

COVID-19:

A Tipping Point for Gender Equality

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Make Your Mark

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INTRODUCTION

In April 2020 the United Nations published a Policy Brief entitled *The Impact of COVID-19 on Women*. In it, they identify 3 priority measures to address the fact that “women will be the hardest hit, but also the backbone of the recovery”¹. These priorities are:

1. Ensure women’s equal representation in all response planning and decision-making.
2. Drive transformative change for equality by addressing the care economy, paid and unpaid.
3. Target women and girls in all efforts to address the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19.

The stark reality is that the disproportionate socio-economic impacts on women are universal. They have the potential to set back markers of gender equality temporarily, and over the long term. As such, the priority measures outlined by the United Nations are relevant to each and every one of the countries and territories experiencing the pandemic, including Canada.

By understanding how they apply to our local context, government bodies will be in a better position to implement them in cross-cutting, relevant ways. With enough effort, there is hope that doing so could in fact propel gender equality forward.

In This Brief

- An overview of how women within Canada, Alberta and Calgary are impacted by the pandemic, now and over the long term
- An assessment of how well the governments of Canada, Alberta, and Calgary have addressed the priority measures outlined by the United Nations
- Recommendations for targeting women through the use of an intersectional, gender-lens with the aim of realizing a quicker, more sustainable recovery and improved gender equality

COVID-19 IMPACTS ON WOMEN IN CANADA, ALBERTA, CALGARY

The health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have been historic to say the least. It has quickly become apparent that the socio-economic impacts of the crisis have not favored women, regardless of geographic region. The following provides an overview of how women have been impacted here in Canada, Alberta and Calgary.

Immediate Impacts

Increased Risk of Exposure

Women are more likely to be working in jobs that are considered essential to preserving life, health and basic societal functioning. The federal government's definition of these services includes jobs done by "first responders, health care workers, critical infrastructure workers, and workers who are essential to supply critical goods such as food and medicine"². Deemed the 5Cs (clerical, cleaning, catering, cashiering, and care), most women fall into these types of jobs and all, except clerical, require interaction with others to perform. They are front-line work, which puts them at an increased risk of exposure to the virus³.

To-date, the number of cases between men and women is roughly equal, including in Alberta and Calgary⁴. Nevertheless, the anxiety that accompanies frontline work may help explain why women are more likely to report feelings of stress and anxiety related to COVID-19. In April, a Léger poll of Canadians over the age of 18 indicated 56% of women reported feelings of anxiety compared to 38% of men⁵.

Increase in Unpaid Work

Unpaid care work is a driver of inequality, with a "direct link to wage inequality, lower income, poorer education outcomes,

Research on disasters and recessions have shown that the pressures of job loss, financial instability, and uncertainty about the future fuel conflict and heighten the risk of violence.

and physical and mental health stressors"⁶. In Alberta, women are doing nearly double the amount of unpaid care work relative to men in a day (3.8 hours relative to 1.8)⁷.

The closure of schools and daycares, and lack of access to respite care or support workers for elderly, ill or disabled family members means parents are taking this on themselves. Given trends in the division of labour between men and women before the pandemic, it is reasonable to assume that women are bearing the brunt of this increase.

Increased Risk of Violence

As stay at home orders prevent next-to-no reprieve from conflict, women face an increased risk of domestic violence⁸.

Research on disasters and recessions have shown that the pressures of job loss, financial instability, and uncertainty about the future fuel conflict and heighten the risk of domestic violence. This is supported by historical trends in domestic violence rates in Calgary⁹.

Calls to sexual and domestic violence crisis lines are up 15 - 45% in Alberta since March¹⁰. Across the world, UN Women is reporting increases in rates of domestic violence around 30%¹¹.

Increased Likelihood of Employment Disruption

Women are over-represented among the occupations that have suffered the most as a result of the lockdown, including sales and service, and educational, law, social, community and government services¹².

In March, Statistics Canada's Labour Force Survey showed that among those in the core 25 – 54 age demographic, women represented 70% of all job losses despite representing just under half of all workers¹³.

While the percentage of job losses evened out between men and women across Canada in April, this was not the case in Calgary. In Calgary, 3.5 times as many women lost their jobs compared to men¹⁴.

Medium to Long-Term Impacts

Decreased Financial Well-being

Aside from the fact that more women have suffered employment losses than men, the consequential financial strain is likely to be more catastrophic for women. This is due to the fact that women are over-represented in precarious jobs, including low-wage work, contract and part-time work¹⁵. This is, in-part, why women are more likely to be living in poverty. The over-representation of immigrant women, racialized and Indigenous women in this type of work contributes to the fact that women in these groups have even higher poverty rates than their white, Canadian-born counterparts¹⁶.

