



GENDERED IMPACTS OF COVID-19 POLICY BRIEF

**Canadian Women's Foundation
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PREAMBLE

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented changes in our lives, but these should be viewed against the many hardships marginalized women, girls, and trans and non-binary people have faced every day in Canada. They have been affected by the opioid crisis, suicide epidemics, homelessness, no access to safe water or affordable food, and shockingly high levels of murder, disappearance and violence, to name a few.

Prior to the emergence of COVID-19, women, girls, and trans and non-binary people in Canada had been experiencing significant public health crises with gendered impacts, living in emergency situations every day. The inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls reminded our society yet again of this intergenerational reality for Indigenous women and girls. Sadly, many of these issues have not been met with consistent, urgent policy and funding responses.

In the light of the compounded complexity and precarity caused by COVID-19, all under-resourced communities will require significant attention in terms of policies and funding packages in order to stabilize during this pandemic while accounting for pre-existing vulnerabilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a gender issue and an equity issue that should be considered through the human rights lens. Women, girls, and trans and non-binary people in Canada are already unable to access their full human rights – clean water, food, physical and mental health care, safe housing, decent work and a living wage, education, and the enjoyment of culture in community with one another.

When diverse women's rights go unrealized in "ordinary times", they are all the more vulnerable in times of widescale upheaval. **All measures to mitigate risks and uncertainty should shore up advances and continue to support human rights, rather than risk further eroding them.**

GENDERED EFFECTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A - Women's Experience of Labour and Work

Women at the Front Lines

Women make up much of the social service sector, where they work mainly in healthcare, homecare and education because of sex segregation in the labour forceⁱ. Women represent over 90% of nurses, 75% of respiratory therapists, and 80% of those working in medical labs, and thus are extreme risk of being exposed to COVID-19 as they carry out their essential work. They also hold many of the jobs in retail, which employs close to 2 million Canadians and is the largest sector by employment. Retail, including food services, is another area of work hit extremely hard by the pandemic, either because staff are working throughout to ensure vital services in food provision, or because they are being laid off due to business closures.

Women in Temporary, Precarious and Informal Employment

Migrant caregivers, whose temporary visas are tied to employers, are at increased risk either to exposure to disease as they care for the elderly and others, or because they are being asked to leave because of shifting dynamics within the households and unclear messages from governments about who can travel, who can stay, and how they can continue to work safely with appropriate equipment and supports. If employers cannot assure the safety of care workers, the government must step in to ensure supports are made available to those who are providing essential services for the elderly and other vulnerable populations in Canada.

Women in all sectors are often in precarious workⁱⁱ without access to benefits and sick leave, working part-time, on zero-hour contracts or employed on a casual basis.

In order to juggle their domestic responsibilities, many women choose part-time, seasonal, contract, or temporary jobs. Unfortunately, most of these jobs are low paid, with no security, few opportunities for advancement, and no health benefitsⁱⁱⁱ

As workers on casual contracts, women are frequently not protected by existing legislation and benefits packages, regardless of how many hours they have worked. Women also make up a large part of the informal economy, where many women work on a cash-only basis. There must be mechanisms put into place that will support those who are unbanked, as well as those who support themselves or supplement very low incomes with panhandling, busking and other informal means.

Currently, 66% of Canadians are living below the poverty line, many are in work that is precarious or without benefits or sick leave^{iv}. This represents hundreds of thousands of workers without steady employment, in provinces that have little or no sick leave requirements in their labour codes. For many of these low-waged workers, rent represents more than 50% of their income. Missing even one paycheque renders them homeless.

Women as caregivers

Women are commonly informal caregivers in the community, ensuring the health, safety and well-being of dependents such as children and the elderly. A Gallup poll from January 2020 in the US found that women were more than seven times as likely to care for their children on a daily basis as men in heterosexual married or cohabitating couples. And 80% of lone-parent families are headed by mothers, according to 2011 Statistics Canada data. “Lone parent” often also means “single income”, creating more uncertainty in times of economic and societal upheaval for these families.

