

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women: Report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women ^[1]

Source: House of Commons of Canada

Format: Report

Publication Date: 1 Mar 2021

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Excerpted from summary

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been profound and far-reaching. Beyond endangering the health of Canadians, the pandemic has worsened inequalities among groups of people. Women, girls and gender-diverse people have faced unique challenges during the pandemic.

During its hearings held in July, October and November 2020, the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women (the Committee) received testimony and written submissions from diverse witnesses. Witnesses brought expertise in the areas of women's rights and equality; education; paid and unpaid caregiving; senior's rights and wellbeing; gender-based violence; human trafficking; and women's participation in the labour force and in specific sectors. The Committee also heard from the Honourable Maryam Monsef, Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Rural Economic Development, and the Honourable Carla Qualtrough, Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Disability Inclusion.

Witnesses provided an overview of gender-based concerns in the context of COVID-19. Three main themes emerged from the testimony: women's health and wellbeing; women's work and economic security; and women's physical safety and security.

With respect to women's health and wellbeing, witnesses explained that women tend to be overrepresented in several frontline workforces. For example, more women than men work in the care, education and retail sectors. These women on the frontlines face an elevated risk of contracting COVID-19. Women also take on a disproportionate share of unpaid care responsibilities, which may also increase this risk. Also, competing demands from domestic responsibilities, childcare and online schooling, and paid employment, have had negative impacts on women's mental health. Certain groups of women, including women living in long-term care facilities and women living with disabilities, have required additional care supports during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Committee heard that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a drastic reduction in women's labour force participation. When schools and daycares closed, many families needed to provide more childcare and domestic labour than usual. Women took on most of this unpaid labour. For this reason and others, more women than men left the paid workforce during the first wave of the pandemic. Also, fewer women than men have returned to paid work since the first wave. Women who own businesses, work in long-term care facilities or perform consensual sex work have faced unique financial hardships. Many women now face a greater risk of poverty. Witnesses proposed strategies to decrease unpaid care work for women, enable more women to join the paid workforce and increase women's economic security.

For some women, public health guidelines about physical distancing have been dangerous. For example, some women experiencing domestic violence have had to stay at home with their abusers. This situation has made it difficult to access domestic violence-related services. In addition, services such as shelters and transition houses for women have been accepting fewer women as a result of public health guidelines. Finally, the Committee heard that human trafficking has not disappeared during the COVID-19 pandemic. Witnesses provided different perspectives on the levels of human trafficking in Canada. Witnesses agreed that supports and services for survivors of human trafficking are essential.

Witnesses provided some suggestions related to the federal government's emergency response to COVID-19. The Canada Emergency Response Benefit, the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy, the Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance and the Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy, as well as the Canada Emergency Business Account were discussed.

The Committee recommends that the Government of Canada take various actions to assist women, girls and gender-diverse people during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Many recommendations relate to improving women's health and labour force participation. Some recommendations focus specifically on women's paid and unpaid care work. The Committee also recommends interventions to help reduce trafficking and violence against women.

INTRODUCTION

The NDP is appreciative to the Committee members, staff, analysts, and the witnesses who participated in this study of the Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women.

This pandemic has hurt many Canadians, this is especially true for the most vulnerable in our country. It is incumbent on us as Members of Parliament to make sure people don't fall between the cracks; to make sure government programs address the realities and needs of many diverse communities. Women are disproportionately affected by every economic downturn or public health crisis and of course, COVID-19 has impacted women, but additionally women from racialized groups, newcomer communities, Indigenous women, and those with disabilities are even more marginalized.

The government continuously rejected New Democrats' calls to make the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) universal, however because support programs are not universal, those who are more at-risk are the ones who are least supported. Sadly, the government's targets will continue to exclude the most vulnerable in our society and continue to leave many women behind.

