News Coverage of Childcare During COVID-19: Where are Women and Gender?

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Abstract: Research has long observed the absence of gender in childcare policy, media, and elections. However, the current global pandemic has invoked critical questions about childcare and its importance to states’ economic recovery around the world. In this note, we analyze news coverage of childcare in Canadian major dailies to explore if and how news narratives regarding childcare are shifting in light of COVID-19. In particular, are we seeing a focus on women and gender in childcare coverage amidst the compounding pressures that women are facing in the current social and economic climate? Results of our analysis suggest that the pandemic has not shifted the conversation on childcare, and that current coverage principally reflects long-standing trends in childcare framing. We find that gender remains systematically written out of coverage on childcare, occluded by a larger focus on health-, economic-, and accessibility-related concerns about childcare services.

Keywords: childcare; child care; gender; women; media framing; social policy; COVID-19; coronavirus; pandemic; Canada; Canadian politics
Gender and women do not figure prominently in discussions of childcare\(^1\) – not in policy, news coverage, or election campaigns (e.g., Albanese et al. 2010; Collier 2012; Jenson 2009, 2012; Naumann 2012; Wallace and Goodyear-Grant forthcoming), despite the issue’s centrality to women’s success and gender equality. Public debate about childcare tends to focus on families and early childhood development, informed by a pro-employment social investment perspective on social policy (e.g., Collier 2012; Jenson 2012; Naumann 2012). Even civil society groups working in the area have moved away from gender or feminist framing (Collier 2012), decentering women – distinct from parents generally – as important clients of the childcare system.

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has created conditions favourable to taking women and gender more seriously in childcare discussion. Globally, schools and childcare facilities have been closed or their operation significantly reduced for months, starting in mid-March for Canada. Unsurprisingly, data suggest that women are handling a disproportionate share of the additional work of childcare and homeschooling\(^2\) widening existing gender gaps in the workplace and the home. At the same time, more men than ever have experienced the difficulties of managing work and childcare, whether working from inside or outside the home, perhaps sensitizing them to the daily gendered dimensions of

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\(^1\) We analyze coverage of care arrangements for pre-school aged children. Of course, child care or care for children encompasses more than this, and includes school-aged children, especially during COVID 19 when children were not in school in most jurisdictions and were doing or attempting remote schooling, in many cases. Our analyses only relate to coverage of childcare for pre-school aged children.

\(^2\) E.g., Maya Oppenheim. "Coronavirus: Women bearing burden of childcare and homeschooling in lockdown, study finds." Independent. May 14, 2020. [https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-childcare-homeschooling-women-lockdown-gender-a9512866.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-childcare-homeschooling-women-lockdown-gender-a9512866.html); Claire Cain Miller. "Nearly Half of Men Say They Do Most of the Home Schooling. 3 Percent of Women Agree." New York Times. May 6, 2020. [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/06/upshot/pandemic-chores-homeschooling-gender.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/06/upshot/pandemic-chores-homeschooling-gender.html)
working parenthood. Labor force data also reveal that COVID 19-related job losses have been borne disproportionately by women, and economists insist that “there will be no recovery without a she-covery; no she-covery without child care.”

There has been a genuine acknowledgement of the pandemic’s disproportionate effects on women, so the question we tackle in this article is whether women and gender indeed have been central to news coverage of childcare, which is an essential service for women’s resumption of their regular work activities. In this note, we examine print news coverage in Canada from March 1 – May 31, 2020 to address the question. Overall, we find similar patterns to pre-COVID 19 studies, with very little focus on women or gender (e.g., Albanese et al. 2010; Wallace and Goodyear-Grant forthcoming). Despite widespread knowledge of the pandemic’s gendered effects, news coverage of childcare in Canada in the first three months of COVID 19 restrictions has been largely ungendered, with health, economic issues, and accessibility dominating coverage, similar to before COVID 19.

