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Behind the Work-Fertility Trade-Off: Women, Work and Transitions

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ABSTRACT: In this third decade of the 21st century, discussion of women's labour-force participation and its impact on fertility continues. While evidence points to a decline in overall fertility rates in most industrialized countries, a direct link to women's labour-force activity - the work-fertility trade-off - is not always clear. Cultural, economic and sociological factors have greatly affected the roles women play in society, which have in turn contributed to declining fertility. Another often overlooked factor is the impact of increasingly longer and complex life-course transitions into adulthood which compress the period of fertility. While these topics have often been discussed in isolation, this paper synthesizes these topics in a demographic overview of women's changing roles. The current pandemic with its impact on labour-force activity (dubbed the "she-cession") and associated declines in fertility has driven home the need for supportive social policies that can contribute to balancing the earning and unpaid caring roles by enhancing the ability of women to engage in the labour force and meet their fertility aspirations.

KEYWORDS: Fertility; Women; Labour; Life Course; Pandemic; Social Policy

Introduction

Several decades into the 21st century, the issue of women combining earning and unpaid caring roles is still being debated (for example, see Anne-Marie Slaughter's (2012) popular article "Why women still can't have it all"). The Covid-19 pandemic has placed women's roles under the spotlight and has had an outsized impact on women's labour-force activity (dubbed the "she-cession" in Canada) as well as declines in fertility. Never far from the discussion of women in the workplace is the issue of the so-called work-fertility trade-off, what economists refer to as the opportunity costs of foregone wages when a woman has children. Most researchers consider the link to be elusive and point to the revolution in women's changing roles in society to at least partly account for changes in fertility levels. This paper will explore women's changing roles behind the work-fertility trade-off in a wide-ranging demographic analysis. We begin with a brief explanation of the work-fertility trade-off. The first main section involves examining women's roles in terms of changing patterns of fertility, marriage and work activity, followed by issues of work-life balance. Secondly, we will examine the often-overlooked issue of prolonged transitions into adulthood, which has compressed the period of fertility. While these topics have been examined before, often in isolation, this analysis attempts to weave together a picture of the enormous changes affecting women and their impact on work and fertility. Finally, we discuss the effects of supportive social policies in Canada that can serve to reduce the incompatibility between employment and childbearing.

The Work-Fertility Trade-Off

This countercyclical argument contends that a rise in women's earnings in industrialized countries would have a reducing effect on fertility in that bearing children would affect working women's opportunity costs in several ways, including an immediate impact on women's employment as well as long-term effects on earning power (Trovato, 2015). For economists, the

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cost part of this link seems to be a straightforward calculation. For instance, economists have actually estimated the life-cycle career costs of having children to be equivalent to 35 percent of a woman's total earnings (taking into account women's decisions regarding labour supply, occupation, fertility and savings throughout the life-cycle, see Adda et al., 2017). For demographers and labour scholars the link between women's fertility and labour-force activity is viewed as more nuanced and has been pondered for decades. Though the negative association between work and fertility is hard to miss, early demographers viewed the association as elusive.

For example, Romanuik (1984) discusses the difficulty in determining the direction of causation in the work-fertility relationship and concludes that the procreative behaviour of any society is part of a very complex process, and it cannot be reduced purely to a function of female labour-force participation. More recently, Bonvalet et al. (2015) in their examination of changes in fertility, admit that it is tempting to assume that labour-force activity caused the fall in fertility because both occurred simultaneously, but acknowledge that the link does not always have an obvious direction. Additionally, in some countries the two phenomena simply did not coincide. Furthermore, Trovato (2015) points to recent evidence where high female labour-force participation rates are associated with higher fertility rates in countries which have implemented strong policy programs that reduce the incompatibility between employment and childbearing.

While scholars have not been able to definitively define the causal connection in the work-fertility trade-off, there certainly are important societal implications to be considered with respect to combining work and fertility. At a societal level, this is an important topic with fertility rates currently below replacement levels in most industrialized countries with significant implications for economic development and labour-force supply. Recently, Fostik and Galbraith (2021) point out that further declines in fertility could put Canada in a situation associated with rapid population aging, increased stress on the labour market, public health and pensions. Economists and business leaders touch upon these concerns with each release of our country's census results, often concentrating on future labour-force supply concerns. This is not a new apprehension. For example, earlier this century, a Conference Board of Canada report was titled: Too few people, too little time: The employer challenges of an aging workforce (Conference Board of Canada, 2006). A full discussion of the effects of population aging are beyond the scope of this paper, here we will briefly discuss its impact on labour-force supply.

