



**Discussion Paper: Reversing the
Gendered Impact of COVID-19
on Labour Force Participation
in Alberta**

PolicyWise for Children & Families

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

PolicyWise for Children and Families (PolicyWise) is conducting a project on the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Alberta’s labour force. We use an intersectional lens to highlight the overlapping and cumulative impacts of the pandemic on women with different intersecting social identities. The goal of the project is to explore solutions to address the disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on women’s and gender-diverse people’s workforce participation. This document presents the findings of project activities to date and serves to promote discussion and partnership for the next steps of the project. Activities so far have focused on increasing understanding of barriers women face in participating in the labour force that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and an exploration of potential policy and program solutions to mitigate these barriers.

Approach

To understand impacts and potential solutions, we draw on four kinds of evidence: published literature, interviews with thought leaders across Canada, Alberta-specific experts representing the perspectives of diverse populations and groups of women disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and extensive data from engagement with front-line staff and leadership of social sector organizations in Alberta.

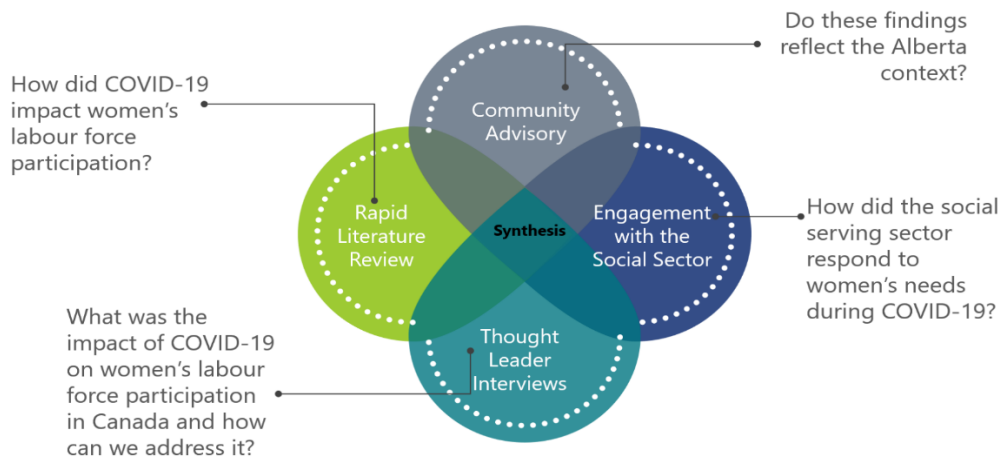


Figure 1. Components of Evidence Synthesis.

Rapid Literature Review

We conducted a rapid literature review of academic and practice-based literature to identify key concepts, challenges, and opportunities related to COVID-19 and women’s labour force participation. We created a search strategy and identified 88 relevant documents for review. We provide details on the search terms, as well as inclusion and exclusion criteria in Appendix 1.

Thought Leader Interviews

We conducted semi-structured virtual interviews with 10 leading practitioners and academic experts on the gendered impact of COVID-19, and policymaking, to contextualize our preliminary findings from the rapid literature review. We also gathered lessons learned related to established programming and policies. We asked about specific equity considerations and recommendations for policy and programs to address the impact of COVID-19 on women’s labour force participation. We identified potential interviewees through the rapid literature review and recommendations of the Community Advisory Group. We include Interview Guides for practitioners and academic experts as Appendix 2.

Validation and Contextualization with the Community Advisory Group

We convened a Community Advisory Group made up of academic experts, representatives of community partners, and Ministry of Culture and Status of Women (Government of Alberta). They meet bi-monthly to contextualize and situate findings within the Albertan context. The Community Advisory Group included members who represent and/or work with Indigenous women, women entrepreneurs, newcomer and racialized women, women in trades, working mothers, single parents, young women, and women with low income.

Engagement with Social Sector

In May and June 2022, PolicyWise hosted two rounds of stakeholder engagement with women-serving social organizations and social enterprises from across Alberta. The goals for these sessions were two-fold: 1) to understand how preliminary findings align with the lived experience of women in Alberta; and, 2) to identify programs and policies to mitigate the pandemic’s gendered impact on labour force participation in Alberta.

In this document we summarize early findings from the literature, interviews, engagement sessions and the input of the Community Advisory Group.

How To Read This Document

- The findings are contextualized in boxes with policy recommendations from different sources
- **Green** boxes are recommendations derived from the rapid literature review, **blue** boxes from thought leader interviews, and **teal** boxes from engagement with social sector staff and leadership.
- Boxes with a **purple** frame (like this one) are notes for added context.
- Coloured text indicates highlights and key information following the same colour code as recommendation boxes: **green** for highlights from the literature, **blue** for highlights from thought leader interviews, and **teal** for highlights from engagement with the social sector.
- Direct quotes are italicized and are placed between quotation marks.

Findings

We identified four main areas of gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women’s employment and labour force participation. These areas of impact include:

- Care economy (including paid and unpaid activities related to caring for children, older adults, or people with disabilities);
- Pandemic affected sectors;
- Women experiencing precarity; and
- Community supports.

In the following sections we will discuss each area of impact on different groups of women. We will highlight the efforts of various levels of government, industry, and communities to address the impact and outline recommendations for action to support a gender-equitable recovery.

A Note on Intersectionality

Intersectionality describes how social categories, like race, class, ability, and gender, create overlapping and interdependent systems of social oppression, discrimination, and disadvantage. While we do not explicitly organize our findings according to an intersectional lens, we discuss the differential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women related to intersecting social identities, for example, racialized women and/or mothers.

Care Economy

Alberta Social Sector Perspective

Make Childcare an Eligible Expense for Benefit Packages

Employers including childcare as part of benefit packages for employees would support employee well-being and productivity, while also help fund childcare and support affordability.

“We should be working more with employers to talk about why has flex spending accounts or health benefits been so closed? (...) Why isn't childcare something that people can use flex spending for? I think employers, what better investment could they make in their staff, it certainly lets them have productive staff that feel like their children are somewhere safe, and they're not stressing about childcare. And then that funding would go towards building better childcare.”

Women undertake a disproportionate amount of the unpaid care work in Canada and across the globe.¹ The pandemic’s impacts on the care economy were most acutely felt by women who provide care to children and/or family members who are older or experience disability. The negative impact of COVID-19 on the care economy most profoundly affected single mothers, working mothers, women over 55 years of age, and racialized women.