Because women play roles in the home related to managing healthcare, education of children, familial and social connections, food and sanitation, a catastrophic event of this kind places additional burdens on women that will have longer term effects on them over the many stages of this pandemic.

In addition to providing care, women also make up the majority of those in need of care, as there are more elderly women and more women than men who are disabled (especially with immune compromised diseases)^v and therefore specific gendered approaches should be considered in the provision of care.

Recommendation 1 - Build policy responses that prioritize women's unique position in the workforce and in society as a key factor when fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.

The inclusion of gender analysis is both about the specifics of women's experiences and the evidence that supports it. Policies must take into account the overlapping and intersecting ways in which women experience discrimination based on race, indigenous identity, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, citizenship, social status, age and/ or disability. This is also why women and equity seeking groups should be included in decision making, in order to provide this analysis, and because their experiences are key to making policies stronger and more responsive to the needs of everyone.

As has been studied in numerous emergencies, but particularly in Hurricane Katrina, the intersectional effects of a crisis are considerable; in fact, crises often amplify oppressions and discrimination:

although the hurricane and flooding affected people of all races in the region—African American, white, Latino, Native American, and Asian American—the combined effects of racism, classism, nativism, and the neglect of the elderly and people with disabilities had a disproportionately negative impact on poor people of color. (Lewis, 2009, p. 234)

Recommendation 2 - Establish measures that support those who are most vulnerable, with fewest resources and benefits to withstand economic shocks.

Policies must take into account diverse women's experiences of labour and work, prioritizing the best way to support them and their families, not only because they are on the front lines or in charge of self-isolating and taking care of others, but because they are already made vulnerable by existing conditions mentioned in the preamble. This includes ensuring that EI or other forms of income support get to women with disabilities, women in the informal economy and women who are unbanked so that no one is left out of the support offered in this time of crisis.

B - Supporting the Charitable and Non-profit Sector and Stimulating Philanthropy

Organizations in the charitable and non-profit sector will need ongoing stimulus and support, as capacity for fundraising goes down because events are canceled, volunteering goes down as people self-isolate, and employees have to stay home in compliance with government measures. Services have had to close temporarily because of government directives, leaving participants without the services and supports they need and staff without pay or paid leave. This sector is also highly gendered^{vi} and those working in community-based organizations are often vulnerable workers, working from project to project, lacking funds for core operations; many are without benefits of any kind.

Organizations have experienced both shrinking and growing budgets and operations caused by trends in funding and fundraising. This means that, to some extent, there is

built-in flexibility and resilience, but it also means that they are dependent and vulnerable to any change in the levels of philanthropic dollars.

Fundraising is also event based, so that cancelling major events due to COVID-19 has led to severe losses in the revenue for many organizations. For some, this may represent up to 50% of their annual fundraising. The loss of all these events for multiple organizations could lead to a crash in the sector. The Government has shown leadership in providing an initial investment in the homelessness and shelter sector, and this must continue. Imagine Canada has provided estimates of these amounts and we support these estimates.

As was seen in the previous recession, the effects were felt well beyond the initial 2008 crash, and some sectors never recovered their previous fundraising capacity. These effects persisted even up to 2015, according to data from Non Profit Quarterly, in part due to fiscal measures and in part due to the resulting real wealth decline among donors.

Recommendation 3 - Support the charitable sector with a significant stabilization and rebuilding package

The needs of the sector at this time include addressing fundraising shortfalls, adapting services to be able to manage more online or phone services, covering extra sanitation needs and staving off job losses and closures. In the case of staff who are let go, they need to also have access to EI regardless of number of hours worked, and for as long as possible. Wage subsidies and a guaranteed income should be considered as options for all cases.

The government can play a role in stimulating philanthropy by offering matching funds, additional tax incentives, bonds for non-profits and other packages that will increase private and corporate donations in each phase of, during, and after the emergency that COVID-19 represents.

The approach needs to be cohesive, marshalling networks and sharing resources, not one that builds in competition and scrambling for restricted and limited resources. The strength of the sector is derived in part from its diversity, in terms of the size, mission, approach, scope and breadth of the offerings of various organizations. Any material support must aim to maintain this diversity, but maintain a strong intersectional gendered approach that supports equity seeking organizations. The overall package will have to be staged over time and cover the widest possible range of charitable and non-profit organisations.

