

REBUILDING WITH EQUITY

Economic recovery through
an intersectional gender lens

BC Federation of Labour Submission
to the Economic Recovery Taskforce

June 2020

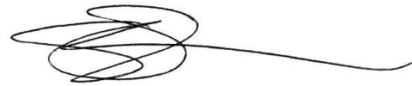


Authority

This document is respectfully submitted on behalf of the Executive Officers of the BC Federation of Labour and represents the views of more than 500,000 affiliated members across the province of British Columbia.



Laird Cronk
President



Sussanne Skidmore
Secretary-Treasurer

Introduction: Gender and the impact of COVID-19

As British Columbia gradually emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, it's with a newfound and sobering understanding of the depth of gendered inequality in our province. And the pandemic has done more than just highlight these inequities; its economic impact has often magnified divisions of wealth, privilege and power.¹

Here are just a few examples:

- As schools and child-care centres closed their doors, and parents stopped working outside the home, the domestic workload has increased dramatically — including everything from homeschooling to preparing additional meals. Yet that burden landed unequally; multiple studies have shown that women have taken up by far the majority of that extra work. That situation is further intensified for single parents.²
- In many lines of front-line work, women (often racialized women) predominate — often in low-paid positions with less job security, authority and less agency in self-advocating for workplace safety. This is true of long-term care, where the virus has been its most devastating, health care grocery store workers, teachers and early childcare educators.³
- The Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) has been a welcome lifeline for many. But a significant number of women aren't able to access it, including sex workers and those in the so-called "grey economy." As well, it looks increasingly likely that as the economy restarts, CERB will be supplanted by EI's return. And since EI is an income-based program, it reflects and reinforces the gender pay gap, which has been stalled for several years at a point where women have to work an average of 26% more to receive the same pay as men. The impact is even greater with groups such as women of colour and other equity-seeking groups. Indigenous women, for example, face a 35% gap, while for women with disabilities the figure is 46%.⁴

There are many more impacts we know about — and countless more still that we don't. One more gap exposed by this pandemic is one of knowledge: We don't have the information and analysis we need to fully understand how the economy affects women and other equity groups in normal times, let alone during a crisis of this size and nature. And that information is badly needed to inform our efforts at ensuring a just, equitable and enduring economic recovery.

In 2008, in the wake a severe global recession, many governments adopted recovery plans that emphasized on large and unconditional bailouts for corporations; they failed to focus on people and failed to recognize existing social and economic inequities. The result was that many who needed help the most were left behind in a "recovery" that mostly benefited the wealthiest.

¹ In this submission, we use "equity groups" to mean communities and categories of people who are marginalized or who face barriers to full participation by policy that doesn't include them and their needs. They include, among others, women, Indigenous people, Black people and people of colour, people living with disabilities, and trans and non-binary people and other LGBTQ2IS+ community members.

² Gonalons-Pons

³ CUPE

⁴ Canadian Women's Foundation [2]

This time, we need to get it right. An intersectional gender lens can allow us to see both the impact of the pandemic and the most effective, most equitable responses to it with far greater clarity. This submission will explore some of the most important gendered impacts of the pandemic and its economic fallout. And we'll offer recommendations for making sure the government's response is truly equitable.

We've organized our analysis and recommendations into three major categories:

- **Safety**
- **Economic security**
- **Leadership**

Gendered impacts of COVID-19

Women's Safety: Effects of COVID-19 on gender-based violence

Experience has confirmed early fears that an extended period of stay-at-home distancing would lead to a rise in gender-based violence. Community organizations report a surge in calls since the shutdown began.

Compounding the issue is the increase in isolation experienced by women, trans and non-binary people, people with disabilities, Indigenous community members on and off reserve, LGBTQ2IS community members, seniors and elders and racialized community members, particularly when a language barrier or precarious immigration status (including the often-tenuous position of temporary foreign workers) is a factor.