CHILD CARE

Child care experts, economists, business owners and many parents agree, Canada's economic recovery is dependent upon an affordable, quality, universal child care system. The vast majority of witnesses during this study agreed that,

"Child care can indeed play a threefold role in recovery. Beyond simply facilitating women's return to work and indeed being a source of employment, the decision to ensure that childcare is affordable, and that high-quality early learning is accessible to all families is going to maximize the future of the next generation of Canadian children... That would lower public spending and increase revenues for governments and society. It pays for itself in the short term and in the long term" (Ms. Armine Yalnizyan - Economist and Atkinson Fellow on the Future of Workers).

As businesses and the economy re-open, it is essential that child care providers get the financial support they need in order to provide child care services in safe conditions for children. It is crucial that we do everything in our power to keep educators and child care workers safe and healthy. This requires reduced capacity at care centre facilities and enhanced staff to child ratios.

For far too long, under-investment by successive Liberal and Conservative governments has failed to ensure working Canadians can get access to child care. Child care is the second biggest expense for families after housing. Working families shouldn't have to choose between going to work and taking care of their children. Parents need quality, affordable childcare.

While this report does recognize the need for investments in child care it doesn't acknowledge that the program needs to be universal in order for it to be accessible. Liberals and Conservatives continue to push for means tested programs that will leave women and families behind and let people fall between the cracks.

NDP Recommendation 1:

That the Government of Canada implement measures that will create a national, universal, affordable child care system by:

- Immediately investing \$2.5 billion into child care to recover the spaces lost because of the pandemic
- Investing an additional \$10 billion over four years into child care
- Working with the provinces, territories, and Indigenous governments to establish a national, universal, affordable early learning child care system.
- Enshrining this commitment to quality, affordable publicly funded child care into law, and set out the principles, conditions, and requirements for federal transfer payments to provinces (like the Canada Health Act) with a right for Quebec to opt out with compensation.
- To commit \$10 million right away to an Affordable Child Care Action Fund and create a national childcare secretariat.

SEX WORK

The Liberal governments definition of work is based on the idea that sex work isn't work. They created support programs that continue to overlook people who don't fit their definition of work. While the Employment Insurance program and other credit measures were expanded, the reality remains that these programs have traditionally and continues to overlook sex workers.

With the government financial supports not applicable to sex workers, this means giving up any income that they might have. That is why New Democrats called for a universal and less administratively complicated approach to financial support during the crisis.

NDP Recommendation 2:

That the Government of Canada implement measures to protect the rights and reduce stigmatization of sex workers, such as:

- conducting a review of the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act, ensuring that sex workers are consulted in this review process;
- examining measures to decriminalize sex work;
- providing funding for peer-led community support and referral services for sex workers; and
- ensuring that sex workers are eligible for federal income and emergency supports when they cannot generate an income including during a public health crisis.

UNPAID WORK

New Democrats believe that the federal government has an important role to play in making work better, fairer, and more secure for everyone. Many women take on the role of caregiver to a loved one or rely on the caregiving of family members. Women lost their jobs at approximately twice the rate of men in the first month of the pandemic, often having to take on more unpaid care work. Even with the economy opening back up in parts of Canada, many women still can't return to work because of these care needs. Women accounted for only 29% of job recoveries.

NDP Recommendation 3:

That the Government of Canada, with the goal of recognizing the value of unpaid caregiving work, including caring for spouses, children, grandchildren, and seniors, ensure that current federal supports and tax credits for caregivers meet the needs of individuals providing this unpaid care and explore initiatives to improve recognition and compensation for individuals performing unpaid care work.

In order to help make life a little more affordable for caregivers, who are overwhelmingly women, the government of Canada must make the Canada Caregiver Tax Credit refundable. This will provide thousands of dollars to the most low-income caregivers, many of whom have given up work completely to care for a loved one.

UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

As we emerge from lockdown, millions of Canadians will not have jobs to which they can return; many will not see their incomes recover to what they were before. Like previous recessions, there will be fewer middle-class jobs and more low-pay jobs, and the end of CERB, and the federal government clawback of these benefits will leave millions of Canadians worse off.

New Democrats are happy that this report calls on the Government of Canada, with the goal of eliminating income insecurity and financially empowering women, to consider replacing existing emergency benefits with a permanent universal basic income program.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the New Democratic Party of Canada.

Region: Canada ^[4]

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