Caregivers to Children

The early days of the pandemic in spring 2020 involved lockdowns and stay-at-home orders to slow the spread of COVID-19. Schools and daycares were closed across Canada as part of the

¹ Madgavkar et al. 2020:4; King et al 2020.

precautions. Informal networks, such as friends, grandparents, other relatives, and babysitters, that often support domestic labour and childcare were unavailable due to pandemic restrictions and concerns about the spread of COVID-19 to adults at risk for severe outcomes.² Daycares re-opened for children of front-line workers in April 2020 and for general public the following month. Daycares received grants from both federal and provincial governments to help recover lost income due to lower registration numbers, help pay staff salaries and buy appropriate PPE. For 2020-21 school year, schools in Alberta periodically switched between in-person and remote learning. Additionally, isolation requirements for students and school and daycare closures due to outbreaks meant many children were at home for extended periods. As a result, for women with children the amount of domestic labour and caregiving tasks dramatically increased. A Canadian study found that at the onset of the pandemic, women's domestic labour burden increased from 68 hours a week to 95, whereas men's share increased from 33 hours a week to 46.³

Alberta Social Sector Perspective

Increased Access to Affordable and Flexible Childcare

Most childcare options are constrained to regular business hours on weekdays. Many workers need childcare outside those hours. For example, work schedules in trades, healthcare, hospitality, shift, and gig work all require extended childcare hours.

After-hours childcare is scarce in Alberta. Successful examples of responses include a temporary program in Banff that provided evening and weekend childcare spots for hospitality workers, and a change in bylaws to allow daycares to operate 24-hours in Wood Buffalo Regional Municipality in May 2022.

"Daycares are offered from 7am to 6pm, or whatever it might be. But how many people particularly if you're in frontline positions, are working, not just 8 to 5, and serve your needs. Finding a daycare in the first place is hard. But finding one with those parameters is even harder."

While the Federal-Provincial Childcare Deal signed in November 2021 led to decreases in childcare fees, families with low incomes continue to face barriers in finding affordable childcare.

The increase in domestic labour and caregiving tasks led many working mothers to retreat from the workforce. The gender employment gap in Canada widened from February to May 2020 among parents of children under 12 years of age.⁴ By September 2020, 70% of Canadian working mothers were working fewer than half the hours they did in February 2020, compared to 24% of fathers.⁵ By November 2020, just over half of working mothers remained at less than half of their usual work hours compared to pre-pandemic.⁶ Overall, twelve times as many mothers than fathers left employment to provide caregiving

² Shafer, Schebling and Milkie 2020; Leclair 2020.

³ Johnston, Mohammed and van der Linden 2020.

⁴ Qian & Fuller, 2020.

⁵ Lundy 2020.

⁶ Scott 2021:5.

From the Literature

Implement Paid Sick Leave

Hussey (2020) argues that having access to paid sick leave would prevent families from having to “choose between a paycheck and staying safe and keeping others safe.”

to children between March 2020 to March 2021.⁷ In Alberta, women’s employment rates have largely bounced back in 2021 after sharp declines in second and third quarters of 2020. Yet the hours worked among working mothers has not recovered. Working fathers in Alberta have also lost working hours, although not to the same degree as working mothers.⁸ The Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit was a temporary support for parents who were unable to work more than half their regular hours due to caring for a sick child and/or due to

school/daycare closures. Caregivers weekly received payments of CAD \$450 for up to 44 weeks.

While women’s employment statistics are returning to their pre-pandemic levels,⁹ this may not reflect a recovery in the quality of jobs. Thought leaders noted that many working mothers reduced hours or took on less lucrative positions to manage the increased childcare needs of their families. Scaling back from work has long-term consequences including diminished career prospects and stunted lifetime earnings. Interview participants noted that the women’s unpaid family caregiving work facilitates men’s higher rate of labour force participation and longer work hours.

Working mothers have reported high levels of stress and anxiety due to the growing pressures of “triple shift” of childcare, domestic labour, and work. Many are feeling exhausted, burned out, and increased pressure compared to men.¹⁰ Women who work report “overwhelming guilt because they can’t do it all.”¹¹ In a Canadian survey conducted in April 2021, 46% of working mothers reported that they were “reaching a breaking point” trying to balance work and childcare responsibilities.¹² BC Women’s Health Foundation (BC WHF) found an association between higher anti-depressant usage and caregiving while working full-time.¹³

Self-employed women faced additional challenges regarding childcare. Interview participants noted that many women go into self-employment to gain flexibility that allows them to balance work and childcare. When the pandemic led to school and daycare closures, achieving that balance became more complicated. Interview participants noted that the increased caregiving burden may have led even more women into self-employment in search of flexibility.

Alberta Social Sector Perspective

Improve Access to Mental Health Supports

As stress and isolation increasingly impacted women’s mental health, access to supports was limited.

“The last two years, I don’t even know if the term stress would accurately describe, and, for example, the more, if a woman was living sort of at intersections of various oppressions, the more oppressions that were there, certainly mental health was a huge piece.”

⁷ Desjardins and Freestone 2021.

⁸ Tedds et al. 2021.

⁹ Statistics Canada 2021.

¹⁰ McKinsey & Co., 2021.

¹¹ Leclair, 2020.

¹² Canadian Women’s Foundation 2021.

¹³ BC WHF 2021.

From the Literature

Provide Unemployment Benefits to Caregivers

Tedds et al. (2020) and Alon et al. (2020) argue that families would be better positioned to balance work and caregiving needs if unemployment benefits were available to those who voluntarily leave employment to attend to caregiving.

Caregivers to Older Adults and/or People with Disability

In addition to taking on most of childcare responsibilities in their families, women are also often the main caregivers for family members who are ill, older, and/or living with a disability. They contribute two-thirds to three-quarters of unpaid caregiving to older adults and/or people with disabilities.¹⁴ The pandemic complicated these tasks due to quarantine and isolation requirements. It also reduced access to supports

such as home visits, personal support workers (PSWs), occupational therapy, and rehabilitation.¹⁵ While initial COVID-19 supports did not specifically target people living with disability, a one-time, non-taxable payment of CAD \$600 was provided later.

Intersectionality

While women on the whole take on a disproportionate share of caregiving and domestic labour, many face additional difficulties in balancing caregiving and earning income. These populations include single mothers, women over the age of 55, and racialized women.

Studies during the first year of the pandemic found that single mothers were more likely to experience job loss or reduced hours than mothers in two-parent families.¹⁶ Thought leaders identified single parents as one of the most impacted groups of women during the pandemic. For single parents who were also the sole breadwinner for their household, the pressures of the pandemic such as school closures, isolation requirements, and declining accessibility of social supports were difficult to manage.

As of November 2021, the national unemployment rate of women aged 55 to 64 was 2% higher than before the pandemic. In contrast, unemployment rates improved during this period for women under the age of 55.¹⁷ While the literature does not indicate why employment recovery is lagging among older women, thought leader interview participants highlighted caregiving duties as the reason. They noted that many women in this age group are “sandwiched;” supporting the care of their young grandchildren and/or their own parents.

Racialized women in Canada were particularly impacted by the increased burden of domestic labour and childcare. A study commissioned by Ontario Chamber of Commerce finds that “Racialized Canadians were twice as likely as white Canadians to stop looking for paid work or reduce time spent on paid work as a result of increased domestic

In July 2020, there was an almost 7-point difference in the employment rates of racialized and non-racialized women (57.7% to 64.4%) (Scott 2021).