As the results of the 2021 census were released, Canada's working-age population was noted to have reached a turning point, in that there was a decline in the main labour-force age group of 15-64, with more people exiting or about to exit than people about to enter the labour force (Statistics Canada, 2022a). It's noteworthy that during the 2010s, immigration has been the driving force for Canada's labour supply, accounting for over four-fifths of the labour-force growth (Statistics Canada, 2022b). Given that the pandemic significantly halted Canada's immigration growth in 2020, the projected post-pandemic rebound in immigration will be critical to labour-market recovery. And as the economy has picked up after the shutdowns during the worst part of the pandemic, there have been noticeable labour-force shortages in several areas of industry.

Yet, it was noted that even though immigration has a rejuvenating effect on the Canadian population and on its labour force, this effect is not enough to stop the population aging process. According to Statistics Canada (2022b, 3), "Modest, sustained increases in immigration levels will not fully offset the longer-term impacts of an aging population but are critical for alleviating the effects of aging on the labour market over time". Population aging is a long-term, normal trend that is occurring in most industrialized countries. In Canada, these shifts in demography are due to decades-long low fertility rates, the gradual increase in life expectancy, and the fact that the large

postwar baby-boom generation began entering retirement ages around 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2022a). Given that women make up 47% of the labour force in Canada, policies that support strong female labour-force participation rates and that allow women to meet their fertility aspirations would be critical for labour-force supply.

In the following several sections, we will examine women's changing roles behind the work-fertility trade-off including fertility patterns, marriage patterns and work activity, followed by issues of work-life balance.

Fertility Patterns

Fertility is defined as the average number of children that a woman has with the fertility rate of 2.1 described as the replacement level for maintaining a population. The postwar (World War II) fertility hike or baby boom in North America was deemed an anomaly attributable to the exceptionable economic circumstances of the postwar period. In particular, rising postwar prosperity (referred to as the thirty glorious years by Ricard (1994) with its robust job market and strong wage increases) greatly influenced increases in fertility as well as encouraging early marriage and the male-breadwinner model of family life. These economic developments were accelerated by the emergence of the welfare state which encouraged government interventions to build infrastructure and support economic expansion (see Mitchell, 2006; Trovato, 2015). Currently, Fostik and Galbraith (2021) describe Canada as a low-fertility country (with a fertility rate that has been on a steady decline since 2008, decreasing further to a record low of 1.40 in 2020 from 1.47 in 2019).

Significant changes in several key demographic dimensions, including very low fertility rates and declining marriage rates have been explained as a shift in value orientation that centres on the ethos of individualism (often referred to as the second demographic transition, see Trovato, 2015). A shift toward more individualistic goals and self-fulfillment is made possible by increased affluence and the emancipation of women (Mitchell, 2006). The widespread availability and adoption of modern birth control methods have afforded women more control over their fertility, including the ability to postpone childbearing, which can result in lower fertility overall (Trovato, 2015). Also, the increased control over fertility allows the option to choose voluntary childlessness, which was once considered evidence of psychological maladjustment and now would be an acceptable lifestyle choice (Veevers, 1980). As Trovato (2015, 250) affirms "lower fertility has resulted from a combination of sociological, economic and cultural factors" and these factors will likely maintain current below-replacement levels in the future.

In the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, there was some initial speculation that the lockdowns would usher in a baby boom (Barroso, 2021; Gibb, 2021). In fact, we appear to be in the midst of a baby bust as fertility rates are down with early reports of declines in births in Europe and North America being documented (Bricker, 2021). A recent Statistic Canada report exploring fertility intentions noted that 19% of Canadians aged 15-49 reported that because of the pandemic, they now want to have fewer children than previously planned, or to have a baby later than previously planned (Fostik & Galbraith, 2021). Reasons for the lower fertility rate relate to economic uncertainty of unemployment and lockdowns along with school and daycare closures resulting in added home responsibility for parents. Along with job insecurity and financial precarity, there are also health concerns as women postpone pregnancies due to possible virus-related health risks (Gibb, 2021).

The pandemic appears to be accelerating the shift towards lower fertility rates though it is uncertain if this is a temporary downturn. One demographer predicted that a fertility downturn beyond 2021 was likely if Covid-19 left serious economic scars on the labour market with the caveat that social and family policies could moderate such impacts (United Nations, 2021). The recent United Nations report on population pointed out that current evidence of Covid-19's impact on fertility appears to be mixed with the expectation that for high-income countries, Covid-19 is likely acting as a temporary interruption rather than a permanent change in long-term fertility trends (United Nations, 2022).