Data and Methods

To analyze news coverage about childcare during the pandemic, we drew a sample of English-language news articles from the Canadian Major Dailies database from March 1, 2020 to May 31, 2020. Articles included in the sample contained a relevant childcare

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3 Economist Armine Yalnizyan’s statement to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, June 4, 2020. See: https://atkinsonfoundation.ca/atkinson-fellows/posts/no-she-covery-without-child-care/

4 This analysis excludes French-language news articles as the dictionaries have not been translated and validated in French to date. While the analysis still includes some English news sources from Quebec, such as the Montreal Gazette, the exclusion of French media may overlook important debates pertaining to gender and childcare in the province. Quebec maintains its own family and child policy supports that are separate
keyword in the article headline ("child care", "childcare", "daycare*", "day care*", "preschool*", "preschool*", or "nursery school*") combined with "COVID", "coronavirus", or "pandemic" anywhere in the text. Our goal was to examine news coverage that focused substantively on the issue of childcare, offering an opportunity to closely examine the core themes that have emerged on this critical public policy issue during the pandemic.

Moreover, the timeframe under study captures the beginning of closures to childcare facilities, schools, and non-essential services across the different provinces of Canada, as well as the initial stages of reopening in the various regions. This allows us to examine the trajectory of discussions about childcare over several weeks of the pandemic and to track how different dimensions of the issue may shift or change in salience over time and in response to coinciding events, outbreaks, or policy changes. After removing duplicate articles, the search yielded a total of 247 news articles from 18 newspapers in Canada.

Using computer-assisted content analysis techniques (see Appendix for description), we identified four key dimensions of childcare in the news sample:

1) *Health Concerns*: Coverage pertaining to health risks in childcare facilities, and the safety measures that childcare facilities have adopted or will adopt to limit virus spread.

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from or in some cases additional to national programs/services, and media coverage of childcare during the pandemic may raise different perspectives on existing supports, challenges, or policy gaps. We acknowledge that this is an important limitation of the analysis, and future iterations of this work intend to adopt a more comparative framework for analyzing the framing of childcare between Quebec and the rest of Canada in this uncertain time.
2) *Economic Concerns*: Coverage of childcare as it relates to the function of the Canadian economy.

3) *Accessibility Concerns*: Coverage related to maintaining childcare spaces in light of the pandemic, particularly with the (temporary or permanent) closure of licensed facilities.

4) *Gendered Concerns*: Coverage related to gendered aspects of childcare, including the disproportionate burden of care that women have incurred throughout the pandemic.

Below, we describe news coverage of childcare over the period, specifically analyzing the frequency of the four dimensions of care in the sample, including any shifts in framing associated with journalist sex or date of coverage.

**Results**

Table 1 displays the frequency of frame mentions in the coverage. Perhaps not surprisingly, we find that the most prominent dimension of coverage that emerges during the pandemic is health-related concerns. Descriptions of health risks – and steps that facilities are taking to mitigate them – are raised at least once in 96% of the articles included in the study, suggesting it is a critical component of current debates about the closure and re-opening of childcare facilities in Canada. Evident in Figure 1, the health dimension was prominent in the early weeks of March amidst the closure of care facilities to limit the spread of the virus. The narrative then evolved over the ensuing weeks to explore the challenges of operating childcare facilities for children of frontline workers, and rose again in the final weeks of
April and May amidst discussions about safety measures in daycares to prevent the spread of COVID-19 upon reopening.

Economic concerns represent the next most prominent theme in coverage of childcare during the pandemic. The importance of childcare to Canada’s economic recovery was raised in 72% of articles in the sample, particularly from the final weeks of April onward (Figure 1, p<.001), as several provinces announced their plans for “reopening” the economy. These articles generally discussed the economic fallout from the pandemic and the measures governments have taken to support families and childcare businesses to ensure that they are able to reopen in the ensuing phases of the recovery.

Closely linked with the economic dimension are also concerns about the accessibility of childcare. This dimension refers to the availability of childcare, including whether spaces will decline due to new distancing and cleaning protocols, as well as how many childcare centres will close as a result of economic hardship brought by extended closure or higher operation costs upon re-opening. Issues pertaining to the costs and availability of childcare – especially amidst the closure of many licensed facilities across Canada – were discussed consistently throughout the pandemic thus far, mentioned at least once in 58% of the articles in the sample.
Consistent with previous research in the field, the gender dimension of childcare was the least prominent frame in the sample, referenced in only 20% of articles. This meant that four out of every five articles on childcare did not even mention – let alone carefully analyze – women in the context of the implications of childcare policy.

