

Women, jobs, and COVID

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For many calamities the maxim has been: first save the women and children. When it comes to unemployment, though: not so much.

The COVID-19 upheaval has already claimed many jobs. While borders remain closed, everyone whose income relies in some way on tourism faces the toughest of times. The impact on other parts of the economy may not be as severe (yet) as first predicted but doubtless employers and employees alike are looking ahead with teeth clenched. As unfolding events in Australia show, there may still be more pain to come.

The Government's recovery response has been to borrow tens of billions for job subsidies and coming capital works in what might be described as a Kiwi-sized Marshall Plan. But is it a Marshall Plan for everyone?

Economic downturns tend to disproportionately disadvantage women and, the Ministry for Women reports, that has held true for COVID-19. It points to

the overrepresentation of women - and in particular young, Māori, and Pasifika women - in sectors that have taken the largest hits.

Prospects for women working in hospitality, in sales, in commercial cleaning, in customer service are not good. When you hear about the hotels being put into hibernation, spare a thought for the women who cleaned the rooms, made the beds, served the buffets and worked in the spas. Their prospects will not be bright.

This adds a degree of precariousness to a longstanding vulnerability. More than two thirds of the country's part time workers are women. The structural inequalities of gender pay gap and occupational segregation mean that women generally have less disposable income and savings than men. That means saw they were in a more vulnerable position before COVID-19, and they remain more vulnerable as we find our way towards recovery.

So have the recovery plans to date taken account of this? Not so far. The wage subsidy has been valuable in preserving jobs but looking out ahead, the support appears to be less than solid.

Essentially, the kind of jobs that have already gone or are in danger of going employ large numbers of women, while the areas in which the Government is readying to spend large sums are industries employing largely men. In infrastructure, in shovel ready projects, in DOC estate jobs, the employment profile tends to be male.

Industries identified as areas where there may be growth post COVID-19 are notably male-dominated: in the technology sector, only a quarter of employees are women and in construction the proportion is just 14%. In the primary sector that share is a quarter and in manufacturing 31%. The Government has launched a laudable apprentice programme – but again, traditionally, the majority of apprentices are young men.

And then there's the move to working from home. One of the unexpected by-products of lockdown was the discovery that flexible/remote working does actually work in some businesses.

Employers have found such arrangements to be viable and (some) employees appear to want to hold on to that flexibility. For women, this does provide an opportunity for more family-friendly work arrangements even if only because it avoids time lost travelling to and from work.

But in broader terms the question remains: do current economic recovery policies offer women as much protection from unemployment as they do men?

Finance minister Grant Robertson has indicated he wants to encourage women entrepreneurs. It's an appealing notion at first blush, but how far might that take us? A great many self-employed women tend to find themselves growing no further than a business of the one modestly-paid employee (ie. the woman herself). The hours might be flexible, but the pay is rubbish.

So what can be done?
One principle is more than well-enough known: women need to be represented and included in all planning and decision making.

In particular, we could be addressing the specific needs and contributions of women as workers, as business owners and as entrepreneurs, maybe providing incentives to businesses to build relationships with women-owned businesses, and if we're going to encourage women entrepreneurs, maybe working on more substantial support to help them build businesses of real promise.

Perhaps we might also consider treating the recharged apprenticeship system as a genuine change moment, with a reinvigorated drive to encourage more women into apprenticeships, not only as a means of finding them a recovery job, but also to prepare our workforce better for the coming era of automation, and job-threatening technologies.

In all of this, as we find with so many aspects of the COVID crisis, there is both a sense of fresh opportunity and a worrying shadow of doom. On the one hand, there could be exciting opportunities here: in remaking tourism: in remaking manufacturing; in resetting the economy; in training and upskilling for a more fruitful future with better prospects for us all. On the other, there is the worry that women in the workplace may be about to see a rolling back of hard-won advances. To avoid that we need more than shovels at the ready.

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