

# Panel urges a feminist approach to COVID-19 recovery plan in Newfoundland and Labrador <sup>[1]</sup>

Province gets failing grade on women's issues during pandemic

**Author:** Mercer, Juanita

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

ST. JOHN'S — In a Tuesday news conference, women's advocates gave the provincial government a failing grade for addressing women's issues during the COVID-19 pandemic. They urged the government to take a feminist approach to the COVID-19 recovery plan.

The virtual conference was titled, "Structural Inequality in Newfoundland and Labrador's COVID-19 Recovery Plan."

It included panelists Paula Sheppard Thibeau, co-chair of the Provincial Action Network on the Status of Women; Amanda Bittner, political science professor at Memorial University and director of the university's Gender and Politics Lab; and Laura Winters, executive director of the St. John's Status of Women Council (SJSOWC) and Women's Centre.

It was hosted by Caitlin Urquhart, a lawyer and chair of SJSOWC.

### Five urgent changes

The panel called for five immediate changes "to ensure any steps to reopen or rebuild the economy have equitable outcomes for all," said Winters.

These included:

- Put women in leadership roles, and ensure a gender-based analysis for the province's recovery plan.
- Create a centralized, provincewide phone line for victims of domestic violence, and ensure it can be accessed via text message.
- Create a task force on domestic violence that includes all political parties and creates specific, targeted outcomes.
- Ensure a living wage of \$18.85 per hour.
- Ensure affordable, quality childcare for everyone that includes publicly funded childcare spaces.
- Winters said the province should avoid austerity measures that will exacerbate the recession; ensure there are no cuts to social services — especially services for domestic violence; and diversify the economy with alternatives to extractive resource-based, male-dominated industries.

She said there's no need to reinvent the wheel because other jurisdictions, such as Hawaii, already have templates for a feminist recovery plan that can be tailored for this province.

The panel pointed out a wide range of issues faced by women in Newfoundland and Labrador, such as poor access to affordable childcare, inequity in pay and the brunt of domestic violence incidents.

"These problems are ongoing, but they have been laid bare as well as made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic," said Bittner.

She said the province managed to quickly set up a snitch line for people who are suspected of disobeying the public health orders, yet a dedicated phone line for domestic violence calls is more important, and nothing has been done to establish it.

Bittner said there should also be special funds and infrastructure allocated for high-risk groups, such as sex workers and elderly women.

### Failing grade

While the panel recognized there are allies within the provincial government working hard to address women's issues, they gave the province an overall failing grade in addressing gender-based issues during the pandemic.

Bittner said the province has daily updates, yet the public almost never hears about issues of gender. She said there is much more that needs to be done, and something like setting up a domestic violence phone line simply requires political will.

Winters said there have been some piecemeal solutions, but they don't address structural inequality.

Sheppard Thibeau said a gender-based analysis is needed from the get-go — it can't be an afterthought. She said many of these issues are not being recognized or talked about.

The panel will prepare a document with the key ideas from the discussion to send to the provincial government for consideration.

In the comments on the Facebook live event, Mount Scio MHA Sarah Stoodley wrote that she will ramp up her lobbying efforts.

"I want to do more," she wrote.

**Region:** Newfoundland <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** feminism <sup>[4]</sup>

policy <sup>[5]</sup>

Women <sup>[6]</sup>

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