Our community partners report that a growing number of women are turning to sex work after being laid off. They, along with those already working in the sector, have had to contend with hotel closures by resorting to isolated, unsanitary and unsafe locations including back alleys and vehicles. Violence is a much greater danger in those circumstances, along with the risks that come with severely unhygienic conditions.

The increase in violence has revealed gaps in our community's ability to respond. Those gaps are especially critical, for example, when people with disabilities experience intimate-partner violence; first responders, service providers, care providers and law enforcement often lack protocols for wraparound services, to ensure people with disabilities receive the particular support they need in a crisis. As well, many women's support organizations that had their federal funding cut during the Harper years still haven't recovered and are finding it difficult to meet the surge in demand and the strain on their resources. This, at a time when increasing funding to women's shelters is one of the United Nations' guidelines for addressing gender-based violence during COVID-19.

And for many women, the workplace offers no refuge from violence. Frontline workers in sectors like health care and community and social services are subject to on-the-job violence even in normal times. Acts of violence are the second most prevalent form of injury for workers in long term care in BC; they represent sixteen percent of all injuries, or 2,367 reported cases, from 2014 to 2019. During the stress of this pandemic, the danger posed by workplace violence has escalated.

Women's Economic Security: Removing barriers to the full and equal participation of women in the economy

The economic damage of the pandemic has hit women especially hard. Since March, unemployment among BC women aged 25 and up has risen from 6.6% to 9.9% — with employment dropping by 84,600.⁵

This threatens to erode gains in recent years in women's participation in the workforce. This is a particular risk if quality, affordable childcare options are not readily available as economic sectors reopen. And even those services will not help some of the women who need it the most, such as parents without immigration status.

Meanwhile, the pay gap we described in the introduction remains a daunting reality. Its persistence suggests that closing it once and for all will require action on several fronts, from equal pay legislation to removing barriers to forming a union.

It doesn't help that women, young workers and equity- groups are overrepresented in precarious and gig work. In 2018, women were twice as likely to work part-time as men (26% of employed women compared to 13% of men), and one in four women aged 25 to 54 who work part-time cite childcare as a primary reason — three times the proportion of men who do.⁶

Another harsh reality for women participating in the economy is workplace health and safety. Many women feel unsafe in the workplace, whether from violence, illness or accidental injury. That's even more true in the COVID-19 era. Of the 15 job classifications with the highest Physical Proximity Index scores — which we can take as a measure of the risk of contracting COVID-19 as our economy re-opens — all but three have higher proportions of women workers than men.⁷ For example, women account for more than 90% of nurses, 75% of respiratory therapists and 90% of personal support workers.

Greater workforce participation by women hinges on a safe, healthy workplace, and that includes robust inspection and enforcement of health and safety laws and regulations.

Women in Leadership: Ensuring women have a voice at every table where economic recovery is on the agenda

One of the biggest reasons that past economic “recoveries” have failed women so badly is also one of the simplest: Women have had little voice in shaping them.

As we begin reopening the provincial economy, we are determined that BC will not repeat that mistake. As a disproportionately affected group, women, trans and non-binary people must be key stakeholders. That means holding space for them to have a full voice in any discussion of economic recovery, to ensure the plans that result will reflect their experience and their needs, and to establish the conditions for their success.

⁵ BCStats

⁶ Patterson, Martha

⁷ Macdonald [2]

Recommendations for a recovery with equity

As in the BCFED's recent submission *Rebuilding Our Economy for All*, we have divided our recommendations into four phases of economic recovery. In our case, we consider immediate, short-term, mid-term and long-term action — ranging from the measures needed right now to deal with the needs of women in this crisis, to long-term strategies geared to building a more equitable economy for all of us.

