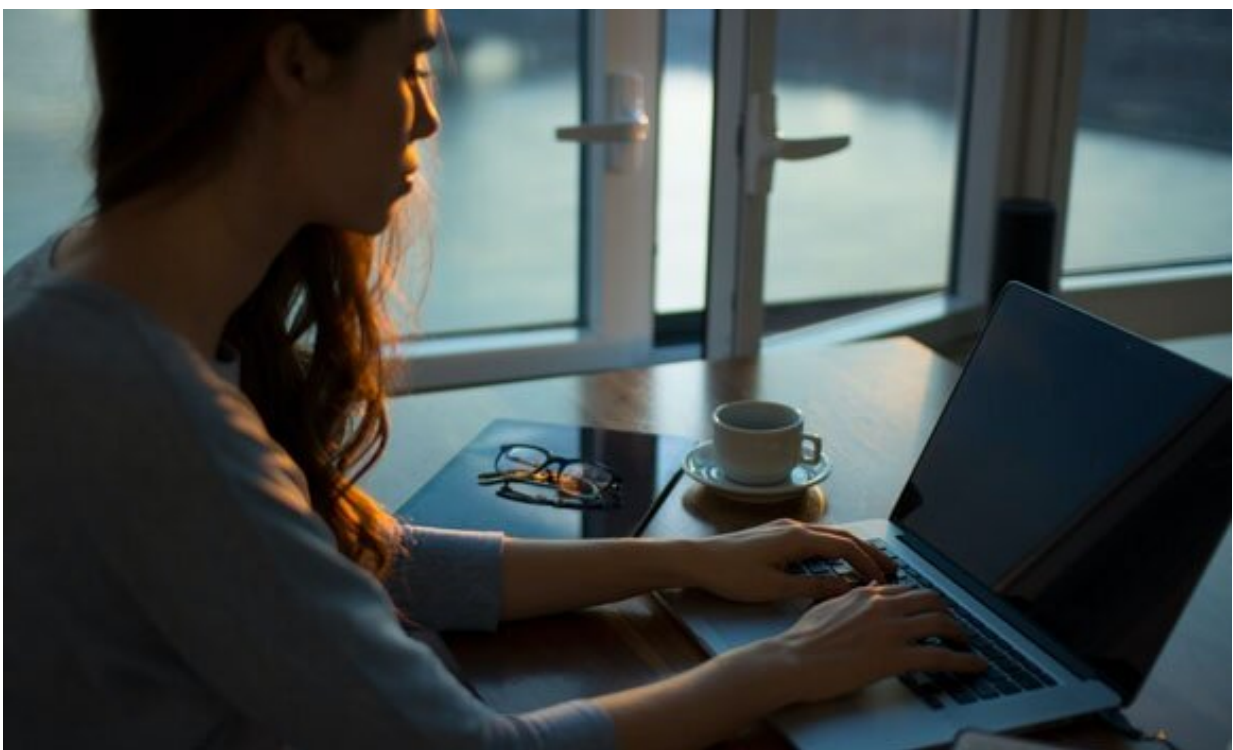


Q&A: Sociologist discusses why women's careers have suffered more than men's during the pandemic

July 31 2020, by Lindsay Dowling-Savelle



Impacted by the pandemic, many women are trading present and future earnings and putting a costly gap in their resumes, says Dr. Foster. Credit: Thought Catalog

It's been more than four months since the COVID-19 pandemic forced

many parts of the economy to shut down almost instantaneously. Businesses, daycares, healthcare practices and education systems were required to close their doors to help prevent the spread of the deadly virus.

While many people faced [job loss](#), others were forced to enter uncharted territory as their home and professional lives collided. They were asked to adapt to a new way of life that involved working from home while fulfilling many other roles all at once, including providing [primary care](#) to children and elders, homeschooling and more.

The move to remote working and the closure of offices and daycares has had a significant impact on the careers of women for a number of reasons. Subsequently, the pandemic has forced us to take a hard look at gender equity in the workplace.

We asked Karen Foster, an associate professor in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, to explain why women's careers have been more negatively impacted by the pandemic than their male counterparts.

How does gender inequity impact women in the workforce and how were these inequities exacerbated by the pandemic?