With falling fertility rates, Morgan (2003) observes an important ideological shift that encourages parents to focus attention on a smaller number of children in that each child is unique and deserving of substantial parental investment in terms of resources and time. A related explanation is that these are planned children and smaller family size contributes to the idea that each child is more precious (Schulte, 2014). This quality-quantity trade-off is essentially an economic argument implying that low fertility is the result of parents investing in fewer children of higher quality (Trovato, 2015). In the modern context, children are no longer the economic assets that they were in the past (as in family-farm labour in an agrarian-based economy).

Marriage Patterns

At the end of World War II, North America and Western Europe entered into a period of what is referred to as "the golden age of marriage" with marriage viewed as the gateway to adulthood and respectability (Coontz, 2005). During the 1950s in particular, there was near universal and earlier marriage (with all but five percent eventually marrying), earlier parenthood, family intactness (low and stable divorce rate) and highly differentiated gender roles (male as sole breadwinner and female as homemaker) (see Mitchell, 2006).

As women achieved higher levels of education and entered the labour force they gained power and independence raising their status in society. Gains in economic independence and autonomy made divorce not only possible but acceptable (Bonvalet et al., 2015). By the late 1960s the centrality of marriage in life was waning, resulting in what Trovato (2015) referred to as the "flight from marriage". Whereas early postwar prosperity favoured early marriage and early childbearing, now late marriage, single parenthood, divorce and cohabitation are all on the rise (Trovato, 2015). While the majority of Canadians still marry eventually, the rate of common-law marriage is on the rise with over one in five now living common-law compared to 6.8% in 1981, with the rate of common-law unions being most prevalent in Quebec and among same-sex couples (Statistics Canada, 2017).

These changes in marriage patterns reflect fundamental changes in society and serve as a barometer of social change (see Trovato, 2015). As noted, society now accepts many different lifestyle models as valid examples of how to structure one's household. According to Mitchell (2006) the model of the family that is rooted in immediate postwar North America was a historical fluke based on a unique and temporary conjuncture of economic, social and political forces. Ruggles (2015) documents this retreat from the prior postwar norm of early marriage and the male-breadwinner model (prevalent over the middle part of the 20th century) to the present where the dual-earner model is now commonplace. His main premise is that the shifts in families reflect changes in work and that these economic changes are responsible for the transformations in family composition, marriage and divorce. The current practice of marriage postponement and lower fertility rates are a function of economic conditions, increased education and career factors (see

Mitchell, 2006). Factors relating to women's paid labour-force activity will be covered in the following section.

Labour-Force Attachment/Activity

Of all the changes over the course of the 20th century, women's changing roles stand out as particularly profound, especially in the second half of the 20th century. Women's entry into the economic sphere (e.g., increased labour-force participation, entry of women into previously male-dominated professions, and increased educational attainment) has led to enormous transformations in the roles women play in society. Romaniuk (1984) speaks of the fuller integration of women into the economic system and fuller equality with men as accelerating and as a re-orientation of the values and beliefs concerning the appropriate roles for women in society. The increasing involvement of women in the labour force has been referred to as a social and economic revolution, reflecting the changing roles and status of women both in the family and in society (McVey & Kalbach,1995). Indeed, women's expanded opportunities to earn income, status and psychic gratification outside of the family contrasts the traditional unpaid care-giving role as an expensive trade-off (Romaniuk, 1984). More recently, Bonvalet et al. (2015) note the rise in the economic status of women, referring to work as becoming a cornerstone to female identity. Women's increasing labour-force attachment has been accompanied by an upsurge in educational attainment with the return on education higher for women than for men (Ferrer & Riddell, 2002).

In terms of labour-force attachment and identity, Bardwick (1986) describes one's occupation as a basic grounding of identity in that work is "who we are". In North America at least, self-image is very closely tied to work. In particular, for women this identity means that they belong to the 'club' with the value of their paid work as the measure of their value to society (Hovanec & Shilton, 2007). Today there is a greater identification of women with their work, as a former stay-at-home mom wryly observed "Work is what makes you a person" (Perle-McKenna, 1998, 57). The cohort differences between the postwar baby-boom women's and their mothers' careers are nicely captured in the title of one journal article: "My daughter has a career; I just raised babies" (Carr, 2004). The correlation between women's socioeconomic status and self-esteem has grown stronger with each generation (Twenge, 2014). Twenge (2014) goes so far as asserting that work, income and education, once relatively unimportant to a woman's identity, are now even more important to women's than to men's identities.

In essence, women's entry into paid employment meant that life was no longer mapped out in advance but instead allowed for broader life choices (Bonvalet et al., 2015). Bonvalet et al. (2015) note the turnaround from the postwar years where working women were once highly criticized whereas being in the workforce now increases women's value in society and enables them to develop their own identity. Employed women themselves consistently report greater societal as well as spousal respect and indicate that they have greater decision-making power in their homes compared to full-time stay-at-home women (see Coontz, 2005).

