

More younger Canadians, including men, facing child and elder care responsibilities ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

OTTAWA - For the first time, men are more likely than women to take time off work because of the "mental and emotional fatigue" of juggling the job, raising children and caring for aging parents, according to a landmark study obtained by the Citizen.

This gender shift is one of many elder care "myths" that researchers Linda Duxbury and Christopher Higgins have debunked in a massive survey of 25,000 professionals, managers and knowledge workers on how they are balancing work, childcare and elder care.

The study, *Balancing Work, Childcare and Eldercare*, found women still carry the load when it comes to elder care. They are twice as likely as men to be working and "sandwiched" between raising kids and caring for aging parents, and three times as likely to be providing elder care alone.

But the big shift is among young men, the "Generation Xers," who are equally involved as caregivers and in some ways feel the stress and emotional strain more acutely.

"What we are seeing is that younger men are like women now. All this focus on women having to step up and lean in, well, this just in, men are now tracking like women," said Duxbury.

"Women are more educated, earn more money and are equal bread-winners today, which gives them more say on who does what. At the same time, younger men feel responsible for their parents. What really sticks out among young men between ages 30 and 45 is they are really part of egalitarian families and that doesn't make things better for women. It makes things worse for men."

What defies previous empirical studies on elder care is that a growing number of working professionals are facing the responsibility when they are in early or mid-career rather than later in their working lives. At the same time, they usually have children at home, are caring for more than one elderly relative, whether a parent or in-law, for an average of six to seven years.

"The findings dispel many of popular preconceptions about working and elder care. We all think it's about older workers looking after aging parents and women who do it all for a few intense months at the end of life, but it's not," said Duxbury.

Duxbury said when she and Higgins began the study, researchers had barely analyzed the socio-economic impacts of paid employees "sandwiched" between child-rearing while caring for elderly parents. She said even Statistics Canada's General Social Survey begins its tracking of elder care at age 45, and their study confirmed a rapidly growing number of workers between 30 and 45 are squeezed by caring for their kids and parents.

The study, supported by Desjardins Insurance, surveyed 25,000 highly educated employees who work for large employers in the public and private sectors. About 8,000 of them also took an in-depth survey on caregiving and 111 agreed to personal interviews. Duxbury is a business professor at Carleton University's Sprott School of Business and Higgins is at the University of Western Ontario.

Duxbury says it is worrisome that 40 per cent of the 8,000 people surveyed who are caring for elderly parents are between the ages of 30 and 45 and also have children. These people worked more than 45 hours a week, spent more than 10 hours on elder care and up to 30 hours a week on children, depending on their ages.

They claimed the emotional strain was far more stressing than the financial or physical pressure, and one-third said they feel overwhelmed every day.

"The people with kids are more stressed and those with elder care are more depressed and if you are sandwiched with both you really lose - you are stressed and depressed."

"This is a bread-and-butter issue that strikes at the heart and soul of Canadians. This is about our children and our parents. What else is there? Who is going to step up and show some leadership here on how we manage this, because I am not seeing any."

Elder care is the work-life balance issue that childcare was 35 years ago, when employers finally realized they needed "family-friendly" policies to attract and keep employees. Duxbury argued Canada is facing an elder care crisis that is a "natural progression" of the childcare crisis when women entered the workforce in record numbers, delayed having children and had fewer of them.

"This wasn't the issue when we had lots of younger people and more caregivers to go around, but what has changed is the huge baby

boomer population that's aging, coupled with an undersupply of youth and increased life expectancy, which also means more Canadians are living longer with chronic illnesses and disabilities."

Duxbury says the findings should be a wake-up call for business and government, arguing that the impact of elder care for the workforce is one of the most ignored productivity issues as policy-makers wrestle with Canada's aging population. She noted in an interview that Finance Minister Jim Flaherty mentioned nothing about it last week's budget.

She said declining fertility, a shortage of youth and a massively aging population means fewer Canadians will be forced to care for more family members. And the number caring for children and parents at the same time will increase significantly.

All provinces are trying to rein in health costs and shifting elder care from hospitals to community care, which Duxbury argues doesn't have the resources. This shift is pushing higher levels of care for the frail, ill and disabled onto employees.

Duxbury said Canada's squeezed health care and social services systems can't afford to take over the estimated \$25 billion a year that families provide in "informal care."

This means some of the onus has to be assumed by employers, who will be in fierce competition for skilled employees, to offer "caregiver-friendly policies" to recruit and retain employees and even get them to take on added pressure of promotions.

She says policies such as flexible work arrangements, particularly compressed work weeks and paid and unpaid leave, will be more necessary. She called for Employee Assistance Programs to include help for families with aging relatives, and caregiver support networks in the workplace.

"How are we going to remain competitive when we aren't paying attention to the fact that we have a huge number in the most productive stage of the career cycle having to deal with kids, elder care, demanding jobs and unrelenting email?" Duxbury asked.

"People can choose to have children but they can't choose whether or not to have parents."

-reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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