



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women in Canada

November 2022

An RSC Collection of Essays

The SARS-COV-2 (hereinafter COVID-19) pandemic has had profound and pronounced impacts on women, girls, and gender-diverse people in Canada. Compared to men, they experienced significantly worse impacts in loss of paid employment (Grekou and Lu, 2021). As demands on caregivers—both unpaid and paid—surged, it is women who have borne the greatest burdens (Leclerc, 2020). Repeated stay-at-home orders have increased risks of gender-based violence for girls, women, and gender-diverse people living in violent situations (Yakubovich & Maki, 2021). School closures had a greater impact on learning and mental health for girls in elementary and secondary school (Statistics Canada, 2021e). Women in postsecondary education face a more challenging transition to the workforce because of the pandemic-related recession (Statistics Canada, 2021e). The tax system, used to deliver much of the emergency income support during COVID-19, continues to have gendered effects because it reflects the gender bias in social norms (Coelho et al., 2022). Women and adolescent girls have reported more mental distress during the pandemic, and we see gendered impacts in the health system, while present before the pandemic were exacerbated by the impact of the pandemic, including unmet health needs and hospital admissions for serious mental health and eating disorders (Leger, 2022; Vaillancourt & Szatmari, 2022). These findings have been echoed in emerging cross-national research, suggesting that existing gender inequalities in health and socioeconomic outcomes have been exacerbated by the pandemic (Flor et al., 2022).

Within this experience broadly, these effects of the pandemic were not homogenous across women, girls, and gender-diverse people. Women in Black and other racialized communities have experienced greater risks of economic losses, more challenges in accessing the social safety net and essentials such as adequate and stable housing, all while also facing disproportionate risks of COVID-19 exposure due to their overrepresentation in the care economy (Canadian Research for the Advancement of Women, 2021). People who identify as LGBTQ2S+¹ experienced even higher rates of job loss and risks to their mental and physical health (Prokopenko & Kevins, 2020). Indigenous women and girls found the health crisis in their communities weaponized as a means to fast-track other policy changes that run counter to the obligations of reconciliation (Power et al., 2020). Women, and particularly Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) women, are more likely to live with a disability (Burlock, 2017) and women with disabilities experienced some of the worst situations during this pandemic—in economic impacts, risks to safety, risks to health, and more (Shakespeare et al., 2021).

1 For greater clarity, this acronym refers to members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer or Questioning, Trans, intersex, and Two Spirit and other communities other than heterosexual and cisgendered. This term will be used throughout this report for consistency, except in direct quotes that use other forms of related acronyms.

This report offers a collection of briefs from a diverse group of experts in the academic, healthcare, and voluntary sectors. These briefs provide greater detail regarding the impact of COVID-19 on women, girls, and gender-diverse people, recognizing the distinct impacts within this group. The diversity of voices and perspectives in this collection serves as a reminder that Canadian women and gender-diverse persons had distinct experiences during the pandemic. This collection of briefs will be of interest to policymakers at all orders of government, analysts in the private and public sectors, as well as to practitioners, including service-providers and community organizations.

The report is divided into three parts, each of which contains briefs that present the state of the knowledge² and advances options for change—in policy and practice—for the post-COVID period in Canada. Part 1 focuses on the simultaneous health and economic crises that the pandemic caused, addressing women’s health generally, the gender dimensions of the impact of COVID-19 on the labour market, and the mental health crises specifically. Part 2 examines how the pandemic exacerbated the long-standing risks to women, girls, and gender-diverse persons. The five briefs in this part address gender-based violence; the experiences of the LGBTQI2S+ community; women and gender-diverse persons with disabilities; Indigenous women, girls, and gender-diverse communities; and racialized women and gender-diverse people. The third part examines the capacity of the system and the need for institutional reform and includes briefs focused on education, the care economy, and the tax system.