Like most industrialized countries, Canada has a high female labour-force participation rate (61.4% for 15–64-year-olds) with women comprising a large portion of the Canadian workforce (47%) (Catalyst, 2020). Of the many social and economic changes in the post-World War II period, one of the most profound is the dramatic increase in women's labour-force participation (Moyser, 2017). For example, Canada's postwar women's labour-force participation rate in the core working ages of 25 to 54 years has increased from 21.6% in 1950 to 82% in 2015 (Moyser, 2017). Women are more likely to work part-time than men (26% versus 13%) with childcare being the most common reason for choosing part-time work among women in their

thirties (Patterson, 2018). It is not surprising that dual-earner households are now the most common household type (close to 70% among couple families with at least one child under 16) whereas the percentage of mothers who work (unpaid) at home full-time is 16.2% (Uppal, 2015).

Early during the pandemic, economists began referring to the chilling economic nosedive in North America as the "she-cession" noting that women's job losses were greater than men's (McKeon, 2021). Women were bearing the brunt of job losses during the pandemic as they make up much of the workforce in the most affected sectors, such as hospitality (Desjardins & Freestone, 2021). Mothers faced higher job losses than women without children as mothers were more likely than fathers to leave their jobs to care for toddlers and school-age children during lockdowns (Wheatley, 2021). The gender wage gap is another reason why in heterosexual partnerships, it's mostly the mothers, usually the lower earners, who have stepped out of the workforce, and who have shouldered more of the childcare and school supervision (Stroh, 2020).

It was not surprising to read reports of women lamenting the loss of self and career with home schooling, cutting back on work hours or losing their jobs while on shutdown during the pandemic (for example see Bell, 2021). Due to the prolonged nature of this pandemic, economists have concerns that a sizeable number of women may be at risk of skills erosion, referred to as the 'scarring' effect (Wheatley, 2021). With women's lowered participation rates during the pandemic, there are concerns that the labour-force progress of the past few years is threatened with some predicting that the Covid-19 crisis could set women's advancement back by a decade (Grant, 2021). This is perhaps overstating it, though Buck (2021) posits that it's not just income and professional experience that women have been losing during the pandemic: for some it's their well-being, with survey reports of unemployed women and single parents reporting the worst mental health because of the pandemic. The following section deals with work-life balance issues related to pressures around paid employment, parenthood roles and the intensification of parenting.

Work-Life Balance

Smaller family size associated with reduced fertility was initially predicted to lead to less time spent parenting over a person's lifetime and to result in less impact on life-course decisions (Coontz, 2005). Yet, parents now spend more time with their children compared to parents of 30 years ago, despite smaller family size (Moyser & Burlock, 2018). This phenomenon, labeled as "intensive parenting", is prevalent throughout the middle classes of many industrialized countries (Moyser & Burlock, 2018). As a result, families with young children describe themselves as very time-crunched with mothers' time with their children climbing steeply in recent decades. Moyser and Burlock (2018) report that qualitative research highlights women's retention of ultimate responsibility for the coordination of children's lives; the smooth functioning of the household; "emotion work" (i.e., provision of support); and "kin keeping" (i.e., the maintenance of familial relationships)—even as their economic roles have expanded. They acknowledge that both men and women spend more time on childcare than 30 years ago but that women have increased their time with children to a greater extent than men, reflecting a more intensive form of childrearing.

The negative impacts of work-life conflicts and role overload are well documented (i.e., reports of stress and time pressure). Higgins et al. (2006) in their survey of Canadian workers have suggested that lower birth rates are a hidden cost of the lack of work-life balance. In their Canadian survey a higher percentage of female respondents versus males agreed that they had fewer children because of work demands or had not yet started a family/decided not to have a family because of their career. Edmonston et al. (2010) note the persistent gap between Canadian women's fertility intentions (largely stable and in the above-replacement-level fertility range from 1990 to 2006)

compared to actual below-replacement-level fertility, a gap which continues to be prevalent in most developed countries (including Canada) according to the recent United Nations (2022) population report discussed earlier.

In most discussions of work-life balance the emphasis is heavily focused on solutions for accommodating women and work. However, a number of researchers raise concerns about the lack of male involvement and call for a better sharing of parental work and a better integration of fathers into housework and care duties (see Gerson, 2010; Matysiak, 2011). Moyser and Burlock (2018) raise concerns about the "stalled" gender revolution in unpaid work though male involvement is on the rise and a more equal division of household and childcare is associated with higher fertility rates in Nordic countries (see Beaujot & Wang, 2010). McGinn (2021) discusses the possibility of changing fatherhood for the better during the pandemic with more men reporting greater involvement with childcare and household tasks.