Decreased hours and job losses stemming from the pandemic will take a considerable toll on women's financial wellbeing. Depending on how long their employment is disrupted, the financial impacts could carry on well into the medium and long term, and will likely be worse for lone-mothers, racialized, Indigenous, and immigrant women.

Weakened Labor Force Attachment

The number of women who reintegrate into the labour market over the medium and long term will depend on many factors. This includes whether or not they have at least some connection to a current or recent job¹⁷. In other words, if they are employed but have taken a leave, or have been temporarily laid off, their chances of returning to work are higher. Currently, the number of men with some connection to a job is roughly equal to women. But the stakes are high.

The participation rate – percentage looking for work or working – between men and women represents a marker of how well we are achieving gender equality. In Alberta, the gap in the participation rate is generally around 13%¹⁸. Depending on how job losses continue to affect industries with high numbers of women, and how well these industries are targeted in the recovery, the labour market impacts of the pandemic threaten to widen this gap.

Sustained High Rates of Domestic Violence

The lockdown has made it especially challenging for women facing domestic violence to seek help. For some, their situation will become even more risky by the time they are able to reach out¹⁹. In addition, the stress caused by job losses and financial setbacks will continue beyond the lockdown.

If the pressure in households fails to dissipate, rates of domestic violence, and the gravity of the violence, are likely to continue increasing over the medium and long term.

OUR GOVERNMENTS' APPROACH: AN ASSESSMENT

Undoubtedly, the impacts of the pandemic are manifesting differently, and unfavorably, for women. The United Nations is one of numerous bodies that has called attention to this. In its April 2020 Policy Brief, the UN identified 3 priority measures to ensure response and recovery efforts address this gendered differential. The following assesses the federal, provincial and municipal governments' efforts against these priority measures.

I. Ensure Equal Representation of Women in Decision-Making

Policies that do not consult or include women are less effective at best, and harmful at worst. Given that women are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, it is critical they are meaningfully involved in planning and activating the response and the recovery. The following breaks down how well women are represented in the highest levels of decision-making in Canada, Alberta and Calgary.

Federal Government

House of Commons

Women hold 98 of the 338 seats, or 29%, in the House of Commons. While this is a record for our country, it is slightly lower than the 30 – 35% “critical mass” of women necessary to truly impact decision-making, according to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women²⁰.

Social distancing measures have obligated the House to limit the number of representatives participating. This means even fewer women have the opportunity to contribute. For example, when the \$82 billion dollar *COVID-19 Emergency Response Act*, was debated on March 24th, only 32 MPs participated²¹.

Nevertheless, there are many other ways in which government can harness the influence of women.

Prime Minister's Cabinet Committee

The Prime Minister created a Cabinet Committee to manage the federal response to the outbreak. Like Trudeau's Cabinet itself, the Cabinet Committee has equal representation from men and women. The Committee is Chaired by the Hon. Chrystia Freeland²².

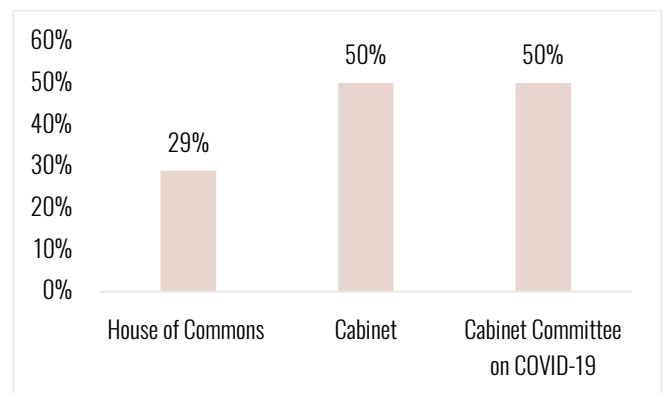


Figure 1. Federal Government - Representation of Women in Decision-Making Bodies

Provincial Government

Alberta's Legislative Assembly

Of the 87 seats in the Provincial Legislative Assembly, 26 are occupied by women (30%). In terms of Cabinet, 7 of the 20 Cabinet positions are held by women (35%).

Among these primary bodies, it appears that our collective threshold for including women is stuck around one-third.

The Economic Recovery Council

The Economic Recovery Council was set-up by Jason Kenney to advise government on protecting jobs during the two-pronged crisis facing Alberta: the COVID-19 pandemic and the collapse in energy prices²³. The influence of the Council on government decisions is hardly futile.

Input received from the Council “will be considered as part of the regular decision-making process of government and Cabinet”²⁴. The 12 appointed members include only two women (17%).

Premier’s Council on Charities and Civil Society

The Premier’s Council of Charities and Civil Society was established in March 2020 to advise government on how to best support civil society organizations and address pressing social issues across Alberta. The Council’s first task is to support the Alberta government’s response to COVID-19 by ensuring civil society organizations are able to protect Albertans and provide supports to vulnerable citizens.