C - Gender Analysis Plus and Evidence-based Emergency Planning and Rebuilding

Planning for and responding to emergencies should always have a strong gender analysis built in from the beginning, and there are numerous international frameworks to ensure this. There can be little doubt that Canada has been hit by a recession caused by COVID-19 that will persist, and for now, it is difficult to measure all of the ramifications of this economic downturn. As the government assesses best methods to mitigate its effects and address everyone's needs, it is important to align with best

practice with regards to gender analysis by considering policy outcomes for all genders. After the recession of 2008, many stimulus packages in Canada focused on supporting the manufacturing and resource base of Canada's economy, by encouraging growth in automotive, construction and green economies. These industries are also subject to gender segregation hence these packages ended up favouring sectors that employed mainly men^{vii}.

In addition, government steps to control fiscal spending tend to include cuts, in efforts that are termed "austerity related". This usually means cutting services, where women's jobs are concentrated. Social services, government administration, health and education are all areas of the economy that typically shrink due to austerity measures. Future decisions by government on size and investment in different sectors should take into account gender segregation by industry and enable funding to flow to all parts of the economy.

Building strength and resilience among populations that are otherwise often made vulnerable by pre-existing conditions, such as overlapping and intersecting discrimination based on race, indigenous identity, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, citizenship, social status, age and/ or disability etc. should be a concern at all times. Establishing equity and appropriate levels of supports that provide a safety net in "ordinary times" helps build in capacity that is badly needed when society faces a major upheaval like the present pandemic.

Recommendation 4 - Maintain an intersectional gender analysis in policy, at all levels

At all times, the government should address equity issues by putting into place policies that end vulnerabilities among different groups in a consistent manner, especially with regards to gender equity, so that more members of our society are equipped to withstand the shocks that something like COVID-19 brings.

There is a temptation to erode equality gains during times of crisis or abandon gendered policies - often expressed in terms of "we cannot afford this". This has led to canceling gender equity or other equity seeking programs in the past. For example, after the 2008 crash, several European countries closed down government departments focusing on gender equality, and stopped measuring and monitoring gains and losses, with a result that there are missing data, a lack of measures and little progress on equality more than 10 years later. We encourage the government not to back away from the budget and policy measures that have been put into place that include a required gender analysis at this time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 - Build policy responses that prioritize women's unique position in the workforce and in society as a key factor when fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2 - Establish measures that support those who are most vulnerable, with fewest resources and benefits to withstand to economic shocks
- 3 - Support the charitable sector with a significant stabilization and rebuilding package
- 4 - Maintain an intersectional gender analysis in policy, at all levels

ⁱ The three industries with the greatest share of women (relative to men) were health care and social assistance (82.4%), educational services (69.3%), and accommodation and food services (58.5%). The proportion of women who worked in these industries was 41.0%, versus 13.1% of men (Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report 2017)

ⁱⁱ Three quarters (75.8%) of those working part-time were women (Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report 2017)

ⁱⁱⁱ Why do women earn less than men? (A synthesis of findings from Canadian Microdata. 2013)

^{iv} Women also make up the majority of Canada's minimum-wage workers, and a third of working women make less than \$15 per hour. About three-quarters of part-time workers in Canada are women. (The Facts about Women and Poverty in Canada, Canadian Women's Foundation, 2018)

^v Women have a higher prevalence of **disability** in almost all age groups. The proportion of those reporting a **disability** among adult women was 14.9%; for men, 12.5%. Among the oldest Canadians (those 75 and older), 44.5% of women reported a **disability** compared to 39.8% of men (Canadian Survey on Disability 2012)

^{vi} They make up an estimated 80% of those working in the non-profit sector across Ontario and Canada (Zizys 2011, HR Council 2008)

^{vii} the greatest share of men (relative to women): construction (88.3%); forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction (80.5%); and utilities (77.8%). (Women and Paid Work, 2017)

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