
THINK WOMEN

Through the Eyes of Non-Profit Organizations: How the Pandemic has Affected Women Canada-Wide.

MARCH-APRIL 2022



PRODUCED BY

THE WOMEN'S ECONOMIC COUNCIL
FOR THE THINK WOMEN PROJECT

WRITTEN BY

SARAH ABDELSHAMY
SERAH GHEZALI
ROMINA LANDAURE
ESTHER GERMAIN



KEYWORDS:

Policy, women and gender, equity, nonprofit organization, equity-seeking groups, intersectionality, COVID-19, economy

This report highlights key concerns, challenges and practices shared by various non-profit organizations that are women and equity focused. The discussion targets the impact of the pandemic on women's economic securities and emerging issues, trends, and recommendations in response to the crisis.



WHAT IS THINK WOMEN?

COVID-19 has amplified the existing economic vulnerabilities that women face while giving rise to the rate of unemployment and continuing the gender wage gap. The need for a feminist economy has never been more apparent than now. [Think Women: Peer Network for a Feminist Economy](#) supports a feminist response and recovery from the current impacts of COVID-19. Our goal is to address systemic barriers by advancing inclusive policies and practices, encouraging more equitable and effective sharing of resources, increasing networks and collaboration to accelerate systemic change, and support the positive distribution of authority, voices, and decision-making power to foster women's equality.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS IDENTIFIED



THE LOSS OF COMMUNITY CONNECTION

NEWCOMER WOMEN, UNEMPLOYED WOMEN, AND OTHER VULNERABLE WOMEN HAVE EXPERIENCED A LOSS OF COMMUNITY WHICH ONLY EXACERBATES THEIR VULNERABILITIES



RESTRICTIONS IN SERVICES AND SUPPORT

ORGANIZATIONS HAVE EXPERIENCED A SIGNIFICANT LOSS IN SERVICES PROVIDED IN PERSON AND THE DIGITAL SERVICES CANNOT OPERATE AT FULL CAPACITY.



LANGUAGE BARRIERS AND DIGITAL LITERACY

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR TARGET POPULATION HAS BEEN IMPACTED BY THE LACK OF OR RESTRICTED ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY COMBINED WITH LANGUAGE BARRIERS.



THE ISOLATION OF VULNERABLE WOMEN

PHYSICAL ISOLATION HAS MADE IT HARDER FOR WOMEN TO ACCESS THE SERVICES THEY NEED AND FOR STAFF TO PROPERLY DELIVER THEIR SERVICES.



MENTAL HEALTH

WOMEN HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY DISCOURAGED DUE TO JOB OR ECONOMIC INSECURITY AND THE RISING DEMANDS OF DOMESTIC OR CARE WORK.

SOLUTIONS AND BEST PRACTICES IDENTIFIED



ADOPTING INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES TO MEET NEW DEMANDS

ORGANIZATIONS HAVE DEVELOPED UNIQUE AND INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES TO REACH THEIR DEMOGRAPHIC WITHOUT HAVING TO RELY ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS THAT ARE OFTEN INACCESSIBLE TO VULNERABLE WOMEN.



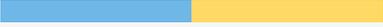
INPUT IN FUNDER AND GOVERNMENTAL SURVEYS

THE NEED FOR ACCURATE REPRESENTATION IN FEDERAL AND PROVINCIAL APPRAISALS IS KEY TO ENSURING THAT OUR CONCERNS ARE IMPLEMENTED IN ANY ECONOMIC RELIEF PLAN



INTRA- AND CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

IT IS IMPORTANT FOR NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS TO BUILD A COLLABORATIVE NETWORK TO BETTER SERVE THEIR CONSTITUENTS.



INTRODUCTION:

The non-profit sector's narrative

On February 23rd and 24th, the Women's Economic Council facilitated two national meetings – in French and in English – with non-profit organizations across the country that are equity or women focused. The main goal of the meeting was to open a national dialogue regarding the establishment of a feminist community-economic recovery. We wanted to create a shared space where nonprofit organizations can disclose structural and daily challenges that have been aggravated by the pandemic, and share best practices to drive a long-term strategy that addresses the impact of COVID on women from equity-seeking groups and the organizations that serve them.

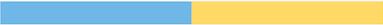
The national meetings are just one part of a series of events that we want to develop in order to facilitate our goals for the **Think Women** project. The meetings took place virtually to include as many organizations Canada-wide as possible. Led by principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion, we felt it was important to hold the meeting in French and in English.

