

Decades of progress on gender equality in the workplace at risk of vanishing^[1]

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We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create a path to prosperity for all Canadians. It's why 62 female leaders from across Canada came together in April, as volunteers, to create a new national non-profit organization called The Prosperity Project.

We began working on a range of key initiatives to help mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on Canadian women who are being disproportionately affected.

We anticipated the triple threat: job losses, domestic violence, and the increased burden of home-schooling, child care and elder care. We are investing in research on the various drivers of prosperity and developing programs to maintain women's successful participation in the economy. Funding is coming only from our members. Ironically, there has been no response from government yet.

Five months into the pandemic, the warning lights for female participation in the workplace are flashing furiously as progress made toward gender equality over the past 60 years is at risk of vanishing. According to a new Royal Bank of Canada study, women's labour force participation is at its lowest level in three decades. As the economy recovers, women are returning to work at a slower pace than men and are more likely to fall out of the work force over time.

The good news is, if we act now, we can help the economic recovery happen faster. A 2017 study reported that advancing women's equality in Canada has the potential to add \$150-billion in incremental GDP growth by 2026.

Gender equality and the path to prosperity must focus largely on addressing the issues faced by a large majority of women. This means acknowledging the distinct needs of all women, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis, as well as women of colour. The problems facing marginalized women were bad before COVID-19; now they are unbearable.

To help alleviate this precarious trend, we call upon our federal and provincial governments to be bold and all-encompassing in their leadership.

- Keep our children in school when reasonably possible

We applaud provincial governments for announcing schools will open. It appears the benefits outweigh the enormous costs of keeping children out of school. As long as elementary schools remained closed, more women would have been unable to return to work, anxiety levels would skyrocket as we stayed indoors, and the long-term effects of the lack of education and social interaction for children would likely escalate. While safety must be top of mind, studies show very low transmission rates in jurisdictions where schools have reopened.

- Create an affordable national child care program

Unlike most advanced industrialized countries, Canada does not have a national child care program. We can learn from Quebec, where a family policy introduced in 1997 has increased Quebec's female labour force to 81 per cent in 2016, compared to 75 per cent in Ontario. Here again, the benefits to women and families will far outweigh the costs.

- Regulate protection of front-line workers

According to provincial workers' compensation boards, 13,000-plus health care workers have filed workplace injury claims related to COVID-19. As of July 3, women in Ontario accounted for 71 per cent of overall COVID-19-related claims and 85 per cent of claims from the health care industry. This underscores governments' failure to value and protect front-line health care employees, particularly racialized and newcomer women who toil in front-line and often minimum-wage jobs.

Governments must tackle the broad social issues, but Corporate Canada must also take deliberate action to lead even more inclusively.

- Set female representation work force targets

We call upon employers to set a target to achieve the pre-COVID-19 level of female representation across the entire work force and

include this in management performance evaluations. Measuring and rewarding top executives for meeting this target will discontinue HR policies and practices that do not mitigate gender bias, and help maintain hard-won gains in gender diversity. What gets measured gets done.

- Businesses must apply a gender lens to return-to-premises plans

Now more than ever, flexible work arrangements must be reconsidered and updated. There are no reasons why more child care spaces cannot be created in our workplaces; it is already proven that this helps keep women in the work force. Gender bias cannot be allowed to creep into conversations about who is invited back into the workplace versus who continues to work remotely. If female representation in corporate headquarters drops precipitously, it is even more likely decisions affecting employees on the front lines will be gender-biased.

- Deepen and broaden the talent pool through skills development

Corporate leaders have long believed that merit and diversity are mutually exclusive. Not surprisingly, Canadians of colour are less likely to believe employees are treated equally in terms of performance, promotions and compensation regardless of racial background. Since two-thirds of our population growth comes from immigrants, increasing racial diversity means the “minority” – about 22 per cent of Canadians identify as racialized minorities – will become the majority in Canada in 20 years. Organizations that focus on this expanding talent pool will be building the work force of the future.

When women succeed, we all prosper. Failure to act now will have devastating and irreparable consequences for Canada’s economic future.

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