Immediate

Women's Safety:

We recommend that the government:

- Effectively enforce health and safety laws and regulations through the WCB and issue penalties for employer non-compliance, up to and including jail time.
- Ensure workers with health vulnerabilities or who are otherwise at higher risk from COVID-19 be permitted to work from home or granted another appropriate accommodation, and that they have access to special paid leaves.
- Ensure workers have access to stand-alone paid sick leave through government- or employer-funded programs, so that no worker feels forced to work sick.
- Secure federal and provincial funding to reopen transit routes so workers who rely on transit can safely get to work or obtain essential supplies.
- Increase access to mental health services and supports for British Columbians struggling with social isolation and the economic impact of this crisis.
- Increase access to mental health care and social supports for health sector workers.
- Build public infrastructure to protect and support sex workers, such as secure and easily accessible washrooms and showers.
- Establish directives and mandates ensuring that all sites which are used to provide childcare, including schools, are safe for everyone in them.
- Expand financial and legal aid, support programs and transition housing for those who have experienced or are experiencing domestic, sexual or intimate partner violence.
- Designate domestic and sexual violence shelters as a core community service, and increasing funding to them, consistent with UN recommendations.

Women's Economic Security:

We recommend that the government:

- Ensure that government continues with planned worker supports, including scheduled minimum wage increases.
- Protect worker rights in the Employment Standards Act and Labour Code, including the right to severance pay.
- Develop recruitment and retention strategies for community and social services and health care, including higher safety standards, better wages and benefits, guaranteed minimum work hours, stable shifts, and access to childcare and benefits.
- Continue to provide childcare, including for school-aged children, with a focus on health and safety for children, childcare providers, teachers, EAs and other school district staff.

- Fully implement \$10-a-day childcare.
- Implement a competitive wide wage grid for early childhood educators.
- Expand public childcare spaces through infrastructure investments.
- Invest in and prioritize recruitment, training, and hiring for all public health services to address excessive workloads and the shortfall of workers and human resources in public health care.
- Continue to fill gaps in economic support programs to ensure migrant workers, undocumented workers, sex workers, and other workers in underground economies don't fall through the cracks.

Women in Leadership:

We recommend that the government:

- Assess all consultation tables related to economic restart and recovery, to ensure ample and effective participation by women.
- Continue to fund the BC Centre for the Women in the Trades, to connect and empower women in the trades through education, networking and leadership opportunities.

Short term

Women's Safety:

We recommend that the government:

- Release the Patterson Report and its recommendations for improvements to the Workers' Compensation System.
- Work with the WCB to ensure they have allocated the required resources to enforce, support and monitor health and safety programs.
- Continue working to eliminate period poverty through expanding provisions for free menstrual products in all public buildings, investing in continued research around period poverty and committing to providing access to menstrual products for people who need them.
- Support the right of everyone in BC to access basic core services, including healthcare, regardless of their migration status. and without fear of being reported to immigration officials.

Women's Economic Security:

We recommend that the government:

- Make permanent the measures government has recently taken to stabilize the long-term care sector as part of the move to single-site staffing and return to a common provincial standard for all workers in this sector, including fair wages and benefits.
- Extend and/or supplement the wage subsidy for workers in sectors that will take the longest to recover, such as tourism and hospitality (where women are disproportionately represented). Encourage employers in these sectors to participate in government wage subsidy

programs, and return all workers laid off due to COVID-19 to their payroll, covering wages and benefits.

- Ensure universal application of successorship laws to prohibit contract flipping.
- Eliminate all exemptions to the minimum wage, including for hand harvesters and other excluded workers.
- Legislate pay equity to eliminate wage discrimination by gender.
- Expand general delivery of childcare services to achieve universal childcare through the public funding of publicly run childcare facilities and assess need to expand summer 2020 childcare and programs for school-aged students.
- Direct health authorities to bring healthcare support services including housekeeping, food services and laundry back into the public system, repealing their privatization under the previous government.
- Increase funding to organizations that recruit women and other underrepresented groups disproportionately affected economically by COVID-19 restrictions, to upskill and re-enter the workforce, especially in sectors such as the construction trades where they are underrepresented.
- Provide stable core funding for the BC Centre for Women in the Trades to continue to support the industry's shift to a more diverse, equitable and inclusive culture that will lead to increased retention of women and other underrepresented people in the skilled trades.

