Reversing the Gendered Impact of COVID-19 on Alberta's Labour Force November 2021 - March 2024

Summary of Findings on the Ongoing Impacts, Trends, and Priorities for Action

PolicyWise for Children & Families

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Introduction

At PolicyWise for Children & Families, we work to enhance practices and policies that support well-being. Between November 2021 and March 2024, we completed a research project entitled "Reversing the Gendered Impact of COVID-19 on Alberta's Labour Force". The purpose of the research was to support programs and policies that facilitate connection with the labour force for women and gender-diverse people. In this report, we present the key findings of this research.

Women and gender-diverse people in Alberta experience barriers to employment and entrepreneurship that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated. The pandemic also impacted the community non-profit organizations that build bridges to employment and entrepreneurship. We explored the barriers women experience in participating in the workforce, ways in which community non-profits support women, and policy solutions that can enhance access to employment. Our research involved reviewing programs and policies, analyzing data from Statistics Canada and other sources, and, importantly, engaging with diverse women and community non-profits across the province.

We identified five priority areas where action can support women's participation in the workforce:

- Caregiving

- Entrepreneurship

- Employment Equity

- Newcomer women

- Community non-profit support

An important finding connecting all five of these areas is the critical role of community non-profits as intermediaries with deep knowledge of women's contexts, including how different social locations and identities intersect. This knowledge and the trusted relationships community non-profits build make them critical partners in developing innovative solutions and implementing programs that support women's employment and entrepreneurship.

In the following sections, we describe the findings from our engagement with women with lived experience and community non-profits that support them, our analysis of Statistics Canada data, and our policy and program reviews. Specifically, we:

1) Describe trends and ongoing barriers for women and gender-diverse people that emerged from our findings, and

2) Review program and policy solutions that can support their participation in Alberta's workforce.

NOTE: These findings informed the development of several policy and program tools, including:

- [Discussion Paper: Reversing the Gendered Impact of COVID-19 on Labour Force Participation in Alberta](#)

- [Priorities Snapshot: Priorities for Promoting a Gender Equitable Response to COVID-19](#)

- [Advocacy Brief: Closing the Gender Gap in Alberta Employment](#)

- [Event Summary: Action through Connection: Research and Collaboration to Support Women Entrepreneurs in Alberta](#)

- [Impact Brief: Women Building Futures Program Impacts 2017-2022](#)

- [Policy Primer: Actions to Close the Employment Gender Gap in Alberta](#)

- [Policy Brief: Actions to Close the Employment Gender Gap in Alberta](#)

- [A Guide for Supporting Clients Requesting Accommodations in the Workplace](#)

Ongoing Impacts, Barriers, and Proposed Solutions

Community Supports are Critical to Understanding and Addressing Intersectional Barriers to Workforce Participation

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionally affected women's opportunity to participate in the workforce or succeed as entrepreneurs, especially for women from equity-deserving communities.

Our findings highlight three overarching themes:

1. **The pandemic exacerbated long-standing systemic inequities.** Understanding intersectionality is key to designing supports and programs that reach populations who need supports most and help mitigate crises. To do that, data must be able to show how supports reach groups from diverse and intersecting equity-seeking communities.

2. **Community non-profits are essential to bridging gaps in knowledge, cross-sectoral understanding, access, support, and community development.** Community non-profits have the situational awareness, deep understanding of intersectional impacts, and trusting relationships needed to effectively respond to emerging needs in crises such as the pandemic and the impacts of ongoing social, economic, and geopolitical challenges. They do this work in the context of fragmented, competitive, short-term funding and, as a result, an intense workload and below average wages for their majority women workforce.[1] Community non-profits are ideal partners for both government and industry when designing and implementing solutions that will help close the gender gap in employment.

3. **Community and social networks are critical to supporting women's workforce journeys.** Many of the women we spoke to, whether they were looking for a job, looking to enhance their career path, struggling with care responsibilities, or starting a business, recounted how their story changed once they connected with a supportive social network. These social networks support a sense of belonging, share information, help navigate supports and opportunities, and provide personal connection, mentorship, and companionship. Community non-profits highlighted the

importance of connections and the need for governments and industry to recognize and prioritize relational approaches and community building.

These three larger themes are implicated within each of the five priority areas. Below, we describe findings for each of the area themes of ongoing impacts, trends, and solutions.

Caregiving

In our research, we found that women continue to contribute more to caregiving responsibilities than men. While there have been positive developments in childcare affordability, flexible access is still a barrier to women's opportunities for training, job search, professional development, and career trajectories. Below we describe findings from data analysis and engagement about ongoing intersectional impacts and innovative solutions.

Ongoing Impacts and Intersectional Barriers

Our research showed how COVID-19 exacerbated existing disparities faced by women related to caregiving responsibilities and participation in the workforce.

Women lose more employment hours due to child and family care than men.

When looking at Albertan families with children under the age of 6, 24% of women were out of the workforce in 2023, compared to 4% of men.[2] Almost a quarter of women over 25 working part-time do so because they care for children.[3]

In 2020, Albertan women with children under 13 took twice as many hours off work for child or family care than men did, 26% and 13% respectively.[4] In 2022, women with children under 13 took off 24% of their total working hours compared with 12% for men (Figure 1).[4] Comparing 2020 to 2022, while there was a slight decrease in total employment hours lost to child or family care, women still lost twice as many hours to caregiving as men. Alberta has the highest gender wage gap in Canada. On average, women earn 14% less hourly than men.[5] A participant in our engagement noted that, "I know a lot of times [for women] the discussion comes down to well, I make less money, and it's so expensive for childcare that I'm going to be the one to stay home."

% of Total Work Hours Lost by Child Age

Youngest child <13

Women — 24%
Men — 12%

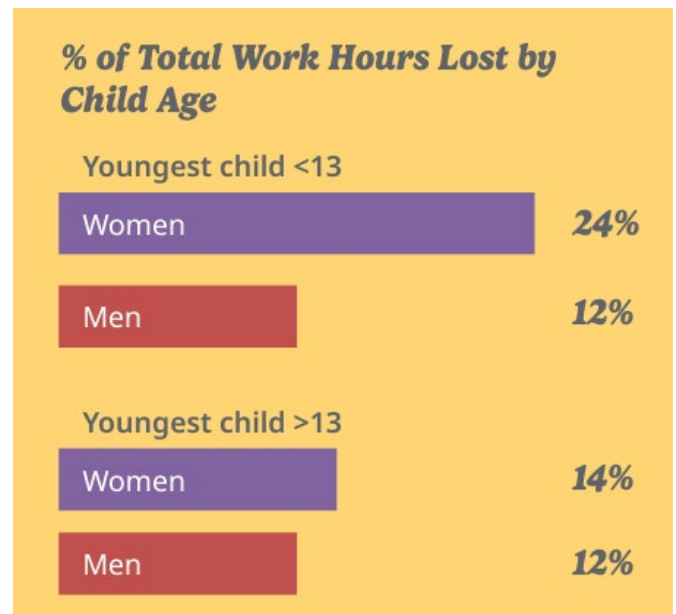Youngest child >13

Women — 14%
Men — 12%

Figure 1. In 2022, for women with children under 13 years, 24% of their total work hours lost were attributed to childcare, more than men with children under 13 or men and women with children over 13[4]