In their comprehensive multi-decade surveys, Duxbury and Higgins (2012) note the importance of flexible organizations and supportive organizational cultures in combatting work-life conflicts and point out that women actively seek out these flexible firms. Chung and Van der Horst (2018) provide evidence to show how work-time flexibility and workplace flexibility can enhance the work capacity of female workers in times of increased family demand. One positive aspect that has come out of the pandemic are the experiments with the 'when' of work (including flextime, four-day workweeks) and 'where' of work (flexiplace or telework). In particular, the issue of telework or work-from-home has received the most attention with researchers estimating that our telework capacity in Canada is such that four-in-ten jobs can plausibly be carried out at home (Deng et al., 2020). Teleworkers are more likely to be female, core-age workers with higher levels of education with 43% of women versus 31% of men teleworking in May of 2020 during the beginning stages of the pandemic (Clarke & Hardy, 2022). The popularity of telework is related to saving time from not commuting and the flexibility provided from working at home. While working from home served well as a temporary response to the pandemic, Deng et al. (2020) propose that this transition might function as a catalyst for a new way of doing business for years to come. Recognition of work-life balance concerns continues with changes to the when and where of work and emerging changes in legislation (e.g., right-to-disconnect laws) that will be discussed in the policy section.

Transitions

A frequently overlooked factor behind the work-fertility trade-off is the issue of prolonged life-course transitions into adulthood which compress the period of fertility. A transition is defined by Mitchell (2006) as a discrete life change or event. The transitions into full adulthood typically involve leaving school, leaving the parental home, engaging in full-time work, entering conjugal relationships, and having children (Trovato, 2015). During the benchmark postwar period these transitions to adulthood (marked by a time of rising wages, low unemployment and muted global competition) were early, uniform and compressed, whereas today's more complex transitions (accompanied by slow or stagnant wage growth, lessened job security and retrenchment of the welfare state) are more varied, prolonged and sometimes reversible (as in home leaving) (see Mitchell, 2006; Venne, 2010). Put another way, the once-stable postwar life-course has evolved to become more complex and precarious. The pandemic with its associated lockdowns has exacerbated young people's transitions into the workforce. Compared to adults, youth have been harder hit by labour-market shifts during the pandemic with young women being disproportionately affected (Wolff & Hamilton, 2020).

A recent survey of the social and economic effects of precariousness in employment in two large Canadian cities (in Ontario) revealed the broad, detrimental impact on workers (Lewchuk, et al., 2016). The survey findings paint a picture of how low earnings and economic uncertainty translate into delayed relationship formation, lower marriage rates and fewer households with children. The difficulty with transitions to adulthood was also observed in a recent Statistics Canada report. The report on young millennials, a highly-educated group, noted a strong divide between those millennials who are struggling with student debt, unaffordable housing and stagnant wages versus a small group who are thriving, having benefited from generous intergenerational transfers (bank of mom and dad) to pay for their tuition and sometimes even a house down payment (Casey, 2022; Heisz & Richards, 2019).

Venne (2010) proposes that the most important transition to adulthood is the increasingly complex education-to-work transition (accompanied by increasing educational attainment) and that delaying this transition tends to delay all other transitions. Mitchell (2006) points out that the one trend that shows little sign of changing in the future is the requirement for higher levels of education, sometimes referred to as credentialism. Young people increasingly face a more complex and prolonged school-to-work transition compared to their parents, who were more likely to be job ready at the end of high school (Beaujot, 2004). Though early transitions during the three economically-buoyant postwar decades clearly appear to be anomalous, they sometimes serve as benchmarks for transitions even into this century, likely because we often make comparisons between children and their parents. An important point to make here is that given current economic conditions and job demands, taking longer to transition into adulthood reflects new economic realities and certainly not a failure to launch. While some lament the longer school-to-work transition (for example see Levine (2005) who refers to young adults as being in the midst of an epidemic of work-life unreadiness) most researchers recognize that complex and prolonged transitions are the norm for young people today. This new reality of lengthening transitions leaves some families overburdened as they support their children for an extended period (Settersten & Ray, 2010).

The traditional adult tripartite life-course model (see Figure 1) consists of young adulthood (education) which is undergoing an expansion, middle adulthood (paid work), which is being compressed, and later adulthood (retirement) which is expanding. Worktime compression refers to the fact that our paid employment is being concentrated into relatively fewer decades of midlife, due to an increase in educational attainment at the front end and to earlier retirement at the back end, both relative to our rising life expectancy (Venne & Hannay, 2017). While we mainly tend to think of longer life expectancy in terms of longer periods of retirement, the first stage of adulthood is also being elongated.