¹⁴ Estabrooks et al. 2020:657.

¹⁵ ibid.

¹⁶ Faraday et al 2020:8; Scott 2021:4.

¹⁷ Statistics Canada 2021.

responsibilities.”¹⁸ A primary reason is that racialized women are over-represented in low-income work, which makes their jobs more easily disposable in the face of growing caregiving needs.¹⁹

Pandemic Affected Sectors

Women are over-represented in sectors that were most affected by the pandemic and related public health restrictions.²⁰ This includes sectors such as hospitality, retail, and wellness. Women are also over-represented in several occupations that were deemed “essential workers,” including retail workers in grocery stores, healthcare aides, personal support workers (PSWs), and nurses.²¹ These workers faced increased levels of stress due to combining caregiving and work responsibilities and being at greater risk of exposure to COVID-19 in their work.²²

Thought Leader Perspective

Improve Employment Protections for Low-Wage Earners

Women are especially impacted by inadequate employment protections, as they take on a disproportionate amount of low-wage work. Their jobs are less secure, and their labour is more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Therefore, improved job protections for low-wage workers would benefit working women.

Women in Sectors Affected by Pandemic Restrictions

At different stages during the pandemic, municipal, provincial, and federal governments instituted various public health measures to curb the spread of COVID-19. These included stay-at-home orders, closures of non-essential businesses, social distancing, and PPE requirements. As a result, in sectors considered non-essential and uncondusive to remote work, such as hospitality, retail, and wellness, workers lost jobs or the majority of their hours. As these

sectors are among the top employers of women, female workers bore the brunt of the economic impact of the first stage of the pandemic, experiencing more job losses relative to male workers.²³ Even within these sectors, women are more likely to be employed in customer facing positions (such as cashiers, clerks, customer service representatives), further increasing their risk of job loss relative to men.²⁴

Thought leaders noted that women are often the first workers to be entrenched as businesses lose revenue and last to be retrenched. Their observation is supported by gendered trends in the national unemployment and labour force participation rate during the

“Female dominated sectors such as food and accommodation, personal services and the like have been on a massive economic roller coaster.”

Thought Leader Interview Participant

¹⁸ Dessanti 2020:9.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Alon et al. 2020; Grekou and Lu 2021; Cook and Grimshaw 2020; Alook et al 2021.

²¹ Faraday et al. 2020; Ivanova 2021; Lee, Schmidt-Klau and Verick 2020; Benfer et al 2020:163; Churchill 2020; Oreffice and Quintana-Domeque 2020; Alook et al 2021.

²² Ravanera and Sultana 2020; Ivanova 2021; BC Women’s Health Foundation 2021.

²³ BC WHF 2020; Grekou and Lu 2021; Alook et al 2021.

²⁴ Royal Bank of Canada November 2020; Oreffice and Quintana-Domeque 2020.

Thought Leader Perspective

Increase Leadership Opportunities for Women in Healthcare

Organizations can promote women leadership through reforming their promotion structures to accommodate those caring for young children. More women in leadership, they argued, would lead to policies that better reflect women's needs in the workplace.

pandemic. Women lost employment at higher rates than men in early stages of the pandemic in spring and summer of 2020 and experienced a slower recovery. According to Royal Bank of Canada's (RBC) analysis in May 2020, 1.5 million Canadian women lost their jobs in the first two months of the pandemic. Women's labour force participation dropped to its lowest level in three decades.²⁵ According to a study by Statistics Canada, women represented 53.7% of employment loss from March 2020 to February 2021.²⁶

Thought leaders added that young women and less educated women were particularly impacted by the

impacts of pandemic restrictions on the job market. They noted that both groups of women are more likely to be in the service sector and among the first to be retrenched from the workforce.

Those who had to either stop working or reduce hours of paid work due to COVID-19 were eligible to receive income supports to supplement lost income through programs such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). The Government of Canada provided supports for workers without access to

From the Literature

Invest in Skills Acquisition and Training

Sharma and Smith (2021) call for training for women in hard hit sectors to diversify employment opportunities. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Ontario Non-profit Network, and Canadian Women Foundation argue that as automation is impacting several female dominated jobs (clerical, manufacturing, and retail), expansion of gendered workforce development programs is essential. Ontario Chamber of Commerce suggests training programs that also address shortages in critical sectors such as skilled trades. Madgavkar et al (2021:10) recommend working towards closing the "digital inclusion gap" to allow women to take advantage of teleworking opportunities.

Alberta Social Sector Perspective

Create Women Informed Accessible Trainings

There are job training and skill acquisition programs that target women in Alberta, particularly in trades. However, social sector participants noted that these programs often struggle to fill all available spots. They pointed out that women face barriers in accessing these programs, such as arranging childminding during program hours or opportunity cost of income lost while attending the program. In general, they noted, women face barriers in accessing professional development opportunities. They recommended incorporating the needs and lived experiences of women into program design to improve accessibility. Doing so would require deliberate engagement.

²⁵ Royal Bank of Canada July 2020.

²⁶ Grekou and Lu 2021.

paid sick leave through the Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit, to enable them to take time off work due to sickness, self-isolation, or underlying health condition.

Even as employment numbers recovered in Canada by the end of 2021, the number of sales and service sector jobs remain below February 2020 levels and may not recover entirely due to increased automation.²⁷ Women in the service sector need opportunities to gain new skills and shift into other sectors.

Women in Front-Line and Essential Work

While some workplaces were forced to close or scale back their operations when the pandemic began, provincial and federal governments designated some occupations as “essential work,” deemed indispensable for the functioning of the society. Included in the category were several occupations that employed a mostly female workforce, including retail workers in grocery stores, healthcare aides, PSWs, and nurses.²⁸ Especially in the healthcare and long-term care (LTC) sectors, women comprise the majority of front-line staff.²⁹ In Ontario, a 2010 survey found that 96% of PSWs were women.³⁰ The leadership of this largely female workforce in healthcare and social service sectors is mostly male, diminishing women’s opportunity to influence their working conditions.³¹

Despite being revered as “heroes”³² the women in the frontlines of healthcare and social services were precariously employed and had low incomes, which contributed to the high levels of mortality in Canadian LTC facilities. A study of migrant healthcare aides in Calgary illustrates this problem. Forced to work in multiple facilities to make ends meet, PSWs and healthcare aides unwillingly spread the virus across facilities.³³ Some reported being abused by residents as a result, blamed for the outbreaks of the virus.³⁴ Later in the pandemic, the Government of Alberta intervened and ended the practice of healthcare aides and PSWs working in multiple facilities. While necessary to halt the spread of COVID-19, this decision resulted in lower incomes for care workers who are already in precarious work situations. As an additional support, Government of Alberta provided a one-time \$1,200 benefit to designated “critical” workers.