Women described to us the toll it takes on them to shoulder the triple shift of paid work, caregiving, and household duties. While workplace and childcare flexibility is critical, we heard that strategies need to span sectors and go beyond the immediate relationship between childcare options and workplace flexibility. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the ongoing need for broader societal efforts around gender roles, gender equity, and caregiving responsibilities. Parental and child benefits, such as parental leave after childbirth, are mostly targeted to support mothers staying home to care for children. Our engagement with non-profits and women in Alberta suggested that even when men have access to benefits such as paid time-off, they may not use them to attend to childcare needs. Participants explained that the wage gap is a main reason for this, as well as organizational culture where it is less normalized for men to ask for time-off to attend to childcare needs.

An important theme in our engagement with women was that while pandemic restrictions no longer apply, there are stricter expectations for when children with minor symptoms should stay home, resulting in an increased number of sick days for kids. Having family members, in particular grandparents, care for these children, is perceived as risky with the elderly population more vulnerable for severe outcomes of COVID-19 and other viral infections. As a result, women disproportionally lose working hours to care for sick children.[4] Furthermore, paid sick leave benefits are often only provided to full-time employees and do not extend to caring for sick family members.

Lack of childcare is a barrier to finding jobs and progressing in career.

If training is needed before employment and the income that would pay for childcare is available, women need drop-in or short-term childcare options so they can participate in training, take time to write applications, take advantage of services, and go to interviews.

We also heard in our engagement that professional development is often expected outside of regular working hours. This is an additional barrier for caregivers to progress in their careers.

Intersectionality affects experience of COVID-19 impacts.

The COVID-19 pandemic required adaptations in employment culture that improved work conditions for some women. Many roles shifted online, which can lend more flexibility to employment. Many women shared how flexible schedules and remote work are particularly useful for women balancing work and childcare demands:

> "I think having flexibility in the scheduling has really made a difference… Being able to look at my schedule and go, 'Okay, I have meetings here. So I have to attend this meeting,'… but being able to work a little bit from home if I need to, if I have sick kids. Having that flexibility, where maybe I'm working a little bit later, but then I had stuff that I could do earlier on that wasn't necessarily work-related… To have that resilience of keeping my job and being able to balance work and home."
> — Community non-profit worker

However, most remote workers have a post-secondary education and have a high household income.[6] Remote and flexible work is not accessible to all workers, especially in retail, accommodation, food service,[7] and healthcare,[6] all industries where women are overrepresented.

Navigating childcare and employment becomes more difficult when access to a vehicle, geographic distance, and insufficient public transit are barriers. Participants called for expansion of co-located school, childcare, and preschool options to mitigate some of these barriers. A self-employed mother explained the difficulty of accessing after-school care for her child:

> "The [after school] daycare expects you to bring the kids to their location. They are not arranging transportation from the school to the daycare. So, if I can drive the kids to the daycare, then I don't need daycare, right? It doesn't really work."
> — Newcomer woman entrepreneur

For newcomer women who have little family support in Alberta, the pandemic made building a social network extremely difficult. In particular, newcomer mothers caring for small children experienced isolation impacting their mental health as well as their opportunities to apply for services, programs, training, or jobs:

> "Honestly, I think the support was really limited for me, just because we're just my husband and I and my daughter. So, a lot of things were just on us to figure it out and work through with what we have. We don't have any family here. So back home, I would know that I can probably take her to my mom or my dad, but it was just only us here. And that part was difficult." — Newcomer woman

Opportunities and Solutions

Women with lived experience and community non-profits serving them suggested actions to be taken in collaboration across sectors to address intersectional barriers.

Flexible childcare options to enable training, job search, and professional development. Women with lived experience and non-profits serving them pointed out the need for governments, the childcare industry, and school districts to collaborate to better meet childcare needs. For example, childcare centres could offer extended hours and drop-in options to accommodate school closure or short-term childcare needs. These options support women and caregivers to participate in full-time work, shift or weekend work, but are offered by few childcare businesses in Alberta.[8] A non-profit worker in a rural area explained:

Proportion of Alberta childcare businesses offering programs for:[8]

Evenings **5%**
Weekends **9%**
Overnight **4%**
Drop-in Access **22%**
Flexible Access **19%**

> "Every school jurisdiction offers schooling at different times. So, our current school system has most Fridays off. Well, that doesn't really work. Some parents have used up all their vacation time long before you even hit March break. And their employers are getting really angry, and they don't have secondary opportunities for childcare. And they don't have any supportive families through transient community. So they have been placed into our community, because we're very fortunate there's work,

but we don't have the service to support those people." — Community non-profit worker

Another non-profit worker supporting teenage mothers reflected on how drop-in childcare would improve young mothers' opportunities to apply for jobs or participate in employment programs:

"It'd be amazing to have drop-in daycare, that if someone's transitioning and in the process of trying to get a job to have enough money to pay for daycare, but they need to be able to access more of a drop-in kind of thing, to get that together to then be able to get a daycare down the road." — Community non-profit worker

Community-industry partnerships for childcare access are another option we heard about. Community non-profits shared their interest in working closely with industry to develop innovative childcare options co-located with training programs and workplaces to support caregivers' workforce participation. Staff from a non-profit providing training for women to enter trades explained:

"I think childcare centres need to come to the table to talk a little bit more about flexibility. But we aren't going to have that until employers and childcare meet at the table. Right now, we're getting a lot of direction from province. But it's really the stakeholders that need to sit together and say, 'What do you need? Here's what we can give you, how do we make this work?' And then we need to bring that to the province and say, 'Here's the recipe, how do you guys make that work for us?'" — Community non-profit worker

Shifting workplace culture and gender roles. Participants called for efforts at multiple levels, including policy, workplace, and community supports. Policy changes such as gender-neutral delivery of childcare benefits or designated paternity leave for fathers can help encourage men to take on more childcare duties. In Canada, only Quebec has more inclusive regulations with great impact: 85.6 % of fathers took parental or paternity leave from 2019-2020 compared to 23.5 % of fathers outside of Quebec.[9] Policy changes must be accompanied by communication efforts that include workplaces to influence cultural change so that men feel confident about taking advantage of such benefits. Community non-profits have an important role in normalizing programs for fathers and children, and targeting outreach to all caregivers to participate in parent groups. One non-profit worker explained the complexity of such a shift:

Figure 2. Policy primer

"Helpful to hear from men, what they need to better support their partners in engaging in the workforce. A lot of times the discussion comes down to well, I make less money, and it's so expensive for childcare that I'm going to be the one to stay home. Or even if [men] have paternity leave or other benefits, the culture of their organization may not be one that they feel comfortable in asking for it or pushing for it. And so I think that human resources aspect or leadership aspect to that in creating a culture where men feel comfortable, also with taking on some of those

responsibilities, or being the one to stay home with kids who are sick with COVID, or whatever it might be." — Community non-profit worker

Social networks are a critical support for caregivers. We asked women across Alberta what helped them most through the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. For many it was a social network that provided connection, practical help with caregiving, information finding, and a sense of community. Community non-profits emphasized the importance of building connections and community for supporting women's workforce participation. To enable women to participate in programs and build social networks, they underscored the need for quality child minding, flexible drop-in options, and program funding to connect women into social support systems and community.