Figure 1: Stages of Adulthood

Stages of Adulthood	Young adulthood ↔	Adulthood →←	Older adulthood ↔
Three-Phase Life Model	Education ↔ Expansion of post-secondary education	Work →← Work-time compression over mid-life period	Retirement ↔ Expansion of time spent in retirement
Period of Fertility	→← Period of fertility compressed		

Adapted from Venne and Hannay (2017)

Yet, more complex transitions and an elongated period of young adulthood (to accommodate longer periods of education) are related to later and lower fertility (Trovato, 2015). In effect, the period of fertility is being compressed in much the same way that paid worktime is being compressed in the middle stage of adulthood (see Figure 1). The factors of increased educational attainment and later entry into career jobs both tend to squeeze the fertile period of adulthood, often pushing the period of possible procreation to a woman's thirties, in essence resulting in a period of compressed fertility. Osberg (2005) notes that the peak loading of our labour supply concentrates paid work into relatively few decades in midlife and that this peak loading also coincides with childbearing and childrearing work or peak years for unpaid work in the home. Specifically, Gerson (2010) refers to the conflict between childbearing/rearing and the key career-building period. Unlike worktime, which can be extended into older adulthood or the so-called Third Age, there is a finite period for possible childbearing and fertility cannot be easily extended despite improvements in assisted-reproductive technologies.

To briefly summarize the two initial sections of this paper: the first section of this paper involved a wide-ranging demographic examination of women's evolving roles relating to the work-fertility trade-off. The complexity of attempting to account for the work-fertility trade-off is confounded by the fact that "associations between women's employment and family size are situated in complex social, economic, and occupational contexts, and are also influenced by the prevailing cultural norms around gender roles and gender equity" (Moore et al., 2021, 47). We have attempted to capture the complexity of the enormous changes affecting women's roles in our discussions of changing fertility rates, increased educational attainment coupled with stronger work attachment and later-and-less-intact marriage and finally with a discussion of work-life balance pressures. From having their lives mapped out for them in constrained and limited roles in the past, women are now presented with broader choices in how to structure their working and personal lives. It was previously mentioned that the profound changes in the roles women play were an economic and social revolution with work becoming a cornerstone of female identity reflecting women's changes in societal status.

Our second section in this paper involved an examination of the topic of longer transitions into adulthood, an issue that is often overlooked in the discussion of combining work and fertility. Yet more complex transitions (including increased educational attainment) during an elongated period of young adulthood are compressing the period of fertility. Considering the importance of

women in the Canadian economy (women make up 47% of the Canadian labour force), our final section comprises a discussion of several supportive policy options to help balance the earning and unpaid caring roles as well as policies to support the complex transitions to adulthood.

Supportive Social Policies

Matysiak (2011) predicts that without easing the tensions between paid work and unpaid care there will be serious repercussions (as in decreases) for fertility, with female labour-force participation possibly increasing further to preserve the average lifestyle. Yet, Morgan (2003) concedes that there is not really a low-fertility 'crisis' but that below-replacement fertility is an issue that befalls developed countries that can usually afford to address it through public policy and institutional adjustments. He speaks of policy responses in assisting women in realizing their intended fertility by easing the difficulty of combining childrearing and working. Women's higher fertility intentions open the door to potential policy changes from government that could facilitate the fulfillment of desired fertility (Edmonston et al., 2010). More recently, a United Nations report (United Nations, 2022) noted that current surveys in low-fertility countries (including Canada) have indicated that many women are having fewer children than they would like. The report lists the multiple obstacles women face to achieving their desired family size, including demands of higher education, high childcare costs and challenges to work-family balance. The report proposes that countries that address these constraints (which is an expectation of continued progress toward gender equality and women's empowerment) can help to ensure that women will have the opportunity and means to achieve their desired family size that may result in a small rebound in future fertility.

Matysiak (2011) questions whether it is possible to increase women's labour supply without negative repercussions on fertility. Yet, supportive policies in the province of Quebec (i.e., universal and low-cost childcare since 1997 and parental-leave benefits introduced in 2006) have resulted in increases in both fertility and female labour-force participation in Quebec relative to Ontario (which had not implemented these policies), demonstrating that it does seem possible to accommodate both caring and earning roles with supportive policies (Moyser & Milan, 2018). Specifically, Moyser and Milan (2018) note that low-cost childcare in Quebec makes it more affordable for those with less education and less earning potential to work.