As surges of COVID-19 strained hospitals and other care facilities, women at the frontlines experienced high levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout due to demanding work conditions and increased risk of

From the Literature

Reform the LTC sector

The pandemic exposed major problems in LTC in Canada. Faraday et al (2021) call for “moving beyond a fragmented approach of underfunding, privatization, and exploitation propped up by systemic discrimination” that has long defined the sector. Instead, she recommends investing in the workforce, ending privatization, and strengthening regulation.

²⁷ Alook et al. 2021.

²⁸ Faraday et al. 2020; Ivanova 2021; Lee, Schmidt-Klau and Verick 2020; Benfer et al 2020:163; Churchill 2020; Orefice and Quintana-Domeque 2020; Alook et al 2021.

²⁹ Berkhout and Richardson 2020; BC WHF 2021; Lightman, Evehe B. and Baay 2021.

³⁰ Cited in Ravanera and Sultana 2020.

³¹ Einboden 2020:346; Parry and Gordon 2020:5.

³² Einboden 2020.

³³ Lightman et al. 2021.

³⁴ *ibid*:28.

catching COVID-19.³⁵ In surveys, women expressed greater levels of worry about catching COVID-19 than men,³⁶ possibly due to their outsized roles as essential workers, caregivers, and customer facing employees.

Self-Employed Women and Women Entrepreneurs

Small businesses owned by women are more likely to operate in pandemic affected sectors such as food service, accommodation, or health and wellness. Over two-thirds of women entrepreneurs in Alberta are in service related sectors.³⁷ These businesses had to close in the early stages of pandemic. Later, social distancing measures limited the number of customers and required investment in protections such as PPE, hand sanitizer, or dividing panels. As a result, women-owned businesses were at greater risk of losing revenue or shutting down.³⁸

As a compounding challenge, women-owned businesses in Canada have less access to capital than businesses owned by men.³⁹ A thought leader interview participant noted that women still face barriers in accessing finance compared to men. Women entrepreneurs experienced greater declines in ownership in the first year of the pandemic than their male counterparts in Canada 12.9% vs 12%.⁴⁰

Thought Leader Perspective

Support Small and Medium Enterprises in Creating Employment that Works for Women

Small and medium enterprises may not have the organizational capacity and resources to provide flexible work arrangements for women. These enterprises are often founder-oriented and lack the capacity to adopt flexible human resources practices. Funding and/or support from the government may help such organizations to adapt to robust human resources practices.

As part of its pandemic response, the Government of Canada also implemented a pilot program that provided business supports for small and medium women-owned or women-led businesses and entrepreneurs in the form of loans/grants and business resources to help them stabilize, cover COVID-19 losses, access capital, support business development and expansion, and promote entrepreneurship. If expanded upon, such a program may help support employment and entrepreneurship opportunities for women.

Thought leaders noted that some women-owned businesses saw growth during the pandemic. For some, the pandemic brought about an opportunity to invest in technology and expand into e-commerce. Businesses geared towards hobbies, for instance those selling crafts, cooking appliances, or art supplies, saw growth in the early part of the pandemic as people sought to pick up new hobbies while abiding by stay-at-home orders.

³⁵ Ravanera and Sultana 2020; Lee, Schmidt-Klau and Verick 2020; Benfer et al. 2021; Ivanova 2021; BC WHF 2021.

³⁶ Oreffice and Quintana-Domeque 2020; Fabrizio et al. 2021; Lightman et al. 2021.

³⁷ Hughes 2018.

³⁸ Mo et al. 2021:262

³⁹ *ibid*

⁴⁰ *ibid*:263

The Government of Canada extended several temporary supports to businesses to remain open and retain workers during the pandemic, including the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) and support for rent and property expenses. Tourism and hospitality industry, and “hardest-hit businesses” received additional supports. In addition, the Government of Canada provided hiring and training supports in response to the impact of COVID-19 on labour force participation, including cost-sharing grants, resources, and training and development opportunities to support innovative product developments, apprenticeships, skill enhancement, employment opportunities, and job retention and advancement as part of its pandemic supports.

Intersectionality

Racialized and newcomer women are overrepresented in the frontlines of healthcare in Canada. According to Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), nearly one-quarter of Filipino and one-fifth of Black Canadians work in healthcare and social services.⁴¹ A study found that one-third of all people employed as nurse aides, orderlies, and patient services associates in Canada were immigrants.⁴² Of this population, over 80% were women. Of all the nurses, orderlies, and personal support workers in Canada, 12% of workers in the sector are Black, 11% are Filipino, and 4% are South Asian.⁴³ In Ontario, 42% of PSWs identified as racialized as of 2010.⁴⁴

Migrant workers reported being afraid to speak up about their working conditions due to fear of losing their status.⁴⁵ In the early stages of the pandemic, some in-home support workers found themselves in the precarious position of being locked down with their employers.⁴⁶ One in three in-home support workers reported being prevented leaving the home by their employer.⁴⁷

As newcomers are over-represented in the front-line essential work, areas with high proportions of newcomers experienced some of the highest rates of COVID-19 infection in Canada. As of June 2021, 27 healthcare aides had died from COVID-19 in Canada, a majority of whom were black (Lightman et al. 2021).

Impact on Gender-Diverse People

A key insight of our research has been a lack of studies and data on the experiences of gender-diverse individuals in participating in the labour force during the pandemic. Social sector participants noted that “there’s massive lack of understanding and knowledge, particularly with, you know, gender and sexual diverse folks” and a lot of efforts to promote gender-diversity at workplaces amount to “window dressing.” More research and engagement needed to assess the pandemic’s impact on gender-diverse people’s workforce participation.

41 CLC 2020.

42 Dube 2020.

43 ibid.

44 Cited in Ravanera and Sultana 2020.

45 Faraday et al. 2020.

46 ibid.

47 ibid.

Racialized women are similarly overrepresented in the service sector, especially in customer facing positions, which put them in greater risk of employment loss than women overall.⁴⁸ 30.2% of Indigenous women and 28% of non-Indigenous women were employed in jobs that had the greatest COVID-19 risk based on proximity to others.⁴⁹

Precarity

Women already experiencing precarious situations related to their job, relationships, and/or immigration status were among the people most impacted by COVID-19. For these groups of women, the pandemic worsened the already difficult situations they are facing.