While the implementation of the federal-provincial childcare agreement has improved affordability of childcare in Alberta,[10] gaps to access remain that impact women in different social and economic positions differently. Community non-profits are key in understanding these gaps and developing solutions that facilitate equitable access to childcare. They are a critical partner for government and industry in designing childcare policies, planning, and programs that support women's workforce participation and career development.

We developed concrete short- and long-term policy solutions based on this research in our Policy Primer and Policy Brief, *"Actions to Close the Employment Gender Gap in Alberta"* (Figure 2 and Figure 3).

Figure 3. Policy brief

Entrepreneurship

Women owned 17% of Alberta businesses in the fourth quarter of 2023.[11] More than three quarters of women entrepreneurs in Alberta are in service-related sectors.[12] Small businesses owned by women were most likely to operate in pandemic-affected sectors such as food service, hospitality, or health and wellness. Women-owned businesses were at greater risk of losing

> Women own **17%** of Alberta businesses.[11]
>
> **36%** of Alberta women-owned businesses reported maintaining cash flow, managing debt, and dealing with inflation as their biggest obstacles in the fourth quarter of 2023, compared to **27%** of all businesses in Alberta.[13]

revenue or shutting down during the pandemic. In 2023, the on-going impacts of the pandemic continued to impact women's business financials to a greater degree than men's businesses.[13] We engaged with women entrepreneurs and business owners in Alberta to understand the continuing impact of COVID-19 on women-owned businesses and women's ability to continue operating their businesses in Alberta.

Resilience in a changing business environment. Women entrepreneurs were resourceful amid a changing business environment. With restrictions on in-person service delivery for non-essential

services, and disruptions in accessing supplies, some women entrepreneurs pivoted to creating new products or services that were in demand during the pandemic period. Women entrepreneurs leveraged their skills to create new opportunities. A women entrepreneur living with a disability shared:

> In 2022, 79% of women-owned businesses operated without any employees, compared to 67% of men-owned businesses.[12]

> "Yeah, [because I couldn't make any money] I had to figure out what can I do to try and sustain my business. And I came up with selling soap. So, I could get back to selling. Because I couldn't be sitting at home not making any dollars." — Woman entrepreneur living with disability

Others adapted to providing virtual services or learning new skills to be able to continue earning income.

When asked what supported their businesses to thrive during the COVID-19 pandemic, women entrepreneurs shared:

- Access to targeted low-barrier grants for women entrepreneurs especially for underserved women populations who did not qualify general grants.

- Supports to help women entrepreneurs complete grant and funding applications.

- Networking opportunities to meet with other entrepreneurs.

- Family and friends providing needed business supports such as bookkeeping and marketing.

Ongoing Impacts and Intersectional Barriers

Business owners have increased business and personal debts. Business owners, especially those involved in in-person service delivery, lost business revenue due to pandemic related closures and restrictions. These businesses continued to accrue expenses while losing revenue, resulting in high debts. Women entrepreneurs, especially those with small businesses, shared that they had to take on personal loans and use their personal savings to be able to keep their businesses running partly because they were unable to access business loans, credit, and or government relief funding. An Indigenous entrepreneur shared how her personal and business debts continued to increase:

> "I think I didn't qualify for the first round or something. But the Métis had some sort of emergency funding. So, like I said, I've still got a lot of stuff on my credit card and line of credit and using my mortgage. That's really depleted a lot of my savings."
> — Woman entrepreneur in childcare industry

Most women entrepreneurs are the only employee for their small businesses.[12] This means that when the owner is unwell and unable to work or is a caregiver for an unwell dependent, the business comes to a halt, losing revenue.

Small and new businesses could not access government COVID-19 business supports. We heard that newly established women-owned businesses did not access COVID-19 relief funds supporting businesses. In Alberta, 31% of women-owned businesses did not access COVID-19 funding or credit due

to eligibility requirements.[14] This made it challenging for women owned businesses to stay afloat and cover increasing expenses and debts. A focus group participant shared her experience as a new small business owner accessing supports:

> "I felt like all those government things that were out there did not address that little section for women, there was a lot of loans, there was a lot of things that you could get and not pay back, like other businesses can get their rent covered, the salary of their [staff], but we couldn't get any of that, not exactly a brick and mortar store."
> — Woman entrepreneur

Self-employed had limited to no access to employment insurance benefits. We heard that self-employed and small owned businesses were unable to access employment benefits such as paid sick leave due to illness and employment insurance due to business closures. Women entrepreneurs were often faced with the decision to either continue running their businesses at the expense of their health or capacity to provide care for dependents or take time off and lose income while business and household expenses accrue. A business owner shared her experience:

> "There were no sick days for me. It would just take the day off if I couldn't do it. Or if I was sick, and there was a survey, I'd say I just can't, I can't do it. I'm sorry. And then I would rest. But no, there's no, no benefits at all. I don't see how that could ever be for someone who's self employed, unless they pay for them." — Woman entrepreneur

Many of the barriers women entrepreneurs were facing and continue to face existed before the COVID-19 pandemic. Two of the main barriers being:

Women entrepreneurs experience barriers to accessing capital. We heard about barriers to accessing start-up capital due in part to gendered stereotypes about women in business. Racialized, Indigenous, and newcomer women entrepreneurs face additional barriers to meeting the requirements for business loans. New start-ups who lost capital invested due to the impacts of COVID-19 faced difficulty accessing additional capital.