- During the French-speaking meeting, we welcomed organizations from Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador whose mandates range from popular-education based services, economic and gender-based advocacy, violence prevention, and other community-based services that advance the role of women in society.
- During the English-speaking meeting, we welcomed organizations from Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, Alberta, and British Columbia. The organizations varied from providing professional and skill-based programs, support to victims of domestic abuse, providing entrepreneurial mentorship, and other community-economic development services.

The diversity in mandates and services made the dialogue even richer and allowed different kinds of conversation to connect with one another and learn from each other.

This meeting highlighted the value of collaboration and networking among nonprofits and the need to increase innovation in order to address new challenges. We've identified both of these as a tool for organizations to strategically implement tactical actions to address their own challenges. The phrase "Think Global, Act Local" was, in a sense, actualized.

This report summarizes the dialogue we've facilitated between non-profit organizations and presents the challenges that women face in the nonprofit sector. We've identified various impacts that affect both the women who work in the nonprofit sector and the women who seek out services from nonprofits. Some of the conclusions we've drawn from the meetings verify preliminary findings outlined in the **Introduction section** about the gender disparity that has been aggravated by the pandemic, primarily as disproportionately affecting women that are already vulnerable to economic risk.



CONTEXT:

COVID-19 and Canadian Economies

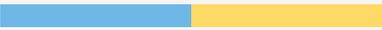
Canadian economic structures are yet to be fully equitable. In fact, [the UN's Human Rights Committee published a report in 2015](#) documenting the growing concern over the gender pay gap. This is more pronounced in provinces such as Alberta and Nova Scotia and has disproportionately affected low-income women, particularly minority and Indigenous women. They also identified a distinct lack of representation of women in leadership positions both in the public and private sectors. The pay gap is intertwined with other economic-related gender gaps, such as unpaid care and domestic work, disproportionate difficulty for newcomer women to achieve economic independence, among others. These disparities, which have long persisted in the Canadian economy, have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Beyond the epidemiological concerns of the pandemic, it has also triggered a severe economic fallout that has put a significant strain on gender equality across the nation. Women in Canada have been leaving the workforce at an alarming rate. [The number of Canadian women who left the workforce during this pandemic reached nearly half a million – of which more than 200,000 are now categorized under long-term unemployment.](#) This is likely due to the fact that the burden of care and domestic work – the demand of which has increased tenfold due to the pandemic – has disproportionately fallen on women. Indeed, women are not only expected to sacrifice their professional employment to take up domestic care work, they are also overrepresented in sectors that are inherently affected by the pandemic.

“Women are among the hardest hit by the pandemic. Social and economic barriers have been amplified for racialized women, Indigenous women, migrant women, women with low-income, single mothers, LGBTQ2I+ women and women with disabilities or mental health issues. The current situation has put women at greater risk of job loss, poverty, food insecurity, loss of housing and domestic violence.”

[–CANADIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION. APRIL 2020](#)

Of course, in addition to these findings, we also know that the intersection of identities must also be taken into account. The gendered implications of the economic vulnerabilities intensified by the pandemic are especially seen in women and non-binary peoples who also experience discrimination based on economic status, race, culture, language, among other factors. Across all studies, it is unanimously clear that there is an urgent need to implement an economic recovery plan that is both feminist and intersectional.



CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

Throughout both national meetings, we've been able to successfully identify four (4) challenges that most – if not all – organizations have either faced or are currently facing as listed below.

1. LOSS OFF COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Communities are an important source of social connection and belonging for individuals; this is even more evident for newcomer women, unemployed women, and individuals in equity-seeking groups. The non-profit organizations who participated in the national meetings service women and non-binary people from equity-seeking groups which makes community an already important and crucial point to consider. However, all the organizations communicated that one of the main ways they felt impacted by the pandemic was in the loss of community connection. This is true for both the staff at the non-profits as well as the women who access the services. It's difficult for general morale to be consistent or high when you are effectively working alone or in isolation.

In parallel, it is difficult to access services that may help you when you are physically isolated from the communities that offer those services. For instance, one of the organizations that serve battered women indicated that the lockdown restrictions have made it harder for women experiencing domestic or gendered violence to physically leave their homes to access help. This was made clear to them as many of their clients that are primarily children and women have been experiencing more severe trauma for longer periods of time. The restrictions have also made it more acceptable for people to be isolated indoors for long periods of time which makes it difficult for others who may have been part of their social circle to identify the tell-tale signs of abuse or domestic violence. In other words, physical isolation makes vulnerable women even more vulnerable.