Women in Precarious Employment

Women are more likely to work part-time, temporary, or informal jobs.⁵⁰ This is because of a historical tendency to direct women to highly flexible jobs to facilitate their caregiving role.⁵¹ These jobs often lack legal employment protections and pay low wages.⁵² During the pandemic, the lack of employment protections rendered women in this type of employment vulnerable to losing their jobs as employers sought to cut costs.⁵³ Studies suggest women's over-representation in informal, part-time, and

temporary jobs is at least partly responsible for the expansion of the gender gap in labour force participation rates during the pandemic.⁵⁴ In Alberta, over 60% of minimum wage workers are women.⁵⁵ Nationally, employment rates of women who make less than \$800 a week fell by 30% from February 2020 to January 2021.⁵⁶

Women who lost informal, part-time, or temporary employment reported finding it difficult to access social supports, even when eligible.⁵⁷ Migrant workers faced difficulties due to their non-permanent immigration status and having to obtain additional documents.⁵⁸ Sex workers were another group who had difficulty accessing supports for lacking formal paperwork and fearing the stigma attached to sex work.⁵⁹ Interview participants noted that self-employed women and those who work in the so-called

“More women going into self-employment is not necessarily a positive development. Self-employment is not a substitute for employers providing conditions that work for women.”

Thought Leader Interview Participant

⁴⁸ Churchill 2021; Gamblin and King 2020.

⁴⁹ Alook et al. 2021.

⁵⁰ ILO 2021; BC WHF 2021; Scott 2021.

⁵¹ BC WHF 2021:3.

⁵² ILO 2021; Scott 2021.

⁵³ ILO 2021; CLC 2020.

⁵⁴ Qian and Fuller 2020; Madgavkar et al 2020; Reichelt, Makovi and Sargsyan 2021; Cook and Grimshaw 2021; Ivanova 2021; Djankov et al. 2021.

⁵⁵ Hussey 2020.

⁵⁶ Desjardins and Freestone 2021.

⁵⁷ Scott 2021:7.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

“gig economy,” such as delivery or driving services, were often not aware that they qualified for supports such as CERB, as their line of work typically precludes them from unemployment supports and other social supports. One interview participant suggested that a failure of communication on the part of provincial and federal governments led to women in these types of employment not accessing benefits that were available to them. Instead, these women continued working with higher risks of contracting COVID-19, as they directly engaged clients as drivers or delivery people.

Women with Precarious Immigration Status

Women who were in Canada on a temporary basis, such as Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs), those on work permits, and international students, faced additional challenges during the pandemic due to their immigration status. Interview participants noted that these women are primarily employed in low-income occupations that involved a high risk of catching COVID-19, such as workers at meat-packing plants, workers in LTC facilities, and in-home support workers. As noted above, some in-home support workers found themselves in a situation where they were forced to lockdown with their employers and/or prevented from leaving.⁶⁰ As their immigration status is often tied to their employment, they had little agency in demanding adjustments to their working conditions due to the pandemic, even when facing exploitation, unsafe work conditions, or abuse.

In addition, newcomer women earn less than their Canadian citizen counterparts. Canadian Labour Congress found that in the healthcare and social services sectors, “workers who are not racialized earned an average of \$29.90 per hour, while Filipino and Black workers earned between \$26.86 and \$23.36. The pay gap is larger for those with overlapping identities, with a racialized woman earning less than a racialized man.”⁶¹

Thought leaders noted that immigration proceedings came to a grinding halt in the early stages of the pandemic, as immigration officials adjusted to processing immigration documents while working from home, and some immigration offices were hit by COVID-19 outbreaks. The resulting backlog delayed the processing of applications to renew temporary visas and work permits or to gain permanent resident

Mental Health Challenges of Racialized Women

Working mothers faced mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety due to the increasing burden of the “triple shift.” Racialized women across North America reported even higher levels of stress, anxiety, and isolation than women overall. Racialized women are overrepresented in the caregiving occupations and other essential work, putting them closer to the traumatic aspects of the pandemic. Due to the higher rates of unemployment among racialized women, a greater proportion of them faced potential financial disaster due to the ongoing crises, suffering the associated stress. Indigenous women, particularly those who live in rural areas and on reserve, reported feeling isolated due to losing access to community and cultural events. In a survey conducted in April-May 2020 by Statistics Canada, 46% of Indigenous women reported increased stress and 48% reported experiencing anxiety.

⁶⁰ Faraday et al. 2020.

⁶¹ CLC 2020.

Thought Leader Perspective

Employment Protection for Temporary Foreign Workers

Labour market reforms, specifically employment standards for temporal workers and temporary migrants, are needed to improve women’s working conditions. Lack of employment protections for these groups leave them vulnerable to abuse, unsafe work conditions, and exploitation, which intensified during the pandemic.

status, causing uncertainty for many migrants. As a remedy, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) extended visas and work permits of immigrants who were in the process of applying for renewals or permanent residency.

An interview participant who works with newcomers noted that a part of the funding for programs that target newcomers was re-directed to COVID-19 relief programs. As a result, the participant’s organization saw

declines in funding for certain programs and was forced to refer clients to other services. Interview participants also highlighted the difficulty of reaching newcomers who experience language barrier through online programs.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Women faced increased risk of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) throughout the pandemic. According to Statistics Canada, calls to the police regarding domestic disturbances increased 12% in Spring 2020.⁶² In the same timeframe, according to a report by Canadian Women’s Foundation, “Not only has there been an increase in the number of calls to police and service providers, but shelters and anti-violence organizations have noted that the women calling for help are reporting more severe violence and abuse.”⁶³

Pandemic restrictions limited women’s access to natural and informal supports, and stay-at-home orders meant many women were working from home along with their abusers.⁶⁴ Additionally, it was more difficult for women to reach available social services and supports such as women’s shelters. This was particularly true in remote areas.⁶⁵ Service providers reported that they received less calls during lockdowns and more calls immediately after, suggesting that women who needed help could not or did not reach out to available supports through online or over the phone while living in the same

Thought Leader Perspective

Safe Housing for Women Fleeing GBV

With no access to safe housing, women fleeing GBV may have to choose between being homeless (sometimes with their children) or staying with their abuser. During the early stages of COVID-19 stay-at-home restrictions, little to no accommodations were put in place to allow women fleeing GBV access safe housing.

⁶² Statistics Canada 2020.

⁶³ CWF 2020:22.

⁶⁴ Parry and Gordon 2020; Connor et al. 2020.

⁶⁵ CWF 2020; BC WHF 2021.

Thought Leader Perspective

Implement Supportive Work-Place Policies on Reporting GBV

Employers who have policies on reporting GBV and provide employees with resources to report and or access GBV supports are instrumental in providing safe spaces. Leveraging connections with other sectors such as childcare, education, and retail can provide avenues to safely reach and connect with women experiencing GBV.

“A lot of people who were experiencing gender-based violence were very hesitant to report to their workplace or seek support, because there were very large concerns about the impact on their career progression. And for those who did disclose, they often tell us stories about feeling like they were then seen in a negative light.”

house as their abusers.⁶⁶ Financial difficulty due to job loss and movement restrictions put women at increased risk of abuse.⁶⁷ Women facing gender-based violence experienced deteriorating physical, psychological, emotional, and economic well-being.⁶⁸

The pandemic stress, anxiety, financial insecurity, and movement restrictions further exacerbated the risk of GBV for Indigenous women. Formal and informal supports, already difficult to access for Indigenous women, became even less accessible, particularly on reserves and in rural areas. The lack of supports compounded the heightened risks Indigenous women face due to

colonization, ongoing trauma, marginalization, and racism.