Lack of targeted business supports for small businesses. Small business owners have to know and be everything for their businesses. Women entrepreneurs as mentioned above are often the sole employee of their businesses and often overwhelmed with doing it all when they do not have the financial capacity to hire business services such as accounting and marketing. This was cited as an additional barrier to accessing grants that require these types of knowhow or skills. This was elaborated on by a focus group participant with a small business:

> "Being an entrepreneur is wearing hundreds of hats at a time. You're the accountant, you're the marketer, and you're a photographer, or the media manager, you are wearing your gear, you're promoting it, you're speaking about it. You are so many things, you're everything. So, you can be the expert, and most of us can probably handle a couple, one or two, because we have life experience that either we're working on a field that we can kind of figure something, navigate something, but we're not going to be experts in everything. And if we didn't have the resources and

the proper training and coaching from [Action for Healthy Communities], my business probably would not be what it is today." — Woman entrepreneur

Opportunities and Solutions

When women entrepreneurs were asked what would have helped for them and their businesses to thrive, they shared:

Mentorship and networking: Women entrepreneurs shared that opportunities to meet other entrepreneurs in similar sectors or with similar experiences would have been beneficial to navigating the changing business environment and making business decisions. As explained by a women entrepreneur who started a new business that was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic:

> "I think mentorship, or just having someone within the space to be like, what are you doing? What do I do? I couldn't find anybody doing something similar to what I was doing, right? You get a lot of advice and this and that from friends and family. But you're like, okay, I need someone who's gone through it. No one has gone through a pandemic. But people have gone through [starts of] businesses before."
> — Indigenous woman entrepreneur

Low barrier grants: New and small businesses who were ineligible for most government grants due to financial and business requirements shared they would have benefited from programs that had lower entry requirements. Several women entrepreneurs shared similar ideas such as:

> "I would say a lower barrier to entry. And the whole goal of that program was to create a low barrier to entry. And I would love to see other programs design that way." — Indigenous woman entrepreneur

Navigation support: One of the barriers to accessing funding and grants was the lack of assistance to navigate the application process and complete application forms. Women entrepreneurs pointed to the need for such supports to enhance their capacity to complete application and be successful in accessing grants and funding. A woman entrepreneur provided an example of what navigation supports could look like:

Figure 4. Event brief

> "Like I said before, it's so important to have someone, a navigator, that's a good word, to have a navigator to help you navigate the process and just say, 'I'm here to help you, and I can help you with the application form.'" — Woman entrepreneur

Collaboration to identifying opportunities to supporting women entrepreneurs in Alberta. PolicyWise engaged with the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH) and Alberta Women Entrepreneurs (AWE) on the ongoing challenges women entrepreneurs face, emerging trends in Alberta, and to identify

opportunities to support women entrepreneurs to thrive and grow in Alberta. Based on our learnings, in collaboration with WEKH and AWE, we developed a workshop to identify opportunities to strengthen the funding ecosystem for women entrepreneurs in Alberta. In this workshop, participants from various sectors worked together to identify opportunities to increase access to capital for women entrepreneurs through policy and programs. Figure 4 shows the title page of our *Event Brief – Research and Collaboration to Support Women Entrepreneurs in Alberta.*

Recommendations have been summarized in *"Actions to Close the Employment Gender Gap in Alberta"* policy primer (Figure 2) and policy brief (Figure 3).This collaboration helped bridge research with learnings from implementing entrepreneurial programs for women in Alberta.

Employment Equity

Equity in employment was an important theme in our engagement with women experiencing compounding barriers that were exacerbated by the pandemic. Many industries impacted by COVID-19 were majority-women industries, including the service, food and accommodations, education, healthcare, and social assistance sectors.[15] Work in these industries became less stable, and women's access to supports was disrupted. Below, we explore:

1. Ongoing barriers to employment equity; and

2. Solutions that can support their workforce participation.

Ongoing Impacts and Intersectional Barriers

Workplace discrimination. Women experience intersecting sexism, racism, ableism, and other kinds of discrimination in the workplace. Whole industries can feel inaccessible to women, limiting their career prospects:

> "One of my dream jobs was to work on a train. I thought that's such a male industry that I never pursued it because I was like, 'there's no way they're going to hire someone female on this.' So, I think sometimes when you look at industry and businesses, they feel like they have a closed-door policy." — Community non-profit worker

Gender-diverse people are also often subject to discrimination in the workplace and may not feel comfortable advocating for their needs:

> "Something as simple as trying to get somebody to use your pronouns, right? [Worker] is terrified of working somewhere with people because of the disrespect that comes every single time." — Transgender community non-profit worker

Employment program staff identified challenges in identifying safe and equitable employment opportunities for the women they serve:

"We noticed that almost every corner we turn, other stakeholders are not applying an anti-racist perspective and approaches. It's really hard, trying to work with others who are perpetuating certain types of biases myths about women or women of color. There's so much work to be done. There are good examples in pockets, but nothing to show the whole landscape taking on equity and anti-racist approaches. That's the sad part. It's so difficult to create system-wide change." — Community non-profit worker

Median Employment Income ($)

Men
Racialized — $52,400
Non-racialized — $73,000

Women
Racialized — $38,400
Non-racialized — $48,000

Figure 5. In 2020, women and racialized people in Alberta earned less than non-racialized men. Racialized women earned less than non-racialized women, reflecting the intersection of gender-based and race-based wage gaps[19]

Pay inequity. Alberta is the only province without pay equity legislation or a framework[16] and has the largest gender pay gap in Canada. Women earn 80% of what men make working in the same sub-sector.[17] Across all workers in 2021, Albertan women's median income was 64% of what men made.[18] The income gap is greater for racialized women, who experience both race-based and gender-based gaps, as shown in Figure 5.[19]

Women are more likely to be low wage workers. For roles where full-time staff earn less than 50% of the Albertan median annual income, 70% are in women majority industries.[19] Many of these industries were strongly impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns, including personal services, early childhood education, and food and accommodations. Low wage earners experience worse mental health outcomes than their higher wage peers.[20]

Low-wage workers are:

14% less likely to have their mental health needs met

14% less likely to be satisfied in their lives

2.4 X more likely to have an anxiety disorder compared to higher-wage workers.[20]

Challenges accessing workplace accommodations. The COVID-19 pandemic brought new opportunities for employees to seek workplace accommodations. Women in our engagement sessions described not feeling supported by their employers when they expressed their concerns about workplace COVID-19 transmission. Parents required accommodations to manage school closures and sick children. Long COVID resulted in chronic illness that impacted employees' ability to do strenuous work.[21] Some women were forced to leave jobs that would not accommodate their needs. Others felt unable to self-advocate, fearing losing their jobs, being denied accommodations, or were unsure what accommodations their employer is required to make through Alberta's Duty to Accommodate legislation:[22]

"[Workers] don't know what their rights are until they're pushed out. Even if their employer knows, sometimes they are just kind of hoping that the employee isn't aware of [their rights], just hopes that they go away, and they often do."
— Community non-profit worker

Awareness of Duty to Accommodate is of particular concern for newcomer women, as employment rights differ from country to country. Being an English language learner adds another layer of complexity to this experience, as women navigate inaccessible policy language while having a challenging conversation with their employer. Women with connections to employment programs can leverage these relationships to support them in seeking accommodations, but only when employment navigators are aware of Duty to Accommodate themselves.