2. DIGITAL ACCESS AND LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Effective communication between an organization and their target population is necessary for a high success rate. This is always a challenge, even pre-COVID-19, as most of the nonprofit organizations that are women or equity focused often interact with newcomer women. Thus, language barrier is always an important component for an organization to take into account. However, when coupled with digital illiteracy – which is common among seniors and individuals with low-income who may not have had access to advanced technological usage – this becomes an even bigger challenge to overcome.

The demographic that some nonprofits service and work with may not be digitally literate and it is particularly difficult to train or teach someone to digitally navigate the virtual world when you are separated with a screen. The screen already adds a layer of difficulty in terms of connecting with someone let alone in terms of teaching and effectively communicating with someone whose native language may not be English or French.

A few organizations brought up the concerning fact that a lack of, or shortage of, access to technology in the home has become an important factor to consider. With increasingly more people working from home and with children studying from home, women may not have the time, skills, or even access to the technology necessary to acquire services they would benefit from.

3. RESTRICTIONS IN SERVICES AND SUPPORT

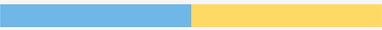
The second common challenge we've identified amongst an overwhelming majority of nonprofit organizations was the sudden restrictions on the services they can provide. Without a doubt, the pandemic has restricted services which had previously been exclusively available in-person and caused a significant loss in services provided by nonprofits and a decrease in their staff numbers.

Clearly, not all services can be offered virtually and even though some of these services were able to be adjusted to the virtual world, the services do not operate at full capacity. For example, organizations that have pivoted their help services for victims of domestic or gendered abuse changed the scope of their services and offered them online. However, the physical isolation of women facing violence has made it easier for abusers to coercively control and closely monitor access to technology - effectively making it a very dangerous feat for vulnerable women to access the services that would help them.

One organization that is primarily focused on providing business advisory services for women entrepreneurs noted that they are now mostly providing counseling services. In this case, a shift in their mandate was informally required to meet the needs and concerns of their stakeholders and the target population they serve.

4. MENTAL HEALTH

All the organizations we've met with have identified the increase in mental health issues as a challenge. In the demographic they serve, they've noted that women are generally discouraged as they are predominantly the ones who had to quit their jobs for domestic upkeep. Additionally, women are disproportionately represented in essential service roles that don't allow them to work from home. Another component they've noted is that many women have had to pivot to self-employment which can often be precarious or unreliable. Overall, however, they have all noted that the requirements to isolate has taken a significant toll on families. The impacts of close contacts with the children meant that whole families had to isolate which had a huge impact on the ability to work for single moms.



BEST PRACTICES AND RESPONSES

These challenges and barriers that women and the demographic that non-profit organizations serve have significantly impacted the ways in which nonprofits support them. Non-profit organizations have had to restructure their approaches and strategies to account for the additional barriers that our demographic faces as a result of the pandemic.

In this section, we highlight some of the ways in which organizations can adapt to the needs of these women.

1. ADOPTING INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES TO MEET NEW DEMANDS

The conversations revealed some interesting insights—most notably that nonprofits are under increased pressure to deliver on their missions in creative ways. Technology was highlighted as one of the tools that is pushing many nonprofits to adapt their outreach tactics, review their communications strategies, and face increasing cybersecurity challenges. Non-profit organizations that serve equity-seeking groups sensed an urgency to adapt their outreach and promotional strategies to continue meeting the needs of their stakeholders.

Many organizations have had to shift the platforms on which they broadcast their services and promotions mainly due to the fact that the demographics they service live in vulnerable circumstances. Indeed, vulnerable communities do not visit the same mainstream platforms and hubs, and many of them don't even have access to the internet. Thus, our outreach strategies must be completely revised. One organization in particular shared that after a dry spell where they were not reaching the demographic they wanted to reach; they created ads on local buses. This made their services more visible to the women who are more likely to benefit from them.

Another organization noted that handing out flyers and infographics about the services they provide around community centers, religious centers, and other local centers was an initiative that they are planning on implementing. A different option that we identified to help the women they service access their services online was by creating original training in videos with subtitles in different languages. Indeed, creating a blended learning model – consisting of tutorials, toolkits, roadmaps – increases the accessibility of services for diverse groups.

Word-of-mouth promotion has great value and legitimacy, especially when the target community are from equity-seeking groups and may experience a cultural or internal reluctance to seek these services. In those cases, if an individual is already accessing a mentorship program in an organization in British Columbia and this organization refers them to another organization based in British Columbia that specializes in entrepreneurial advising, they are more likely to seek out the latter organization.