In engagement sessions, social sector staff added that survivors of intimate partner violence need additional supports regarding employment. Survivors often experience financial abuse from their partners. When they are able to get away from an abusive environment, they face immense pressure to support themselves and any children they may have. Having supports available for women experiencing intimate partner violence to establish financial independence through employment is key to combatting intimate partner violence and enabling women to leave abusive partners.

“There are many barriers for individuals that are struggling with domestic violence, with the trauma and stuff that comes with it. The other piece of it, that I think isn't always as noticeable, is that if you are successful in getting out of a domestic violence situation, now a lot of women are single, and have children to support. There isn't much out there for them to do that.”

Alberta Social Sector Engagement Participant

⁶⁶ CWF 2020.

⁶⁷ Lee 2021:4.

⁶⁸ CWF 2020; BC WHF 2021.

Countering Bias and Discrimination in Hiring and in Workplace

Alberta-wide stakeholders placed emphasis on the importance of countering bias and discrimination when it comes to hiring practices and workplaces. While there are legal protections in place, social sector staff argued that hiring bias against women remains an issue.

For those employed, wage inequality persists. Participants noted that Alberta is behind other Canadian provinces when it comes to gender gap in wages. Wage inequality and lower pay often drive women out of the workforce - either to attend to caregiving duties or due to burnout. Participants also highlighted gender inequality in access to professional development opportunities.

Intersectionality

Thought leader interview participants noted that single women, racialized women, and newcomer women are over-represented in low-income shift and “gig” work. As a result, they are disproportionately impacted by the challenges that such employment presents, including lack of labour protections and irregular hours that make it difficult to arrange childcare.

Racialized women were particularly impacted by the loss of temporary, part-time, and informal occupations. The impact on their financial security was larger compared to their non-racialized counterparts, despite experiencing similar rates of job loss and loss of hours.⁶⁹

In describing the hiring and workplace discrimination women face in male-dominated industries, social sector staff noted that the impacts of such discrimination are compounded for racialized and newcomer women, women living with disability, and gender-diverse people.

Alberta Social Sector Perspective

Implement Workplace Policies with an EDI Lens in Male-Dominated Industries

Women continue to find it difficult to enter male-dominated industries. Hiring bias, workplace harassment, and discrimination prevent women from thriving in these industries. EDI informed policies, including anti-harassment policies and hiring transparency, would help support women to enter male-dominated industries. Firms that want to hire women need to be more transparent about it.

“I think sometimes when you look at industry and businesses, they feel like they have a closed-door policy. Sometimes they could show that they actually would like more women, or they would want more diversity. They need to put it out there and be transparent about it.”

⁶⁹ Faraday et al. 2020.

Alberta Social Sector Perspective

Support the Implementation of “Duty to Accommodate”

Women in the workplace continue to face discrimination in the workplace due to gender, sexuality, race, or disability. While there are policies and resources around anti-discrimination and duty to accommodate, they are often not employed in practice. An important step would be to partner with community organizations to raise awareness about duty to accommodate with employees.

“I've heard a lot like about the duty to accommodate that so many people with disabilities are not aware of it. Like they don't know what their rights are, until they're kind of pushed out. And then they find out later. And even if their employer knows, sometimes they are just kind of hoping that the employee isn't aware of so doesn't push it and, just hopes that they go away, and they often do. So I think kind of making those regarding the disability rights, minority rights, somehow getting the word out that this exists.”

Employers Should Streamline Hiring Processes

In addition to bias, hiring processes often present barriers to mothers, non-native English speakers, and those with less access to technology, as many employers use online forms and platforms for hiring purposes.

Community Supports

Non-profit organizations that support women were also impacted by the pandemic. In interviews and engagement sessions with social sector staff across Alberta, several pandemic related issues were noted.

In the early stages of the pandemic, many organizations had to quickly transition to online delivery of service or adjust the way they deliver in-person programs. Interview participants noted that as the non-profit sector is traditionally behind on updating its technological resources, the updates that were necessary for switching to online work and service delivery ended up being costly and time-consuming. In trying to deliver programs online, organizations began to respond to requests for devices, found creative ways to access devices, and struggled meeting the demand. Access to technology became a barrier to continuing work, education, and social connections during the pandemic. As work, schooling, and social support programs shifted to remote delivery, women in low-income households struggled with having access to appropriate devices, data plans, and internet speeds.

Organizations addressed increasingly complex needs during the pandemic including housing and food insecurity through loss of employment, increased caregiving needs, increased rates of GBV, and the impacts of isolation on mental health. The resources available to them did not have a corresponding increase. Organizations had to do more with less, straining their organizational capacity.

Social sector staff explained how the pandemic impacted staff retention and turnover. As the staff of these organizations are mostly women, they faced many of the same issues discussed in this paper, particularly regarding caregiving. Coupled with having to respond to increased need among the clients they serve, staff experienced burnout, stress, and a decline in mental health. Increased levels of staff turnover affect organizational capacity and present a roadblock for programs. It disrupts continuity of programs and services. Clients may end up having a more difficult time receiving appropriate supports when a staff member with whom they have established a relationship with leaves.

Alberta Social Sector Perspective

Strengthen Social Serving Sector through Funding Reform

To foster coordinated and adaptable community supports, funding needs to shift from competition-based and fragmented short-term grants to a coordinated long-term, wrap-around service model. Funding needs to consider complex evolving realities where resources must adapt quickly to emerging needs. Finding funding should not take up as much capacity in organizations as it does currently.

Having core funding and more stable funding cycles would strengthen community organizations and better enable them to respond to emerging situations such as a pandemic. Improved funding would also support organizations to build organizational resilience to respond to emergencies and weather disruptions to operations.

Social sector staff cited the current funding practices as a major impediment to offering competitive wages, benefits, professional development, and long-term contracts to staff. The pandemic presented an added funding challenge as organizations were unable to hold fundraising events. Many agencies reported having to go through yearly funding cycles, which can alter the funds available to them on a year-to-year basis. As a result, organizations are unable to plan ahead, and adjusting their programs and services in response to emerging community needs depends much on voluntary commitment and dedication of an already strained work force.

Alberta Social Sector Perspective

Include Social Serving Sector in Policymaking

The organizations in the sector are deeply embedded in the communities they serve. They have a unique, in-depth understanding of realities and gaps in supports and services that become barriers to women's labour force participation. They are critical partners for any funder or government agency to understand the realities of women to better design services, funding, and evaluation.

"I think it's important that governments are more involved with non-profits and community agencies because we are the ones that are working with these people. We know their stories, and there is a kind of that disconnect between the government, whether it's about funding or income support grant or any of that."