Because this is a collection of work that relies on not only a variety of different data sources, but also voluminous literature published across a wide range of time periods and disciplines, there will naturally be an inconsistency in language related to sex and gender identities. Sex and gender have often, in the past, been used interchangeably, but they are different concepts. Sex is usually categorized as female or male and refers to biological attributes. Gender is often referred to as a social construct that exists along a continuum, and may vary across time, places, and cultures. Gender may or may not correspond to a person’s sex. Gender identities include men, women, girls, boys, and gender-diverse people. Throughout this volume we endeavor to use the more inclusive language and understanding of gender were possible. In this volume, woman means woman identified. In some contexts, however, it may not be possible to be consistent with this terminology as it pertains to data that only identifies individuals based on sex and not gender, quotes from sources that use outdated language, and reliance on literature that is based on inconsistent language.

In considering this collection of briefs holistically, its findings and recommendations as they pertain to the experiences of a range of women with intersecting identities, perhaps the most resounding lesson from the pandemic and our effort to understand and respond to it, is the need to mainstream analysis and advice that takes account of differences by gender, race, income, disability status, and more. Attention to gender differences, and differences of experience within a gender, has proven critical to understanding risk and capabilities. As we stare down the challenges in front of us, hopeful for not only a fair recovery from COVID-19, but also the chance at a bigger shift toward a more just society, what is required is a much more inclusive approach across the public, private, and voluntary sectors to address longstanding failures of the economy and society. Policy choices, policy outputs, and policy impacts need to be more representative of, and attentive to, the experiences and struggles of marginalized and underrepresented populations. Policy work

2 The briefs in this report were written in the Spring and Summer of 2021 and reflect the state of knowledge at that time. We note that policy responses have changed considerably since that time, but the virus continues to circulate.

must also expressly consider how inequality is created and perpetuated within public research, institutions, and discourse. This can only be accomplished if and when the transdisciplinary framework of intersectionality is taken seriously. This includes the equally important fact that individual identities, policy, and institutions are indivisible from the systems of power of which they are both a product and servant.

What do we mean by intersectionality? Intersectionality is most often associated with the work of critical legal scholar, Crenshaw (1989), who coined the term in reference to the unique and multifaceted oppression experienced by Black women in interactions with the American legal system. However, as scholars of intersectionality (e.g., Cameron & Tedds, 2022; Hankivsky et al., 2014) note, the concept of intersectionality signals a broad and rich body of thought that spans Black, Indigenous, queer, and post-colonial feminist activism and scholarship (see, for example, Combahee River Collective, 1978; hooks, 1981, 1984; Mohanty, 1984). At its core, intersectionality is concerned with interactions among dimensions of identity within the context of overlapping systems of power (McCall, 2005). Central to intersectionality is a recognition that identity is inherently multi-faceted and shaped by categories (e.g., gender, race) that must be considered simultaneously, in intersection, and in context; that the social world and its composite institutions (the state, the market, community) represent sites of power, within which identity and experience are shaped; and that interlocking systems of power (colonialism, misogyny) can undergird, come to bear upon, work through, and reproduce at various levels, from the individual to the societal (see Collins, 2015; Dhamoon, 2011; Hancock, 2007a; Hankivsky & Cormier, 2011; Hankivsky et al., 2014; Manuel, 2019; McCall, 2005). In the context of policy, these insights can support researchers and practitioners to move beyond one-dimensional, siloed, and decontextualized considerations of identity and experience that has dominated policy discourse to date. Intersectional analysis can uncover how social locations and structures of power come to shape experiences of policy issues and the availability and delivery of services (Hankivsky et al., 2014), for example, and how aspects of people's lives overlap to "present different choices, produce different decisions, and manufacture different outcomes, even among similarly situated groups" (Manuel, 2019, p. 46).

Although intersectionality is well understood in some segments of the academia, it is not well understood in the context of policy analysis and policymaking. Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) remains the federal government's primary mechanism for attending to issues of equality and diversity in public policy. GBA+, however, only weakly incorporates intersectionality and is an insufficient as a framework for intersectional policy analysis. In particular, GBA+ overlooks core concepts of power and bias and considers identity issues in only an additive, not intersectional, way. This report serves as a call to public policy academics and practitioners to make a concerted effort to bringing intersectionality to bear on public policy research, design, and analysis so that the intersectional issues of identity and power become central to such analyses.