Lack of paid sick leave. Paid sick leave impacts financial stability. Many self-employed and hourly employees do not have access to paid sick leave or Employment Insurance[23] and most low wage workers do not have the option to work from home during illness. Alberta's labour standards require five days of unpaid job protected sick leave per year.[24] Workers without access to paid sick leave must make the choice to work while ill or forgo their income.

Women are under-represented in leadership positions. Women hold 34% of management roles in Alberta[25] and in 2021 women managers earned 64% of what men made.[19] In our engagement, women noted that men may be given more flexibility to do professional development on work time, providing pathways to advancement:

34% of managers in Alberta are women.[25]

> "Women are expected to do training evenings and weekends for their jobs. We don't expect that of men. We certainly don't see equity in training and professional development. Men will be able to do [professional development] during their work time when [women] will do their job and then have to find that time later outside of those hours to continue to train or retrain or pick up certification. I think that's unjust and unfair." — Community non-profit worker

Gender-diverse Canadians experience worse employment outcomes. Nationally, transgender, non-binary, and other gender-diverse people have lower personal income than their cisgender peers despite having more education, on average.[26] Across Canada, 31% of transgender and non-binary people reported not working in the past year, compared to 26% of cisgender people.[26] With this increased financial precarity, 29% of gender-diverse Canadians experienced significant negative impact on their ability to meet essential needs during COVID-19.[27] Gender-diverse people also experience more housing insecurity than cisgender people.[28]

There is limited information available about employment for transgender, non-binary, and Two Spirit Albertans. Where there is 2SLGBTQ+-specific data available, it is only reported at a national level.[29] Some data sources report statistics according to binary sex rather than gender or distribute non-binary people across binary gender categories. These approaches to gender in data do not allow for analyses to uncover the specific experiences of gender-diverse people in Alberta.

Opportunities and Solutions

Advancing pay equity. To address the gender pay gap in Alberta, the Alberta Government can legislate gender-based pay equity. Employers can increase transparency in their pay grids and their promotion practices to build an equitable workplace culture. Awareness of human rights complaints processes can support women to address instances of pay inequity:

> "I think Alberta is the lowest or one of the lowest in all of Canada in terms of pay equity, and [the human rights commission] gets very few complaints under the provision of pay equity. I think that's a big gap. I don't know if it's people don't know that they can make a complaint or if they actually don't know that they are getting paid significantly less than their male counterparts or what it is. I'm sure there's a variety of different reasons." — Engagement participant

Supporting access to accommodations. To ensure workplaces accommodate childcare responsibilities, health conditions, pregnancy, and religious needs, governments and community non-profits can ensure accessible information about Duty to Accommodate is available for workers. To build awareness of Duty to Accommodate, PolicyWise, the Alberta Human Rights Commission, and Calgary Immigrant Women's Association partnered to create resources to support community non-profit employment navigators and their clients. Through engagement with community non-profits, we created a guide to Requesting Accommodations in the Workplace and a form (Figure 6) to support conversations between employees seeking accommodations and their employers. To improve accessibility, we translated the forms into several languages.

Figure 6. Guide for Duty to Accommodate

Support for low wage workers. Improving labour protections for low wage workers would help safeguard essential workforces and support women. Increasing the minimum wage closer to living wages would help Albertans make ends meet in the province's current affordability crisis.[30,31] Legislating paid sick leave for hourly and part-time workers would support Albertans who fall ill. Many low-wage and part-time workers do not receive benefits, impacting their access to healthcare, including mental health care. Exploring legislation to mandate benefits for different classes of workers would ensure workers are healthy and able to support themselves. Expanding provincial healthcare coverage to include universal mental health care and pharma-care would help address mental health concerns among low-wage workers.[20] Finally, providing funding to community non-profits who provide wraparound services to low income community members would help them bridge gaps and link Albertans to programs that support their well-being.
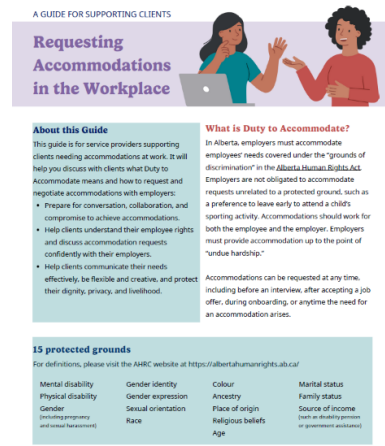
Providing wraparound care in employment programs. A partner organization linked their employment program success to the wraparound supports they offer, summarized in our impact brief, "*Women Building Futures Program Impacts 2017-2022*" (Figure 7). They provide access to supports beyond employment and training, including housing, food, childcare, and mental health. These programs are resource-intensive, but they address multiple barriers to employment. In our engagement, non-profit workers identified embracing wraparound approaches as an opportunity for systemic change:

Figure 7. Impact brief

> "I think there's only so much you can do at a micro level. I think it has to go bigger. I think it needs to be more wraparound even at a government level. There are so many people that fall through the cracks. If you're going to look at getting more support out there, it needs to be addressed at multiple levels and come from multiple angles, because there's just so many different things that need to be addressed." — Community non-profit worker
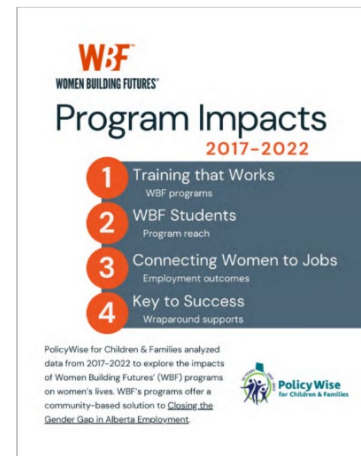
Increasing women leaders. Increasing the number of women leaders in Alberta requires action at individual and systemic levels. Training, mentorship programs, and cross-sectoral networks for women leaders would support women's advancement. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion programs, especially in men-majority industries, should ensure they address bias towards women to ensure they are given equal opportunities. Ensuring access to affordable and flexible childcare options would allow women to balance leadership demands and childcare responsibilities. Community non-profits can play a role in bringing women leaders together, offering training and networking opportunities, and supporting employers to foster women's advancement.

Promoting Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. Equity, diversity, and inclusion programs can help shift workplace cultures in men-majority industries, improve employment outcomes for newcomer and racialized women, and protect women's psychological safety. Unconscious bias can be hard to address, but impacts women's access to employment:

> "It needs a lot of commitment from someone internal as well as external. It's really difficult to change employers' view because they do hold more power, the hidden ones, who we'll hire or not hire. And yet that's where we need to challenge their unintentional but definitely sort of racist perspective." — Community non-profit worker

Community non-profits offer services that can support employers to improve their equity, diversity, and inclusion practices through knowledge mobilization and services for workplaces. Networking can help community non-profit employment programs be aware of safe employers and spread awareness of organizations that can support equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives.

