -- are likely part of the explanation. The introduction of a flat tax rate and a doubling of spousal deductions in 2001 certainly eased the financial burden on single-income families.

And some researchers believe that conservative social attitudes, and the resulting workplace expectations for women, are to blame.

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Prosperity has, at a minimum, arrived at the same time as working mothers were dropping out of the work force. Statscan analyst Vincent Ferrao said it is possible that it might be more than mere coincidence: The rising wealth of Alberta could be enabling some women to stay at home without undue financial hardship. "Wages have been increasing quite rapidly," he said. "Is it possible you only need one person working?"

That hypothesis certainly lines up with Ms. Carvey's experience. Ms. Carvey and her husband, Darby Parker, had the relatively unusual luxury of being free from the financial worries of moving to a single income. Her salary of \$70,000, while substantial, was lower than the six-figure compensation her spouse brought home from his oil-patch job. With a small mortgage, a modest home and a six-year-old car, the couple had avoided an overhang of debt.

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And here emerges another paradox: Alberta's prosperity might have given some families the means to live on a single income. But the fact

that they are doing so is dampening future growth, as the province's businesses run short of workers. If Alberta women (again those with children under 6) were working at the same rate as their Quebec counterparts, there would be close to another 17,000 female employees on the market -- a godsend in a province running short of everything from oil-patch executives to coffee-house clerks.

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If the future prosperity of Canada hinges on convincing women like Ms. Carvey to stay in the work force, or at least to return quickly, it might just be time to start sweating. The proud mother of Cadence, now 15 months old, says she might not ever go back to work. "That career used to define me. Now, I'm not so sure."

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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