

Priorities for Promoting a Gender Equitable Response to COVID-19

PolicyWise is working on a project funded through Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) Canada to identify pathways to reverse the gendered impact of COVID-19 on labour in Alberta. Here, we bring your attention to key findings from the first year of the project.

What does the research say on the gendered impact of COVID-19?

Many of the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on employment are well-documented across Alberta and Canada. They include:

✓ **Increased domestic labour and caregiver responsibilities.** School and daycare closures, quarantine requirements, lack of paid sick days, concerns over exposure to COVID-19 made it difficult for women to balance caregiving, domestic labour, and paid employment.

✓ **Reduced job opportunities.** Many women worked in sectors disproportionately impacted by the pandemic like the service industry. The number of jobs in these sectors declined significantly, leading to declines in women's income and savings.

✓ **Elevated work-related risk, precariousness, and stress.** Sectors with a woman-majority workforce became more demanding, more stressful, and riskier due to the pandemic. For example, frontline work in healthcare and long-term care. Within these sectors women often had limited labour protections, due to lack of seniority, being on the frontline, and/or working on temporary employment contracts or on a part time basis.

✓ **Elevated gender-based violence.** The stress of the pandemic, being cut-off from support systems, and having to stay home with abusers led to higher incidences of gender-based violence. The pandemic's impact on women's employment made it difficult for survivors to establish financial independence and build protection against financial abuse.

✓ **Intersecting identities presented barriers.** The pandemic impacted women differently based on social characteristics, like age, sector of employment, residential location, education level, income, race, immigration status, and marital status. For example, the increase in caregiving was particularly pronounced among single mothers and racialized women. Immigrant women often had little to no labour protections in their workplaces.

The Way Forward in Alberta

To put the research in Alberta context, we spoke to representatives from the social sector in the province. We asked them how women's work-related needs and priorities can be met. Their recommendations for action were:

- ✓ **Apply a gender-based and equity, diversity, and inclusion lens to all policies.** Supports and services intended to bolster women's workforce participation often fall short because they are not designed to address the intersectional barriers women face due to income, race, immigration status, gender-based violence and discrimination.
- ✓ **Increase support for the social sector.** The sector stretched its resources to respond to the emerging needs in their communities, including mental health, housing, and food insecurity.
- ✓ **Consult the social sector in policy decision making.** Through their work in the community, social serving sector staff have unique insight to their communities' needs. Governments need to hear from them to better reflect communities' interests in policy.
- ✓ **Build partnerships and collaborations across sectors.** Current system of service delivery and funding is siloed and fragmented, which perpetuates inequities and makes it difficult for people to access available supports.
- ✓ **Make job training fit women's needs.** Women reported barriers to accessing existing job training programs, such as arranging childcare, or the cost of income lost while attending the program.
- ✓ **Encourage workplaces to welcome women.** Male dominated industries such as trades are not always transparent about wanting to hire more women, work hours in these sectors do not line up with hours of daycares, and workplace discrimination continues to be a problem.