Newcomer Women

Alberta is home to about 390,000 working-age immigrant women.[32] These resilient women are eager to participate in Alberta's economy. We heard that finding employment in Alberta is not straightforward for many newcomer women. Next, we explore barriers to employment for newcomer women, and opportunities for employers, governments, and community non-profits to embrace and support them.

Recognizing the strength and resilience newcomer women bring to Alberta. In our engagement with newcomer women and community non-profits, we witnessed the strength, creativity, skill, and aspiration women bring when they settle in Canada. An important theme throughout these conversations was the need to recognize their strength and potential as an opportunity for employers. This recognition is facilitated through community non-profit programs that connect employers and newcomer women and support relationship building, mutual understanding, and trust:

> "We would be focusing on women who have very little formal work experience, very powerful, resilient women. Survivors. But maybe they don't have formal work experience. They are maybe illiterate in their first language. It's very hard to learn English for the workplace. Our program focuses on that and supports them in learning workforce English, and helps them develop relationships with potential employers. The training is done in partnership with a partner or an employer in a certain industry. When there's a relationship, when the employers actually are training the women, they hire them right after they finished training." — Community non-profit worker

Ongoing Impacts and Intersectional Barriers

Unemployment and underemployment. In 2022, newcomer women with university degrees had almost twice the unemployment rate of university-educated women born in Canada.[4] In our engagement, women described being unable to find work in Canada that matched their employment back home:

9% *of university-educated immigrant women are unemployed, compared to **5%** of women born in Canada*[4]

> "When you come, you have Masters, you have PhDs, you have degrees, you have diplomas, and you can't get a job. You can't get a meaningful good paying job where you left back home." — Newcomer woman

Many newcomer women are forced to work "survival jobs", roles that pay significantly less than those aligned with their training. These survival jobs, such as in retail or food service, are physically demanding and, between work and caring for their families, women find themselves not having the time or energy to fight for a job in their field:

> "People get often then so stuck in the survival jobs because they're also hard. There's only so many hours in your day. So, if you're working and working and taking care of family, and then also having the energy to do more applications, that is a really difficult time." — Newcomer woman

Canadian work experience. Newcomer women described a discrepancy between their employment expectations and the reality after landing in Canada. Canada's point-based immigration system gives immigrants the impression that there are many jobs available in Canada. When they arrived, women realized that Albertan employers value Canadian work experience over international experience. Women were frustrated that Albertan employers expected Canadian work experience but were unwilling to provide that experience themselves:

> "I think referrals in Canada are very important. And the question I keep asking them is that you want me to have Canadian experience, is what we we're really hearing when we came, like you don't have a Canadian [work experience], so that was one of the reasons why we had to just get the transition job. We have that Canadian experience and get our foot into the door. The question I keep asking them is that if you don't give me a job, how do you want me to get the experience?" — Newcomer woman

Unrecognized foreign credentials. Newcomer women, especially in healthcare, found that their professional credentials were not recognized in Alberta. For some women, the process of credential recognition is inaccessible:

> "Since I'm an international medical graduate, here in Canada, we cannot practice without license. To get the license you have to take three of their exams. They're pretty costly, like one exam is above $3,000." — Newcomer woman

COVID-19 disrupted networks. Newcomer women who arrived in Alberta during COVID-19 found themselves trying to build connections in an isolating employment landscape. Women recognized that having strong employment networks and mentorship could help them overcome barriers to employment, but without opportunities to connect in-person, they were unable to build new networks:

> "And at that point, I was just thinking on how to launch my career in Alberta. And that's when the pandemic hit. So, for me, I felt lost at that point, because I had no networks. I had no network." — Newcomer woman

Temporary Foreign Workers are vulnerable to exploitation by employers. Alberta hosted 20,000 temporary foreign workers (TFWs) in 2023,[33] largely recruited for roles that pay below the provincial median wage.[19] In Alberta, there is minimal monitoring or regulation of employers of TFWs,[34] and TFWs may not be aware that they have access to the same Employment Standards as residents.[35] Work permits may be inaccurately framed as a pathway to citizenship,[34,35] while permanent residency status is less likely to be awarded to "lower-skilled" TFWs.[36] Some TFWs who are ineligible for refugee status use work permits as a means of escaping dangerous conditions in their home countries.[34]

Work permits are at the discretion of employers.[35] Some TFWs feel disposable, as though their employment could be terminated at any moment.[34] Employers are the primary supports for many TFWs in Alberta. They may provide housing, connections to support services, education about labour laws, and income.[34,35] If employers are unsupportive, TFWs may not be aware of community non-profit programs available to support them. They may fear accessing healthcare, advocating for their employment rights, or asking for accommodations as they may be risking their work status.

Opportunities and Solutions

Supporting community-based employment programs. Community non-profit employment programs help women gain Canadian work experience and build skills that support success in Canadian job markets. Through employment programs, newcomer women can develop relationships with employers, mentors, and have support navigating the job market:

> "To support women in gaining and sustaining gainful employment is a lot of the principle of relationship, of companionship, of holistic support. It could be within a place of employment, but how wonderful it would be for women that have more barriers to employment to actually have someone who is a conduit companion, who could help liaise between employers and her, and actually troubleshoot and problem solve, and even guide her to have mentors so she could move to other more substantial careers, more than survival jobs." — Community non-profit worker

Employment programs help women create networks and find opportunities for mentorship. Women shared that programs that solely focus on technical skill did not provide those crucial opportunities for connection and soft skill learning:

> "So it's like they're working with people who are just starting out to re-qualify. So for me, I had hoped maybe this would be a point of networking, pointing in the right direction, in your own profession. But they did really help with the resume building, job interviews, and all those kinds of things." — Newcomer woman

For newcomer women, employment programs can bridge differences in employment culture, so women are prepared for the Canadian work landscape:

> "I'm coming from Nigeria. It works differently there with how you apply for jobs, and what should be on your resume. There was [a session for newcomers] where they pair you with a mentor in your field in Canada. They actually paired me with someone from my same country. I felt like he could relate, and he really gave me some good advice. I'm hoping that I can be a mentor to someone someday."
> — Newcomer woman

Bridging Foreign Credentials. Despite Alberta experiencing labour shortages due to the pandemic,[37] many qualified newcomer women are unable to find employment in their fields. Women recommended employment bridging programs as a solution, providing Canadian work experience in their field while they seek credential recognition:

> "Put something in place, a bridging program of sorts, go back to school for five years here in Canada, or do an assistantship in hospitals, the ER wait time is something else. And yet we have doctors, nurses rotting away, in stores doing different things."
> — Newcomer woman

They also recommended that professional associations could play a role in advocating with governments to create streamlined pathways for foreign-trained healthcare providers:

> "Not just the government, the professional bodies too. They can do better to embrace other professionals coming in from other parts of the world to Canada."
> — Newcomer woman

Increasing access to wraparound supports for Temporary Foreign Workers. Across the prairie provinces, Temporary Foreign Workers (TWFs) report challenges related to food security, housing, finances, and health.[34] Community non-profit wraparound programs could meet these needs, but many TFWs are unaware of the programs available to support them. During COVID-19 lockdowns, TFWs lost crucial work hours due to their own illness or to workplace shutdowns.[34,38] TFWs in the prairies recommend employers direct them to settlement community non-profits to support their basic needs.[35] They also recommend provincial governments create a specific budget line to fill gaps in federal funding and to extend community-based settlement services into rural areas where TFWs are most vulnerable.[34]

Community Non-Profit Supports

Community non-profits have an in-depth understanding of the unique realities women experience and the service gaps that create barriers to women's workforce participation. They provide programming and support in navigating services for women, many with intersecting barriers. Using their expertise, trust relationships, and situational awareness, non-profits are critical partners that funders and government can leverage to design services that enable women to fully participate in the workforce and realize their goals and potential.