"A lot of the approaches that Government take to engage people are at the service level, it doesn't show the totality and the depth of people's experiences. We tend to simplify and abstract things. This is the moment where we need to learn from the depth of people's experience, and then be critical in thinking if this is the reality of so many, what can we do? I think that process is still missing."

Need for a Systemic Response that Includes the Social Sector

As many of their community members faced crises and uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the social sector had to go above and beyond to help them. Agencies were confronted with intensified food and housing insecurity and applied commitment and creativity to respond. We heard from agencies in the sector that created impromptu pantries in their offices to respond to food insecurity. They worked with community partners to address housing challenges. They secured grants to make sure that families had the devices they needed for online work and school. They had to change their own programs and practices to continue to deliver services while observing public health regulations. Even as their own staff, majority of which are women, faced the same challenges as the families they serve, the sector continued to play a vital role in addressing the emerging needs for women throughout the pandemic. The social sector is the backbone of building community resiliency. In the table below, we highlight social sector participants' views on what needs to be done to support women's participation in the workforce going forward, and the role of community agencies, government, and employers.

Actions identified by Alberta social sector

Policy/ Program recommendation	Community agencies	Government	Employers
Improve working conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raise awareness about workers' rights Boost wellness support for social sector front-line staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mandate paid sick leave Increase employment protection Improve foreign worker policies Mandate benefits to frontline workers Monitor precarious / care work for exploitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide paid sick leave Allow flexible work arrangements Design non-discriminatory policies
Invest in and strengthen non-profit sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner across agencies for better coordination of resources for wrap-around supports Partner with employers to better match women and workplaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure core funding and longer funding cycles Support infrastructure for coordination, partnerships, & awareness of programs and services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner with community agencies to support labour force participation
Use equity, diversity & inclusion lens in program & policy design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design inclusive programming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess impact of laws, bylaws & policies on identity-seeking and marginalized groups Co-develop policies with people with lived experience Invest in women-led organizations Improve rural internet access Improve mobility and reduce access barriers through transit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support women in leadership
Invest in care economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand flexible childcare or childminding for women accessing programs and supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in universal childcare Invest in safe school environments, i.e. improved ventilation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accommodate and support employees with childcare responsibilities
Invest in training & development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design programs to accommodate care responsibilities Increase awareness of available supports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in training and development Reform educational policies that support mothers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Value professional development of women as part of their job during work hours

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion lens & Women-informed policy & program design

Social sector staff are embedded in communities. They are well-positioned to observe needs and gaps as they emerge. The sector's knowledge and experience are critical for understanding the needs of communities and crafting responses to address them. In engagement sessions, sector participants made it clear that the impact of the pandemic on women's participation in the workforce have been multi-faceted and complex. The response to the pandemic's impact must be crafted with a systems approach. For recovery to be sustainable, civil society and policymakers across different levels of government need to work together to transform social structures and create an environment for women to not only participate in the workforce, but to thrive and contribute to Alberta's economic future.

Alberta Social Sector Perspective

The Way Forward is in partnering across sectors to transform the environment women live and work in with deep understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

To address intersectional barriers to work force participation, the front-line staff who witnessed both the strengths and challenges of women in the work force recommend:

Bridging non-profit and industry for mutual understanding: Overcoming barriers to women's employment in Alberta requires partnerships between employers, industry, businesses and community organizations. Existing job training programs in Alberta struggle to fill all available spots because employers' policies and attitudes around paid sick leave, flexibility, and professional development do not consider the needs and realities of many women. Partnerships between the social sector and employers would help build the knowledge and understanding to ensure that job programs can better match the needs of women and those of employers.

Participants argued that dedicated funding for brokers and liaisons would be necessary to build and maintain relationships to employers.

Shifting organizational culture in the social sector: Social sector participants argued that the current workplace culture of "doing more with less" fuels overwork. Current funding models and resulting job insecurity exacerbate this experience and practice. As a result, mental health challenges and burnout are common for sector staff. Combined with low pay, rising costs, and the extra strain the pandemic brought on, the sector experiences high staff turnover. In addition, the social sector is female dominated which means these challenges disproportionately impact women's labour force participation. Participants argued that organizational cultures need to shift to prioritize mental health and well-being, cross-training of workers, and flexibility.

Fostering cross-sector collaboration and coordination: Alberta social sector participants expressed a desire to find ways to connect to coordinate supports and services and advocate as sector. In part due to the funding structures, the sector is fragmented. Collaboration and coordination are key to providing wrap-around supports, and to enabling the sector to effectively advocate for itself and the communities it serves.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic made the need for collaboration and coordination more urgent. They noted that during the pandemic many of them had to shift focus on providing basic needs in ways they had not done before, including food and housing. They argued that women and families would have benefited from coordinated wrap-around supports available at a single location, without having to travel to multiple agencies.

Shifting to a strengths-based communication strategy: Alberta social sector participants suggest that the sector should foster strength-based narrative in public facing communication. They claimed that the sector's current image is a deficit-based one, focusing on the needs and shortcomings of the sector and its clients. They recommended highlighting the successes and impact of the sector and strength of clients. Such shift in communication, they argued, would lead to more recognition of the sector's work and the resilience of its clients.

Next Steps

Guided by these findings, we are now looking deeper into key labour trends in Alberta using data from stories of women with lived experience and from Statistics Canada. The purpose of this work is to make available more evidence specific for Alberta and from an intersectional and gender lens for ongoing recovery.

Currently, we are hearing from women with diverse experiences across age groups, sectors, backgrounds, and abilities in interviews and focus groups. These conversations are informed by and further explore what we are seeing in labour force data.

We are also building relationships with social sector and community organizations to prepare engagement and co-creation of our project outputs including policy papers and policy & programs tools for cross-sector actions. For these next steps, we will build on our findings to focus on policy and program solutions that transform the environment women live and work in through cross-sector collaborations and a strengths-based orientation.

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Appendix 1: Rapid Literature Review Search Strategy

Search Strategy for Academic and Grey Literature

To conduct the rapid review of academic and grey literature, a set of search terms, guided by the purpose of the research project, were used to identify relevant publications that feature cutting edge research. Searches were conducted in Google Scholar (for academic articles) and Google (for grey literature), using the following terms:

- “Women” AND “Covid-19” AND “labour force participation”
- “Women” AND “Inequity” AND “Covid-19”
- “Covid-19” AND “Gender equality” AND “labour force participation”
- “Gender” “Employment” AND “Covid-19”
- “Women” AND “Inequity” AND “Indigenous” AND “Covid-19”
- “Women” AND “Inequity” AND “Racialized” AND “Covid-19”
- “Visible minorities” OR “Newcomers” OR “Young women” OR “Mothers” OR “LGBTQ+” AND “Employment barriers” OR “Employment advancement” AND “Covid-19”

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure that the review is limited to publications directly relevant to the research project, a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed. Inclusion criteria were:

- Publications that discuss impact of COVID-19 pandemic on women’s labour force participation.
- Publications that discuss impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the labour force participation of visible minorities, newcomers, young women, mothers, LGBTQ+ in Canada.
- Publications that discuss global trends in gender gap in employment and labour force participation during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Publications that identify gender gaps/analysis in employment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Exclusion criteria were:

- Publications that do not take into account gendered analysis of COVID-19.
- Publications that are not in English and published before 2020.
- Publications that focus on case studies of low and middle income countries.
- Search was limited to first four pages of results listed.