The gender frame most commonly emerges in coverage focussed on economic recovery, where often little more than a single mention about women emerges in the context of discussing the caretaking challenges that parents are experiencing during the pandemic. For example, three articles quoted Conservative Party leadership candidate Erin O’Toole, stating: “Far more women than men have lost their jobs, a reflection of how hard the hospitality, service and retail sectors have been hit... With schools and daycares closed, many workers with kids - particularly women - wonder how they will be able to get back to work” (Platt 2020). This notion that women are “especially” or “particularly” hard hit by the current crisis is mentioned in 14% of the articles in the sample, which do not further explore women’s experiences with balancing care and work responsibilities or how gendered care imbalances affect women’s economic success, personal wellbeing, or indeed, the COVID-19 economic recovery itself.

Only 6% of the articles in the sample substantively discuss gendered-related issues regarding care work, referring to women or gender more than twice in an article. These articles highlight the challenges that many women have faced in balancing their time between paid work and caregiving work, as well as the implications this could have on
women’s productivity and career advancement in the future. As one article described, “time away from work might mean not getting promotions or building up work hours associated with career advancement. As well, staying home means not paying into a pension plan or employment insurance, including maternity and paternity leave” (Taylor 2020).

The coverage of childcare during the pandemic also remains silent on a multitude of gender-based inequalities – social and economic – that mothers face in taking on a larger proportion of childcare work. For example, only 2% of articles in the sample acknowledged issues related to equal pay and the wage gap. Many women also face additional demands in terms of caring for seniors, which were mentioned in 1% of the articles. Further still, discussions of single mothers remain absent from the conversation on childcare, similarly featured in 1% of the articles in the sample. Domestic violence, which has been on the rise since the beginning of quarantine in Canada (Illesinghe 2020) and is integrally linked to familial care, is mentioned in fewer than 4% of articles. In effect, it seems the gendered issues related to childcare during the pandemic have most frequently been conceptualized in relation to Canada’s economic recovery, with little substantive focus on the diverse experiences, challenges, and barriers that mothers continue to face.

As Figure 1 reflects, while the other childcare frames show shifts in frequencies over the timeline, gender framing did not see any marked variation throughout the time period under study. Gender and women, it seems, were background, low-salience features of public discourse on childcare during the early stages of the pandemic shutdown and early phases of “re-opening”. Moreover, consistent with our previous research on the framing of
child benefits (Wallace and Goodyear-Grant forthcoming), we also find that women journalists are more inclined than their male colleagues to speak about gender in coverage of childcare (p<.001). Although there is relative parity in stories written by male and female journalists⁵, women journalists account for 80% of the gendered mentions in the sample, while male journalists a mere 20%. While this may be unintentional – and perhaps even a product of editorial teams’ decisions to have women journalists write about women’s issues – it suggests that we need to further explore the ways that women’s representation may matter when it comes to ensuring that gendered perspectives are on the table in childcare policy debates during COVID 19 recovery efforts.

Conclusions

Around the world, childcare policy and practice have critical gender-related dimensions. Accessible, affordable childcare is a necessary ingredient for women’s equality, especially in the context of economic and social recovery from COVID 19. Our analyses suggest that the media information environment has not engaged sufficiently with these realities, and may be contributing to the neglect of women and gender in this policy area, the normalization of gender-related care imbalances, and the removal of these challenges from the public eye and public accountability.

⁵ Women journalists wrote 90 articles in the sample (53% of stories included in the journalist gender analyses), male journalists wrote 80 (47%).
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Table 1. Frequency of frames in coverage

|                  | Mean Mentions Per Article | Maximum Mentions Per Article | Total Mentions in Sample | Std. Deviation of Mentions Per Article |
|------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Accessibility    | 2.18                      | 20                         | 538                      | 3.183                                  |
| Economy          | 6.23                      | 54                         | 1540                     | 9.257                                  |
| Gender           | .75                       | 26                         | 174                      | 2.851                                  |
| Health           | 13.15                     | 88                         | 3248                     | 13.354                                 |
Figure 1. Weekly average mentions of four care dimensions, per article

Dimensions of Care
- Accessibility
- Economy
- Gender
- Health