

Women in Canada and COVID-19

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on everyday life have already been extraordinary. From self-isolation and physical distancing to mass closures of non-essential stores and workplaces, and schools and childcare centres, our everyday lives have dramatically shifted. While many changes are necessary, there are different impacts on different people, in particular on women. Many underlying experiences of inequality women face are magnified in a time of crisis. The only way to truly ease the disproportionate effects on women is to ensure a GBA+ (gender-based analysis plus or feminist intersectional analysis) is a key part to all initiatives, not only during this pandemic but also as we recover from it.

Violence Against Women

Self-isolation may leave women in unsafe situations and at [increased risk](#) of domestic violence.

According to a [report on violence against women](#) we know that “the greatest risk of homicide for women is in their own homes”.

The federal government announced \$50M towards women’s shelters. This is an important and necessary funding increase. [Before the pandemic](#), funding to address violence against women and build shelters was already needed. When the pandemic subsides, sustained funding for anti-violence services will still be needed.

Women and Work

Women are on the frontlines of COVID-19 as they dominate the health care field and the retail sector. Those women are unable to self-isolate. According to a [2016 report](#), women are overrepresented in part-time, minimum wage and precarious work. Immigrant and racialized women are even more likely to be living with low income and are a large percentage of those working part-time or in other precarious situations. The gender wage gap persists for women generally, but for racialized women and specifically black women and Indigenous women, these gaps are even greater.

The government has announced \$2,000 a month under the new Canada Emergency Response Benefits. These payouts will begin rolling out this week but after four months, regular EI benefits will replace it at a maximum of 55 per cent of weekly earnings. That won’t last long for precarious workers with low wages and inadequate financial support forces many women to work despite immunocompromised health, anxiety or other stressors.

The federal government also announced an increase of the Child Care Benefit and some provinces are establishing free childcare for essential workers. These are positive and necessary actions, but gaps remain.

In Ontario for example, childcare for essential workers is being set up this week for children under 5, but what about for children who are over 5? With the closure of schools, if essential workers have school-aged children they also will require care. This is a time where governments need to truly consider and understand the diverse needs of women and our families.

Women, Childcare and Housework

Women are still the [main providers of unpaid housework and caregiving](#), even when they are engaged in paid work outside of the home. This is no doubt magnified in the current situation of self-isolation and with the closures of childcare facilities and schools.

Now for some women, work has moved home, and they are responsible for juggling two jobs, childcare and their paid work throughout the day. For some families there may be some help from a spouse but for many, especially single mothers, they must now juggle childcare and home schooling on top of their paid work, for low-income women this is often in very cramped circumstances.

Overcrowded, cramped and sub-standard living conditions

Many women and their families in Canada are forced to live in overcrowded and cramped conditions because adequate housing to accommodate their families is unaffordable or unavailable, this is particularly an issue for [Indigenous communities](#) where almost one fifth of Indigenous people live in crowded conditions. Self-isolation is a serious challenge if a family member becomes ill or has potential exposure to COVID-19 when there is little or no space within a household to self-isolate. Indigenous women and their communities face additional challenges during COVID-19 due to the on-going water crises. Following public health guidelines to wash hands frequently adds even more pressure on the communities with very limited water supplies. The risks to women and their communities in rural and remote areas are further exacerbated by the lack of healthcare infrastructure.

Moving Forward

Any future economic planning needs to take women's existing inequalities into consideration and avoid austerity measures. Governments have privatized [and cut public services](#) to save money and reduce deficits during and after periods of 'economic upheaval'. But these measures lead to low wages and increase precarious employment—which have a large impact on women generally, but more so for immigrant women, racialized women, single mothers, Indigenous women, and women with disabilities—women who are already marginalized in this neo-liberal, patriarchal, racist economic system.

This pandemic has shown us how we collectively rely on public social safety nets in a time of crisis. As governments put in public safety measures for addressing the pandemic in Canada, it highlights how important public and government services are now and will be for equitable economic recovery plans.

Universal public services like childcare and health care, stronger social safety nets like EI and paid sick leave, and funding for women's organizations providing front-line services are not only needed during a crisis but are vital for women's equality and advancement in Canada every day.