The Council is made-up of 15 members, 4 of whom are female²⁵. This is especially dismal considering that women make-up the vast majority of the charitable sector²⁶.

Chief Medical Officers

Notably, of the 14 provincial, territorial and national chief medical officers, 7 are women. This includes Canada’s chief medical officer, Dr. Theresa Tam and Alberta’s Chief Medical Officer Dr. Deena Hinshaw.

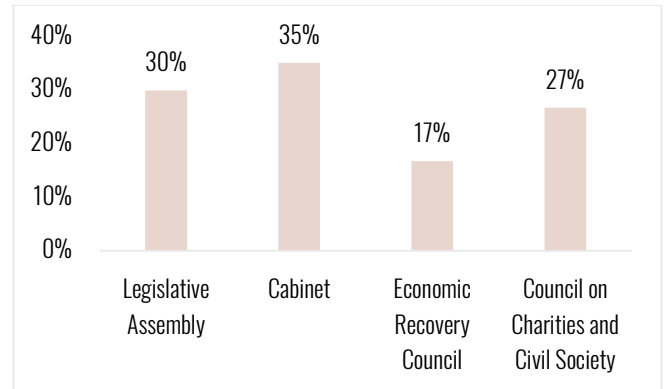


Figure 2. Provincial Government - Representation of Women in Decision-Making Bodies

Municipal

Calgary City Council

City Council consists of the Mayor and 14 City Councillors representing each Ward. Of these representatives, only 3 are female (20%).

COVID-19 Task Forces

The City has established 5 Task Forces to disperse the efforts associated with tackling the impacts of the pandemic within The City’s jurisdiction. Three of these are responsible for addressing the impacts external to the Corporation. All are Chaired by women²⁷:

- Business Sector Support Task Force Members, 10 of the 28 members are women
- Community Support Task Force, unspecified designates
- Economic Resilience Task Force, 7 of 19 members are women

Overall, women’s representation among elected or appointed decision-making bodies on COVID-19 Canada, Alberta, and Calgary is 33%. Certainly, there are others influencing the response and recovery. Among these primary bodies however, it appears that our collective threshold for including women is stuck around one-third.

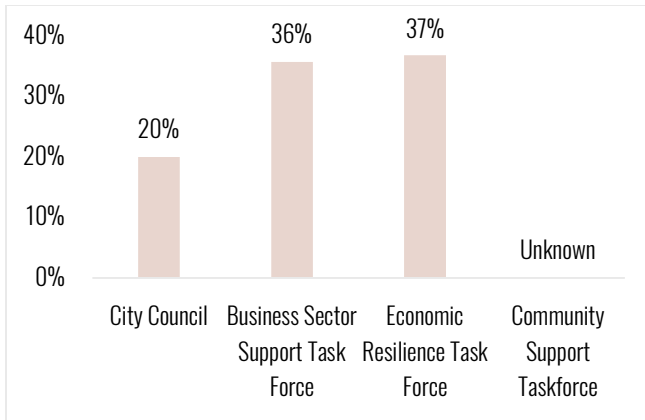


Figure 3. Municipal Government - Representation of Women in Decision-Making Bodies

2. Drive Equality by Addressing the Care Economy, Paid and Unpaid

Whether paid or unpaid, women are taking on the vast majority of the formal and informal work associated with caring for those who are children, ill, elderly, or have disabilities. Many women are doing this work on top of their regular jobs. More than ever, people are recognizing how essential this work is to our daily lives and to the economy.

Job-Protected Leave

Alberta has temporarily changed Employment Standards legislation to provide for 14 unpaid days of sick leave retroactive to March 5, 2020. This applies to part-time and full-time workers but not contractors or the self-employed. For those caring for others, the Province is providing unpaid, job protected leave for all employees who are caring for children affected by school and daycare closures, personally ill or caring for self-isolated family members due to COVID-19.

These changes temporarily waive some of the rules regarding leaves, including the 90-day employment requirement. The length of the leave is linked to guidance from the Chief Medical Officer. While employers are not required to pay

Some women are falling through the cracks. Either they can get-by on their own or weaken their job attachment in order to qualify for CERB.

wages or benefits during the leave, they must give them the same, or an equivalent, job back when the employee returns to work²⁸.

While these changes are important, there are many who will simply be unable to bear the financial strain of taking unpaid leave. As some reprieve, the Province provided \$1146 to cover two weeks of lost pay due to self-isolating or caring for a dependent who is self-isolating. The program, distributing roughly \$107.9 million, has closed now that the federal Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) is available²⁹.