In addition to this search strategy, a number of publications were added to the literature review as they were referred to in the publications that met the inclusion criteria.

The searches were conducted during December 2021.

Appendix 2: Interview Guides

FOR ACADEMIC EXPERTS

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview with us. We greatly value your time and feedback.

We work for PolicyWise for Children & Families, which is a provincial not-for-profit organization that aims to inform, identify and promote effective social policy and practice to improve the well-being of children, youth, families, and communities.

Purpose: PolicyWise received a WAGE grant through the Feminist Response and Recovery Fund for a three-year project on the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Alberta’s labour force. The goal of the project is to increase the understanding of barriers women face in participating in the labour force in Alberta. We are collaborating with the Government of Alberta to implement policy solutions, tools, and programs to facilitate a feminist recovery. We have completed a literature review and a jurisdictional scan, which helped us identify broad themes and trends. The goal of our interviews is to build off the literature, contextualize our findings, and address any gaps in knowledge.

Process: We estimate that this interview will take approximately one hour. Participation in this interview is voluntary and you can end the conversation at any time or choose not to answer certain questions.

Confidentiality and Consent: With your permission, we would like to record the interview. The recording of our conversation will be kept on a secured, locked and protected site, and nobody outside the project will have access to it. Your answers are confidential and will only be used for project purposes. The themes from the interviews will be aggregated so that no single individual or organization is identifiable. With your permission, quotes from the interview may be used in the report to illustrate findings, however quotes chosen will be not identifiable. **Are you comfortable with this interview being recorded?**

Do you have any questions for us before we get started?

Interview Questions

Introduction

1. Please tell us about your work/expertise related to women’s employment and labour force participation.
2. Some economists have argued that the pandemic led to a “she-cession” - a recession that disproportionately affected women. In your opinion, is Alberta/Canada experiencing a she-cession due to the pandemic? Why/Why not?

3. What general trends as relates to the impact of COVID-19, have surfaced with women in the workforce?

Gaps

1. Though statistically there are signs of recovery, women's employment numbers still lag behind men. What are some continuing struggles women in the labour force face as the pandemic goes on, which aggregate statistics do not capture?
2. In your opinion, what interventions, initiatives or factors have bolstered women's resilience in the face of the pressures that the pandemic brought on?
3. The pandemic has not impacted all women equally. In your opinion, who are the subgroups of women who have faced the highest risks, especially regarding employment/labour force participation?
4. What are some unique barriers women face in employment and labour force participation that the pandemic brought on?

Policies

1. The pandemic has amplified the existing inequities women and underrepresented groups were already facing in the labour force. In your opinion, is it possible for pandemic recovery efforts to address these inequities? Why/why not?
2. Service jobs have been a main source of employment for women but were heavily impacted by the pandemic and are also threatened by automation. What would be the impact of service jobs potentially disappearing altogether on women's employment, and how can it be addressed?
3. How do you think the pandemic impacted women's professional advancement and earning power? (Potential follow up) What are some policies that can address barriers to women's professional advancement?
4. How did government policies and supports available in Alberta and in Canada (e.g., isolation support, CERB, childcare deal) impact women's employment and labour force participation? What were their successes and shortcomings?
5. In your opinion, what are some policies, solutions, programs etc. governments or civil society organizations should pursue to reverse the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Conclusion

Do you have any additional comments? Thank you!

FOR PRACTITIONERS

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview with us. We greatly value your time and feedback.

We work for PolicyWise for Children & Families, which is a provincial not-for-profit organization that aims to inform, identify and promote effective social policy and practice to improve the well-being of children, youth, families, and communities.

Purpose: PolicyWise received a WAGE grant through the Feminist Response and Recovery Fund for a three-year project on the gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Alberta's labour force. The goal of the project is to increase the understanding of barriers women face in participating in the labour force in Alberta. We are collaborating with the Government of Alberta to implement policy solutions, tools, and programs to facilitate a feminist recovery. We have completed a literature review and a jurisdictional scan, which helped us identify broad themes and trends. The goal of our interviews is to gain insight into the practices and programs on the ground. We would like to understand what has worked, lessons learned, adaptations and specific considerations for underrepresented women. We would like to hear your experiences and learn from your expertise.

Process: We estimate that this interview will take approximately one hour. Participation in this interview is voluntary and you can end the conversation at any time or choose not to answer certain questions.

Confidentiality and Consent: With your permission, we would like to record the interview. The recording of our conversation will be kept on a secured, locked and protected site, and nobody outside the project will have access to it. Your answers are confidential and will only be used for project purposes. The themes from the interviews will be aggregated so that no single individual or organization is identifiable. With your permission, quotes from the interview may be used in the report to illustrate findings, however quotes chosen will be not identifiable. **Are you comfortable with this interview being recorded?**

Do you have any questions for us before we get started?

Interview Questions

Context

1. Please tell us about your work and your programs related to women's employment and labour force participation.
2. What general trends as relates to the impact of COVID-19, have surfaced with women in the workforce?
3. How were the women who participated in your programs affected by the pandemic?

Gaps

1. The pandemic has not impacted all women equally. In your opinion, who are the subgroups of women who have faced the highest risks, especially regarding employment/labour force participation?
2. What are some unique barriers women face in employment and labour force participation that the pandemic brought on?

Experiences: Programs

1. How have you/your organization supported women you were working with during the pandemic? What were some of your successes and challenges?
2. How did you have to adapt your own work with women due to the pandemic? What needs and challenges came into focus?

Experiences: Observations

1. How are working mothers dealing with school outbreaks, quarantines, and closures? How have you helped them with challenges related to childcare?
2. Our literature review suggests that women are experiencing greater levels of mental health distress during the pandemic. What are some of the mental health challenges you have observed among the women in your programs? How did you respond to them?
3. What are some ways in which the women you worked with showed resilience in the face of the pressures that the pandemic brought on?

Policies

1. How did government policies and supports (i.e. isolation support, CERB, childcare deal) impact women's employment and labour force participation? What were their successes and shortcomings?
2. In your opinion, what are some policies, solutions, programs etc. governments or civil society organizations should pursue to reverse the gendered effect of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Conclusion

Do you have any additional comments?