As the economy slowly regains its footing during our adaptation to the endemic nature of Covid-19, some employers are finding it increasingly difficult to fill positions. Ensuring women who work in areas such as retail, customer service and hospitality-related fields (which tend to be lower paying) have access to affordable childcare may lead to an increase in their labour supply. Several decades of evidence from Quebec indicate that their childcare system has increased that province's GDP by 1.7 per cent while providing a return on investment to both levels of government that offsets their initial funding costs (Boesveld et al., 2021). Or as Armine Yalnizyan (2020) succinctly puts it: "subsidized childcare literally pays for itself", viewing childcare as necessary infrastructure in that it helps people get to work. With Canadian women earning 42% of household income pre-pandemic, the Canadian economy cannot bounce back without restoring women's contribution to it given that most households are dual earner (Buck, 2021). Having fuller employment of women ensures a prosperous economy with one economist noting that if women participated in the labour force at the same rate as men, it could add 100 billion to Canada's yearly GDP (Wheatley, 2021). Despite women's high investment in education and strong labour-force attachment, Sunter (2001) proposes that women's dominant role in child and household care will likely preclude a full closing of the participation gap with men.

For Matysiak (2011) the big three recommendations to ease the tension between paid work and unpaid care are access to low-cost childcare, parental leaves and flexible work arrangements. We will discuss each of these beginning with childcare. Esping-Andersen (2005) contends that the key component to encourage both work and fertility is access to affordable daycare and he considers this the most efficient and equitable option because it helps minimize mothers' employment interruptions. The current Liberal government's proposed publicly-funded childcare program now has all the provinces (Ontario was the last to sign on in March 2022) and territories signed on in their attempt to create a national childcare system. Their proposed program involves non-profit delivery, better trained and paid staff and marked-down fees for parents and is often referred to as $10-a-day daycare. McCuaig (2021, 1) notes that "the pandemic has revealed many hidden truths, in particular the social and economic contributions of women with young children" with economists recognizing that the pandemic has created a "she-session" that will persist until women re-enter the paid workforce. Though there is excitement regarding the federal government's planned national childcare programs, there are concerns on the horizon regarding implementation and staff shortages of early-childcare educators (see McGinn, 2022a).

Canada has a complex system of maternity-and-paternity leave programs mostly funded through employment insurance in its many jurisdictions (comprised of one federal system, 10 provinces and 3 territories). Gerson (2010) cautions that parental supports are not sufficient if they reinforce gender inequality in parenting. "By making fathers' participation in childcare a matter of national policy, such use-it-or-lose-it policies provide strong encouragement for men to be involved" and "they make it clear that all parents have the right to care for their children without risking their jobs, financial well-being, or work identities" (Gerson, 2010, 222). Despite its many negative impacts, Doucet et al. (2020) contend that Covid-19 has given rise to a unique opportunity to restructure social policy such as Canada's complex parental-leave structure.

Evidence from Quebec's early adopter use of non-transferable leaves for fathers dramatically increased the use of fathers using it versus fathers in other provinces (Doucet et al., 2020). They conclude that parental-leave design functions best with non-transferable leave (for fathers) coupled with robust wage-replacement rates. They view these policies not only as employment policies but also as care policies to facilitate gender equality within households. The parental-leave program combined with the low-fee childcare has lead Buck (2021, O7) to assert that "Quebec is forging a path toward greater equality". One author summarized a simple formula for accommodating earning and caring roles: "To achieve a high fertility rate, a modern industrialized country would have to welcome high taxes, make female equality a social reality, have state-paid childcare, extend parental leave to fathers and then recognize the resulting payoff in tax revenues and female labour-force participation" (Allemang, 2012, F3).

In terms of easing work-life balance concerns, Gerson (2010, 221) contends that the post-industrial workplace is well suited for flexible-work approaches and that "providing work flexibility requires having both formal policies and informal work practices that banish the penalties attached to caregiving and give workers more control over when and how to do their jobs". MacNaughton (2021, 1) asks if the pandemic could create the flexible workplace that parents need and notes that one advocate of flexible work has observed that "one of the benefits of Covid-19 is that it has catapulted institutional mindsets around flexible work into the future". The pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have resulted in the mass movement to work-from-home arrangements or teleworking for those white-collar workers who were able to do so. For many workers this meant saving time with no longer having to commute but for those supervising their children flextime and reduced schedules were required in some cases.