Community non-profits described to us the core elements of their work as customized, needs-based support that focuses on connections, safety, intercultural awareness, and trust (Figure 8). They emphasized that to be effective this support must be trauma-informed, oriented towards individual and community strengths and potential, and in collaboration across sectors.

Figure 8. Word cloud created from participant responses about the core elements of navigation supports

Community non-profits have a keen interest in building stronger relationships across sectors, particularly with industry. They feel that partnerships across sectors are key to fostering mutual knowledge of opportunities and barriers, and the development of realistic and impactful solutions. To do that, the non-profit sector needs stable funding that acknowledges their impact and expertise and promotes collaborations. In the following pages, we describe the main themes from our engagement with community non-profits. The themes centre lessons learned from their experience responding to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as recommended solutions.

Ongoing Impacts and Intersectional Barriers

Barriers to employment and service access. Non-profit staff observe that a poor understanding of the realities of diverse women result in gaps in supports and services that become barriers to women's workforce participation. Eligibility criteria for supports, training, or funding, as well as hours and locations of training can pose barriers and systemically exclude women from benefitting from opportunities. For example, participants described barriers in rural areas to training, language programs, or choice in workplaces that align with women's interests or caregiving responsibilities. They can provide the intersectional lens to policy and program design in partnership with government and industry to improve access and impact of programs. Workers providing wraparound supports to women shared two examples that illustrate intersectional barriers:

> "When you're talking about institutional racism, a lot of our clients are Indigenous folks, they are Black, they are Muslims. They have those racial or religious barriers that intersect with the fact that they are substance users. They don't speak English, they don't have formal education. So, it's a lot, there's just a lot." — Community non-profit worker

> "[There is] an excellent [housing] program in our community. A two-parent family moving into that low-income housing can do it, because there's a substantial number of volunteer hours to access it. But a single mother, who's working a part time job, and still do all the volunteer hours cannot access [this] housing, because she can't fulfill the volunteer hours because she's trying to work. So how many things stacked against that single mother." — Community non-profit worker

Barriers to collaboration and service coordination. Participants also pointed out that such coordination and collaboration might be possible in urban centres where transportation and a diversity of services are available, but that there are major barriers to this in rural areas. However, even in urban centres intense workloads resulting from increased services demands since the pandemic, and the fragmentation of funded programs are currently barriers to awareness of available services and supports and to effective collaboration between services.

> ❯ **68%** of jobs in Alberta community non-profits are held by women.[1]
>
> ❯ **45%** of jobs in Alberta community non-profits are held by racialized people.[1]
>
> ❯ **46%** of roles in Alberta community non-profits are held by people with at least one university degree.[1]

Staff turn-over and mental health impacts. A major theme for community non-profits was the ongoing struggle to balance workloads, staffing, appropriate compensation and benefits for staff, and accommodating flexibility in the context of limited, short-term, and project-based funding. The majority women workforce in this sector[1] shouldered much of the increased demands for supports during the pandemic, while caring for their own family members.

Staff turn-over has been an ongoing challenge in the sector since the pandemic. As one reason, participants discussed the unacceptably low pay and benefits for staff compared to workers with equivalent education in other sectors,[1,39] shown in Figure 9. Additionally, wellness and mental health supports for staff are essential to retain staff in the context of emotionally challenging work. Yet access to and cost of counselling is often a barrier for non-profit staff. Many non-profit workers we heard from spoke about the impact of the lack of mental health supports in frontline work:

Figure 9. In 2020, non-profit workers earned less than workers in other sectors with comparable levels of education.[1,39] This difference was larger for workers with more education

> "But if you're in frontline work and you're dealing with stuff all the time, being able to take your stuff to [someone] and then be able to process it as opposed to going home to your family members, or your friends and like sharing too much that maybe they can't handle. But being able to have a space for you to process that stuff."
> — Community non-profit worker

Short-term, project-based, and competitive funding. Providing wraparound supports, building partnerships, and fostering staff and organizational wellness is tied to funding. Current funding models were cited as the main barrier by participants for community non-profits to improve staff retention and enhance supports for women's workforce participation. Finding funding currently takes up much capacity in organizations. Short-term grants limit continuity of programs for the women they serve, and limit employment contracts for their staff to one or two years. Participants explained how competition-based funding is a barrier to collaboration and service coordination:

> "You have 15 different agencies that are applying for this one pool of funding. We call this crabs-in-a-barrel mentality: we are all just trying to dig down on each other to get to the same funding." — Community non-profit worker

Non-profits need stable funding to focus their efforts on serving women and families, and to provide their majority women workforce with appropriate compensation and working conditions.

Opportunities and Solutions

Importance of wraparound supports. Many of the community non-profits workers we heard from explained how their close relationships with women and their communities equip them with acute situational awareness and insight into root causes of barriers to workforce participation. They emphasized that wraparound supports are key to addressing intersectional barriers by taking care of the most urgent needs, such as housing, food security, or trauma and mental health. Once these needs are resolved, supports can then move on to training, job search, and workforce participation. Non-profit workers take a holistic view on supporting women in employment and entrepreneurship, such as transportation, food, housing, social support and community belonging, supporting conversations around gender roles and men involvement in childcare, infrastructure and safety in schools, and discrimination in access to services. Wraparound support was key to mitigating the impacts during the pandemic. They advocated for a recognition of the importance of wraparound supports and service coordination for policy and funding programs.

Non-profits shared how funding criteria were temporarily relaxed during the pandemic to enable them to pivot and respond to emerging needs. They point out that this flexibility continues to be critical to addressing the exacerbated and ongoing intersectional barriers for women in employment and entrepreneurship:

> "And what I heard is that organizations really appreciated the funders kind of throwing some of the rules out the window, so that they could maneuver really quickly to respond to the issues that were at their door, and not have to go through the channels to try to find more funding." — Community non-profit worker

Community non-profits as critical partner to program and service design. At our policy workshop with non-profit workers providing navigation support for women, participants highlighted the importance of government, industry, and the financial sector reaching out to those who are connected with communities. Recognizing and valuing community non-profits as critical intermediaries for mobilizing information and developing solutions is essential to addressing ongoing intersectional barriers to workforce participation and entrepreneurship.