2. INPUT IN FUNDER AND GOVERNMENTAL SURVEYS

Accurate representation in surveys, reports, and appraisals on a federal and provincial level is key in being able to formulate an economic recovery plan that is both feminist and intersectional. One organization highlighted the importance of making sure that our concerns are accurately represented in federal and provincial censuses to properly reflect the urgency of women's needs. Without a documented analysis of the gendered ways in which the pandemic has affected women and non-binary people from equity-seeking groups, it would be impossible to get an accurate appraisal of how to move forward.

3. INTRA- AND CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

The scale of issues that nonprofits tackle—poverty, racial justice, gendered violence, among others—feel overwhelming for any one organization. While these organizations have different goals in mind when they take on their projects, we all share the common goal of eventually transforming our existing systems for the better rather than just addressing symptoms. Nonprofit collaboration has been an increasingly important social change tool for addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession. This was the most common best practice indicated among respondents, i.e. the importance of expanding an organization's collaborative network to better serve its constituents. This could be done in spaces like the Think Women Network where like-minded organizations can openly discuss their concerns for the future of women's equity, share their local initiatives, knowledge and tools and collaborate intra and across their sector .

As government funding declines and the competition for philanthropic resources increases, it becomes more difficult to find enough capacity to continue providing services. One proposal that was brought up by an organization was to share and lend limited resources with other organizations, to leverage their funding. For instance, there are many buildings that offer office spaces that could be shared with other organizations. This would reduce the financial burden of operating from within a physical office, remedy the social isolation that many of the staff members suffer from; and increase the communication and collaboration between like-minded organizations. The ultimate goal for intra and cross-sector collaboration is to help nonprofits sustain and grow their impact **beyond** their individual organizations.

CONCLUSION

TOWARDS A BETTER, MORE EQUITABLE ECONOMY



Our economies haven't been equitable for decades and all the data points to a gender and racial gap. The economic disparities that have long marked our structures disproportionately affect women, non-binary people, racialized women, and other equity-seeking groups. These disparities have been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic which has created economic insecurity that women have bore the brunt of. As such, our economic recovery plans should take these intersections into account and adopt an intersectional approach.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS:

We've identified a total of four challenges and barriers that nonprofits face on a structural and daily basis:

(1) the loss of community connection experienced by both the staff within nonprofits and the women who access their services. Isolation has triggered an aggressive cycle that at once impedes on the organizations' ability to advertise their services while also making it immensely difficult for the women in need to benefit from the available support and services.

(2) Digital access and literacy has significantly hindered effective communication between an organization and their target population. Language barriers have always existed in the non-profit sectors but, coupled with the lack of or limited access to technology, these barriers have become hurdles.

(3) Restrictions in services and support specifically as a consequence of the pandemic as not all services can be offered virtually and those that can do not operate at full capacity. Some organizations have also shifted their services from consultative-based ones to counseling-based ones.

(4) Mental health is an ever-increasing challenge as organizations have noted that the demographic they serve have become more discouraged and burnt out given the high burdens of domestic care.

BEST PRACTICES AND SOLUTIONS:

Beyond the challenges, we were also focused on providing and sharing best practices and responses of which we've identified three.

(1) Adopting innovative strategies to meet new demands. The pressure to continue meeting the needs and demands of stakeholders while still servicing our target populations that have for the most part become more vulnerable meant that we had to develop new and innovative strategies. Organizations shared some of their strategies such as the importance of promoting their services in spaces that are more public and easily accessible; the importance of creating tutorials, toolkits and roadmaps that would help communities benefit from our virtual and hybrid learning models; and finally the value of word-of-mouth promotion which would also strengthen connections between organizations.

We also identified the value of our **(2) Input in funder and governmental surveys.** There was an important emphasis on having accurate representation in federal, provincial, and territorial reports and appraisals as we recognize that an economic recovery plan can only be feminist and intersectional if our concerns reflect the need for it.

Finally, we identified the need for **(3) intra- and cross-sector collaboration.** While organizations all have their own unique mandates and services, we all share one common goal of bettering our economic structures and eliminating the wide gaps which often make vulnerable communities more vulnerable. We identified the need and value of collaboration with each other and across the sector. Sharing resources, developing collaborative strategies, and participating in networks such as **Think Women** are all valuable ways to share and expand our best practices.

In conclusion, the nonprofit sector has been significantly impacted by the pandemic and we believe in the power of communication, collaboration, and networking. We still have a long way to go if we want to achieve our goal of developing and implementing a feminist economic recovery plan. The lack of data and documentation has been a significant hurdle in the non-profit; we hope that this report addresses these gaps. We also hope that this report could be shared across the non-profit sector as well contribute to the burgeoning field of COVID-19 and Canadian economies.