

A Covid recovery window of opportunity

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It was Albert Einstein that said: “In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity”. This sentiment seems to have gained pretty much universal traction across our nation as we face the long road to recovery from the impact of COVID-19. There’s a widely held view that our re-build should result in a new New Zealand, one that is better than before. More equitable, resilient, addressing longer-term structural failings. In regenerating our country we should be enabling all New Zealanders to prosper.

Many of the current job losses are affecting lower-paid workers and economists predict we may soon see two further waves of job losses with the number of unemployed people reaching 200,000. History tells us that the burden of recessions and unemployment is never shared equally. The aggregate unemployment rate peaked in the global financial crisis (GFC) at 6.4%. But for Māori it reached 14%, and for Pacific people 15%.¹ We are told to anticipate a wait of three-to-four-year years until we return to pre-COVID unemployment levels. Bring on 2023.

Women at the poorest levels of our society are especially vulnerable when it comes to the long-term recession we are facing. They bear the brunt of biases, inequities and suffering many of us will never know or experience. The majority of single parent households are led by women. Right now they may have lost their job in tourism... retail... cleaning a commercial property. It may have been part time or seasonal as they care for other family members and they were simply deemed non-essential. There are no savings as, coming from the low-paid sector, they never had enough to put by. They may be struggling to get access to support and the relevant benefits. And anyway, their family will struggle to survive on a benefit.

But these women can be part of the recovery and regeneration of our society. In the aged care sector there are calls from a range of organisations to increase the number of care workers and nurses in our facilities, but the real need is not so much the numbers as having well trained and experienced staff on the job. For me caring for the elderly is a privilege. I’ve devoted a good part of my career to it and I find it so rewarding. It is proven that residential care for our elderly community significantly improves their health and wellbeing,² that isolated adults die at significantly higher rates than well-connected ones,³ and a well-

¹ The Spinoff, 24 March, 2020

² Caring for our older Kiwis: The right place, at the right time published by the NZACA

³ American Association of Retired Persons, Insights on the Issues, November 2017

trained, empathic caregiver can make all the difference for an older person who has been mostly alone.

McKinsey tells us that jobs in health care and related to aging could grow globally from 50 million to 85 million by 2030.⁴ Here in New Zealand the sector employs a vast number of women of different ethnicities and half of the 5000 nurses in aged-care are from overseas. It has also been a great pathway into general nursing for women from poorer economies. With a reduction in immigration the sector will be crying out for new recruits. This is an opportunity as we emerge from level two and onwards.

Training as a care worker offers qualifications and a consistent career path that will always be in demand as our population ages. Whilst women of Māori, Pacific and Asian heritage may traditionally prefer to care for their elderly at home, their family members, both in NZ and overseas, are increasingly going into aged care facilities as we urbanise. Whilst women from these ethnicities may not be used to this type of aged care, working as a care worker has a higher rate of pay than the rates some of our lower paid women are used to, and is certainly more rewarding. Starting at a base level of \$20.50 an hour, the top rate for the highest level of care assistant is \$25.50 an hour, compared to the minimum wage of \$18.90. There is a big future in aged care, care workers are very much needed, and there is pride in being trained for a rewarding profession in which women who have been used to tenuous jobs at low rates of pay can advance.

Like Airini,⁵ a young Māori woman who left school early and without qualifications. She did not have a great start in life and very little support. She received the unemployment benefit for a few months, then applied to become a care worker at her local rest home. As she had her children she made her role casual and flexible so she could work around their needs. She was a solo mum so continued to work in this way until her children were old enough for her to do some training through Careerforce. By her mid-thirties she had passed levels one, two and three and then was given a scholarship by the company she worked for to become a nurse. Her family helped her with her kids and she took herself off to University, a dream she had considered well beyond her, and she qualified as a nurse. This whole extraordinary journey took her eight or so years. She went on to become the Clinical Services Manager, (the chief nurse) of the home she had started out at, and became the manager a couple of years later. Today, in her early forties, she would be earning around \$100,000.

Airini's is not an isolated story. I can think of twenty, maybe thirty women from lower socio backgrounds who started life as carers, realised they had found a worthwhile profession and a supportive company and have similarly made their way in the world. If you like the idea of making the lives of older people happier and more fulfilling and can see yourself in aged care, then you could also have the potential to be a great nurse. Once you are in a care assistant role you can access Careerforce training which is done online. The cost is not high and lots of companies will pay for it if they sense you are eager to advance. Each paper is

⁴ McKinsey Global Institute Report, November 28, 2017

⁵ Name changed

made up of work-based training and is done in a group setting which means you have support and collegiality as you train.

Caring for the elderly is not ageist either. Women are generally going to be worse off as they retire if they have taken time off to raise children. The aged care sector offers opportunities to work later in life and to take on lighter duties well into your seventies if you keep fit and well. As aged care workers advance in years they can also take on shorter hours. Seven to eleven every morning is the busiest time in any aged care facility and more hands are always needed at times like that.

And it may seem an odd aside, but there is huge camaraderie amongst aged care workers and they are not afraid of confrontation. Just as companies like Westpac assist women experiencing domestic violence whilst they are at work, and supermarkets took on such a mantle during lockdown, it has been known for an aged care facility manager to assist a female staff member whose home was not a safe place, help them to relocate, and protect them and their children.

A rising tide needs to lift all boats, not just the yachts as they say. Elder care is recession proof and a very necessary part of the health continuum. I commend it as a relevant contributor to the regeneration of women's employment in our post COVID-19 recovery efforts.