Building bridges: Community learning partnerships to improve coordination and collaboration. Many solutions to overcoming barriers for women's workforce participation centred partnering, coordinating, and working as a collective across the social serving sector. While the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted efforts within the sector to improve coordination, participants shared their desire to prioritize connection and collaboration:

> "So [local non-profit offering training programs] has established a connection with the food bank. And thinking about the larger structures around food security and things like lunches for kids and, and that type of thing. Prior to the pandemic we had connected with the YMCAs collective kitchen. And we're starting to think of different

ways that we might be able to connect housing, and the student experience with organizations that are already doing some education, but also access to food and healthy food preparation. That was disrupted a little bit, but I think there's seeds that were planted to think about how might we build a network of support." — Community non-profit worker

"So looking at community learning partnerships, to find out more about what programs and services others are offerings, so we can do those referrals and connections, rather than trying to recreate or compete for funding in that same sector or area." — Community non-profit worker

Building bridges: Brokering partnerships with industry to enhance training, job matching, childcare access, and language training. To address intersectional impacts and barriers, community non-profits are ideally positioned to improve mutual understanding across sectors and enable industry and government to recognize the strength and opportunity diverse women represent for workplaces and a diverse and resilient economy. They shared their vision to build these relational foundations to grow partnerships and collaborations that will transform the systemic conditions for women. Ideas for partnerships ranged from training opportunities that include mentorship, to job matching, on-site childcare solutions, and workplace language training. For example, to support newcomer women's workforce participation, participants emphasized the need to build a diverse network of employer partners and create safe spaces to have conversations between employers and newcomers. They explained how through these interactions, both sides can get to know each other, their skills, expectations, and unique contributions newcomer women bring to different industries:

"So it's really applying that kind of relational practice where the employers actually know these women from day one, and they know them, and they love them, and they help them grow." — Community non-profit worker

However, building relationships takes time and staff capacity. Current project-based funding does not allow for organizations to invest in such important partnerships. Staff turn-over has increased since the pandemic and is a barrier to continuity of initiatives and relationships. Participants shared the need for a broker or liaison who can build mutual understanding, invest in relationship building, and act as an intermediary between women and workplaces to provide mentorship and troubleshooting support.

Fostering organizational resilience and staff wellness. Participants reflected on how to build resiliency within their organization so staff can take sick time and vacation without needing to attend to their work. They expressed that they need guidance and ideas for how to improve working conditions for their staff in light of demanding work and limited funding:

"We're struggling a lot because when our colleagues who are mothers need to be at home caring for children, you all know with COVID, one child after another gets sick, right? And so they've exhausted their time off. For a grassroot organization, we would like some guidance, how to look at solutions and leveraging maybe additional resources. Of course, hopefully, it doesn't impact the income of the colleague who's the caring mother, but also for the organization. With a colleague away for so long,

we actually needed relief, someone to step in and do the work." — Community non-profit worker

Some ideas and solutions that emerged from these discussions were:

- Training and briefing people to partially share positions so that one person can cover for another. This could be combined with mentorship, succession planning, and leadership opportunities for staff.

- Implementing core work time and flexible work time to accommodate care responsibilities.

- Downsizing organizational space and exploring best practices in hybrid work.

- Prioritizing organizational planning and clarity on mission and vision in the context of increasing needs for services.

- Providing access to counselling for staff. Engaging staff in a wellness audit that assesses staff trauma, burnout, and compassion fatigue.

Community non-profit workers also reflected on the relationship between a work culture that values overtime, overwork, and availability outside regular working hours with the increase of staff experiencing burnout and leaving the sector. They spoke about the need to re-think productivity and shift work culture, especially in frontline work that requires relationship building and supporting individuals in difficult circumstances. Non-profit staff felt that valuing care and empathy, wellness and work-life balance will benefit their productivity and the resilience of their organization:

> "And that doesn't have to just be diversity and inclusion, it's empathy. It's empathy. A coworker who's having a troubling time, or sometimes it's just you haven't slept, we seem to have lost that that empathetic nature within the workforce. And instead, it's you need to get this done. And if you're not getting it done, we'll find someone who's going to get it done. And it's creating a culture, […] building that empathy, that training needs to be part of the leadership skill training or leadership excellence that we're just not seeing happening right now." — Community non-profit worker

Re-thinking funding and grant design. Participants were clear that current funding systems need to shift away from competition and project-based funding calls to a coordinated long-term, wraparound funding model:

> "Now the way a lot of the funding is organized, or it's set up to be competitive and not to be collaborative. So, if they could change the way the funding is given, so that organizations can actually work together without being penalized for it, I think that would make a huge difference." — Community non-profit worker

Funding programs need to consider complex evolving realities where resources must adapt quickly to emerging needs. Participants called for better consideration of intersectional barriers in designing funding programs. This means built-in flexibility for eligible costs so community non-profits can respond to most urgent needs and enable women to move forward with their careers.

Participants discussed developing sponsorship models to mitigate application requirements, community networks for grant writing support, and designing grants to combine funding with learning and mentorship opportunities.

For detailed recommendations for strengthening community supports, see our policy brief, "*[Actions to Close the Employment Gender Gap in Alberta](#)*".

Concluding Thoughts

> "So those families that we did get to the supports, and we did get the action items to happen. I think sharing those stories, instead of it just happens and quietly goes away. And there's great ways to share those successes. And when the community hears about it, they latch on to that, it stays in their memory differently. And it does help broaden that spectrum of what people are aware of what they can reach out to, what they can access. And certainly, women respond much better when we share those successes with each other. It's definitely an empowerment versus feeling a roadblock in front of us. I have heard some really good stories today. And, and those are my takeaway." — Community non-profit worker

Over the course of this project, we were fortunate to hear from and build relationships with many change makers, advocates, and experts with a vision to transforming the environment around women so they can pursue their goals.

We witnessed the expertise, innovation, and energy within communities of women and the non-profits supporting them. We hope our findings can help shift the narrative from barriers to recognizing the strength and support that community can create. Policy design and implementation needs to value the community non-profit sector for the essential work they do as intermediaries with acute situational awareness and the relational capital to effectively respond in crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It is critical for governments to create the conditions in which the sector can collaborate, connect, showcase their impact on their terms, and have a voice and place in the design and implementation of solutions.

Community supports can transform the conditions in which women can pursue their goals, are valued for their work, competencies, innovative potential, and energy. Rather than centring barriers and accommodating needs, what we learned can inspire decision-makers across sectors to invest in the potential and opportunity that women bring to the economy and to leadership.

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