Women in Leadership:

We recommend that the government:

- Design and initiate comprehensive gender-, race-, disability- and equity-based analyses of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, to properly inform support and recovery efforts.
- Implement a program to forgive student loans for low- and middle-income British Columbians and for workers in sectors with recruitment and retention challenges such as health care, community and social services, and education.
- Develop Community Benefits Agreements for existing and future projects to ensure the benefits of public investment are captured by workers and community through employment and upskilling opportunities. Implement provisions to prioritize the hiring of women, Indigenous workers and members of other equity groups. Include local-hire provisions in CBAs.
- Provide stable long-term funding to the BC Centre for Women in the Trades to connect and empower women in the trades

Medium term

Women's Safety:

We recommend that the government:

- Make public infrastructure to protect and support sex workers, such as secure and easily accessible washrooms and showers permanent.

Women's Economic Security:

- Remove existing statute barriers to joining or forming a union by reinstating the one-step certification process.
- Improve worker protections such as hours of work, overtime and paid vacation.
- Ensure that precarious workers and gig workers are not excluded from employment standards protections by ending the misclassification of workers and strengthening enforcement to reduce employers' reliance on precarious and gig workers.
- Expand and stabilize food security networks.
- Research and implement sectoral bargaining. Strike a single-issue commission to implement a made-in-BC multi-employer sectoral bargaining model.
- Expand primary health care reforms to ensure multi-disciplinary teams include health science professionals and skilled health workers and expand the Community Health Centre model for delivery of primary care.

Women in Leadership:

We recommend that the government:

- Commission local artists, with a focus on women and equity seeking groups, to develop artistic works and performances across mediums and make them available to the public in accordance with physical distancing guidelines.
- Work with the federal government to implement permanent residency upon arrival for all migrant workers including those without status.
- Acquire or build publicly owned and operated long-term and seniors' care facilities.
- Acquire or build publicly owned and operated childcare facilities.
- Invest in expanding apprenticeship and training program opportunities for women workers, Indigenous workers, and other groups underrepresented in the trades such as those offered by the BC Centre for Women in the Trades.

Long term

Women's Safety:

We recommend that the government:

- Develop long-term strategies for making protocols for safely serving vulnerable populations – from the moment of first contact; through shelter, support services and/or the justice system; and on to aftercare – into a permanent process.

Women's Economic Security:

We recommend that the government:

- Develop a plan to implement a living wage in BC.
- Increase annual operating budgets for both the Labour Relations Board and Employment Standards Branch to ensure effective implementation of recent changes, strengthen enforcement, and guarantee that labour issues and disputes are addressed in a timely manner.
- Continue to lift income assistance and disability rates, recognizing that women with disabilities face a larger gender pay gap than any other demographic of women in Canada and are also one of the most susceptible to gender-based violence.

- Expand social housing programs and wrap-around services to more communities in BC.
- Ensure relief provided to seniors and vulnerable populations is not clawed back.

Women in Leadership:

We recommend that the government:

- Fund more women’s leadership initiatives and encourage the development of new initiatives tailored to the distinct needs and strengths of equity-seeking groups.

Conclusion

BC is in the middle of a crisis unlike any we’ve faced before. Yet it shares at least one thing with past crises: Its impacts are much greater for those who get the short end of British Columbia’s disparities. The COVID-19 pandemic’s burdens have landed unevenly, and it’s only through an intersectional gender lens that we can see how.

Yet that lens allows us not only to look into the past, but also to shape the future more equitably. And there is an opportunity here that we believe British Columbians must seize, if we want to live up to our values of fairness, equality and solidarity.

When we craft a recovery strategy that puts equity at the forefront, we do more than just address the fallout from this most recent crisis. The policy decisions and investments we recommend here will make our province stronger and more resilient in the face of possible future pandemics and allow us to make the most of prosperous times. And they will help us build an economy that works for everyone.

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