As much as we like to think we've made great strides in gender equity, I can think of three ways, right off the bat, that the pandemic has exacerbated existing gendered problems. The most obvious is probably that during the pandemic, women with children were far more likely to drop out of the labor market, quit their jobs, stop looking for work etc., to take care of their kids compared to men with children, and women and men without children. My former doctoral supervisor, Andrea

Doucet, has done a lot of research on men taking on more of the responsibility for children, but even she notes that women continue to do the lion's share of that work, and moreover, to feel responsible for it. When push came to shove, because women's earnings typically are lower than men's within couples (despite a growing proportion of female breadwinner couples in Canada) it would have made sense for women to stay home with the kids because they earn less. But it also made sense on a cultural level—because we have gendered assumptions about who's best suited to care for children, and because women are socialized to prioritize care. There are people who think we should preserve those assumptions, but even they ought to recognize that if care work is important, it should be supported and even remunerated. Women shouldn't have to trade economic security for their caring roles and responsibilities, and we are seeing women do that because of the pandemic. My colleague Sylvia Fuller at UBC has crunched the numbers to show that, despite your awesome neighbor who quit his job to care for the kids, statistically it is mothers who are bearing the brunt of the closure of daycares and schools. They're trading present and future earnings and putting a costly gap in their resumes.

A second gendered aspect of the pandemic is that the types of jobs that disappeared first were public-facing service jobs. Women dominate jobs in retail and the service sector, and social distancing threw a lot of that work into jeopardy. Economist Armine Yalnizyan has, accordingly, termed what we're going through a "shecession" and, to link it back to the first point, she is urging us to commit to a "shecovery," in which childcare is essential. Tammy Schirle at Wilfrid Laurier had similar findings.

But at the same time, many of the jobs that got deemed essential during the pandemic are also dominated by women: mainly grocery store workers and health care support workers across a range of specific occupations. Women got the worst of both worlds here—they were more

likely to be in sectors that shut down, and also more likely to be working the jobs that got busier, more dangerous and more stressful as a result of COVID.

What steps need to be taken to create gender equity for women in the workplace?

Not all women have children, but a significant proportion of working women do. So childcare must be part of a recovery plan that puts gender at the forefront. So should mandatory, universal sick days for all employees in every province. When school goes back, little outbreaks are going to send kids home again, and kids will be made to stay home if they have so much as a sniffle. If we don't want parents sending sick kids to school out of desperation, they need to have paid leave from their employers. Governments might need to enact strong legislation about what employers can and can't do if their employees have to take time off or work compressed hours to meet childcare obligations. Moreover, we should think ahead to next summer. This summer showed us that a certain age of kid—say, 5-9 or 10, is too old for daycare but too young to stay home alone. These kids would typically be in summer camps or some other congregate setting (or cared for by an informal network of neighborhood kids and family), but much of that fell apart when summer camps closed and people were restricted to bubbles. What is the solution for next year, if we need it?

We need to also look at the types of jobs that will be growing post-pandemic and take steps to ensure that there is good gender representation in the [training programs](#) that prepare people for those jobs. Often gender segregation in certain sectors and jobs can be traced to the pipeline of trainees. If there aren't many women in the school programs, there won't be many women in the jobs. If we know the [service sector](#) is going to be susceptible to future shocks, we probably

want to take early steps to ensure that it's not comprised of mostly women. No field should be, if we believe that economic gains and losses should be spread equitably across the population.

Finally, employers should instill a culture that encourages male employees with children to share the load with their partners. I have heard so many anecdotes about men's employers assuming their employees' wives will take care of the kids and being shocked by anything else. There is no good reason for that beyond gendered stereotypes and discrimination. Just like more men should take parental leave when their children are born, more men should step up and share the emergency childcare burden if we enter another phase of lockdown or school closures.

What can employers, co-workers, and governments do to support women employees as they return to work during and following the pandemic?

In addition to the steps I just noted, employers could get creative. I've heard of employers hiring a childcare provider and creating an in-house daycare if they have a few employees who need it. They should continue to emphasize equity and diversity in hiring, which means understanding that gender affects the routes people take in and through the labor market, and assessing them only by controlling for those factors. We need to appreciate that women's labor force participation grows the economy. I'm not even a champion of growth, but that's the dominant objective, so why aren't we using it as an excuse to support women? Now more than ever, we probably need a universal childcare program, one that is funded enough to ensure a spot for every child and family that wants it. The cost of leaving childcare up to individual families is far greater than the cost of a universal program.

We should also look at the essential jobs we've needed more than ever during the pandemic—grocery store and health care jobs—which are female-dominated, and bump up their wages so they truly reflect the value of this work. Ditto for the newly dangerous jobs we're starting to need desperately now that we are slowly opening up: daycare workers, and, in a couple months, teachers. Insofar as these [jobs](#) are dominated by [women](#), bringing their remuneration in line with their social value—which we can no longer ignore—is an act toward [gender equity](#).

Provided by Dalhousie University

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