One CEO is hopeful that some good will come out of this challenging year, stating that "we can be flexible and still be successful and productive and that nine-to-five is irrelevant" (MacNaughton, 2021, 1). Indeed, there have been reported instances of employees resisting the return to the office. One recent survey of Canadians found that more than half would look for a new job with remote options if their current employer required them to return to the physical workplace full-time (see McGinn, 2022b). Given recent labour-shortage concerns, those employers who are most in tune with these in-demand worktime and workplace flexibilities will benefit in terms of attraction and retention of employees. Instead of back-to-normal perhaps a reset is in order with the pandemic removing some of the psychological barriers employers had around flexible work arrangements (Kirby, 2021).

Another recent development in terms of work-life balance is the right-to-disconnect law recently enacted in the province of Ontario (requiring firms with more than 25 employees to draft policies that address off-hours work communication). Although at a nascent stage in Canada as well as globally (only a small handful of countries have enacted this type of legislation) these laws are a starting point as they set out boundaries in an attempt to deal with work-life balance concerns.

In contrast to the policy consideration given to balancing earning and caring roles, the issue of prolonged transitions to adulthood has received little attention. Given that prolonged or complex transitions tend to delay fertility and the fact that these longer transitions are likely to persist in the post-industrial economies of developed countries, we ask are there ways to ease these transitions to adulthood roles? Esping-Andersen (2005) points out that in all countries, unemployment is associated with low fertility or as Wheeler et al. (2006, 39) put it "babies are born where the jobs are". Wheeler et al. (2006) state that a key lesson from Sweden is that fertility is sensitive to the presence or absence of policies supportive of family formation (low-cost quality daycare) as well as prevailing economic conditions (favourable economy with low unemployment). In terms of the latter, strong state support of unemployment can be helpful in smoothing bumpy rides during difficult economic conditions.

The pandemic can certainly be referred to as a bumpy economic condition with CERB (Canada emergency response benefit) functioning as a policy that provided financial support to those whose jobs were directly affected by the pandemic. Other proposed legislation is aimed at workers in the gig economy who face uncertainty in employment. Noting that one-in-five (often young) workers toil in the gig economy, the province of Ontario has proposed legislation to extend the minimum wage to gig workers such as Uber drivers (see Ontario Newsroom, 2022). Also, Ontario intends to develop a portable-benefits system for gig workers and other workers who don't have health, dental or vision coverage with the package intended to move with individuals if they change jobs (CBC News, 2022). Ontario's proposed portable-benefit system for gig workers is a recognition of precarious employment that often affects young workers.

Mitchell (2006) notes that policy inattention to young adults results in greater intergenerational transfers which present challenges for parents who are increasingly responsible for the economic well-being of their young adult children during their prolonged transition to adulthood. Wheeler et al. (2006) discuss the more complex life-course transitions compared to earlier generations and note that many of our social institutions and social policies have yet to catch up with these changing and prolonged demographic transitions. There is a need for flexible policies to support this longer and more complex emergence into adulthood roles, especially for those youth who cannot rely on prolonged intergenerational transfers (see Venne, 2010). One recent policy is the first-time home-buyers' incentive (the Tax-free First-Home Savings Account)

which is a home-buying plan for first-time buyers and a recognition of rising housing costs that rose substantially during the pandemic.

Conclusion

In this paper we have provided a wide-ranging examination of the changing roles affecting women in the modern world by delving into the work-fertility trade-off. We have woven together the many socio-economic forces affecting women in terms of work, fertility and transitions. Arpino et al. (2015) note the importance of institutions and policy in promoting the reconciliation of work and motherhood resulting in recent increases in fertility in some countries. It seems well understood that female labour-force activity and fertility are both higher in countries where there is government support of family-friendly policies (the big three: childcare assistance, parental leaves for both men and women, and flexible work-time arrangements) and where gender norms encourage spousal support in child-care and housework (see Beaujot & Wang, 2010; Trovato, 2015). Recently, Quebec's early adoption of supportive policies has resulted in higher female labour-force participation along with higher fertility rates.

The pandemic's impact on labour force activity (the she-cession) has driven home the need for supportive social policies which can contribute to balancing the earning and caring roles by enhancing the ability of women to engage in the labour force and meet their fertility aspirations. Along with the big three supports, further flexible policy actions can be used to smooth out the precarious and prolonged transitions to adulthood that often result in delayed and reduced fertility. What is being driven home during this pandemic is the precariousness of female employment and its relationship to supports for those women with dependent children. During the pandemic, many have expressed a desire to return to normal. But instead of returning to business as usual after the pandemic, it makes sense to assess what has worked (flexible work hours and flexible locations for some jobs) and double-down on prioritizing the proposed low-cost childcare system given the impact that the pandemic has had on women's labour-force participation rates as well as on decreasing fertility rates. These proposed policies will assist in combining the earning and caring roles in the aftermath of this pandemic which may prove to be an epoch-changing era.

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