Ensure Ongoing Financial Support for Employment Disruption

The CERB has done a relatively good job of providing low-restriction financial support to employees who have taken unpaid leave, lost their job, or had their hours cut. Both informal and part-time workers are eligible. This is particularly important for women, as they are over-represented in the employment sectors hit the hardest by employment cuts. In fact, women are more likely to be eligible for the CERB than Employment Insurance³⁰.

To ensure a strong recovery, these kinds of financial supports must continue for as long as possible, which may require extending the benefit period beyond 16 weeks and beyond October 3 when the program is set to expire.

As we begin to phase out of the lockdown, government must continue to support employees who choose not to return to work in order to protect their health or the health of their family.

Some have already fallen through the cracks. Women earning over \$1000 per month are ineligible for the CERB, even if they earn just \$1 over. The majority of individuals earning between \$1000 and \$2000 are women, and they would be financially better off cutting back their hours to qualify for the CERB³¹. This bears a double-edged sword: either they get-by on their own or they weaken their job attachment in order to qualify. Both options may have long term consequences.

Support Caregivers Regardless of Labour Force Attachment

Recognizing and supporting the care contribution of those who are not employed is critical. Across the Province, women who were not in the labour market are stepping-in to fill the role of teachers, respite care workers, and nurses. They are providing essential services to their family members in their own home. These roles come with costs, not to mention new skill requirements³². Quality skills training and financial support for taking on additional caregiving responsibilities for the ill, elderly and disabled, should be available regardless of their attachment to the labour force.

Encourage Men's Domestic Contribution

Government campaigns that call upon men to take on more domestic responsibilities, including childcare, can help shift the burden off women's shoulders and build habits that outlast the crisis. For those able to work from home, the additional caregiving responsibilities have implications far beyond stress and burnout. It also reduces their work productivity, which could jeopardize their job security and earnings potential³³.

Support the Wellbeing of Health Care Workers

The health care sector is overwhelmingly made-up of women. In 2017, 81% of Alberta's health care occupations were filled by women³⁴. Many of these women are racialized and immigrant women³⁵. The pandemic puts them at increased risk

The number of outbreaks at long-term care facilities, which primarily employ women, is calling attention to the low wages and poor working conditions.

of contracting the virus. Approximately 10% of the COVID-19 cases in Alberta and Calgary are health care workers³⁶.

A report released by the International Long-Term Care Policy Network identified that Canada has the highest share of COVID-19 related deaths among the 13 countries studied³⁷. The number of outbreaks at these facilities has called much-needed attention to the low wages and poor working conditions here³⁸. Notably, the vast majority of these workers are women and, at least in the Prairies, more than half are not Canadian-born and do not speak English as a first language³⁹.

Finally, health care workers must have adequate access to personal protective equipment to safely deliver care and consistently clear guidelines to help prevent the spread.

3. Target Women Across All Response & Recovery Efforts

A successful recovery for all requires targeting women while taking into account the unique experiences of Indigenous women, women with disabilities, LGBTQ+ women, immigrant women, and women who are racialized.

Explicitly Employ an Intersectional Gender-Lens

Knowing who to target, when, and how, requires the use of an intersectional, gender-lens. In other words, an analysis that recognizes the unique ways in which men, women and gender-diverse individuals are affected by the pandemic and how intersecting identities, such as race and ability, further affect their experiences.

Only the federal government has explicitly acknowledged their commitment to using a gender-lens. In fact, the federal Department for Women and Gender Equality was tasked with a gender-based analysis plus of the government's spending and policies, including COVID-19 efforts⁴⁰. However, confirmation that such an analysis is in progress has yet to be reported.

Collect Data to Inform Appropriate Responses

To respond effectively, Alberta Health must collect data on COVID-19 patients' socio-demographic characteristics, such as race, income, and immigrant status. Advocacy groups in Ontario have successfully urged the Province of Ontario to collect data on race as of May 2020⁴¹. No other Province has been collecting socio-demographic data beyond age, sex and geography. The Province of Alberta has hinted at looking into the matter further⁴².

Understanding how the virus is affecting different minority groups, including Indigenous, immigrant, low income, and racialized women, is the only way to develop targeted action plans that effectively meet their needs.

Inject Significant Financial Support Into the Domestic & Sexual Violence Sector

As mentioned above, stay-at-home orders and social-distancing practices increase women's risk of violence in the home. It has been deemed the "shadow pandemic" by organizations across the world.

While the federal government invested \$50 million dollars to women's shelters and sexual assault centres to address these concerns, the dollars were evenly distributed across eligible organizations and ultimately amounted to very little⁴³.

More must be done to expand the capacity of shelters, and to develop safe spaces and innovative methods for women to seek help. Women's organizations of all kinds need the

financial and technological resources to move their services online. Furthermore, advocacy and awareness campaigns that speak to both men and women need to be widespread and transformative⁴⁴.

Apply a Gendered Approach to Addressing Housing & Homelessness

The response and recovery must also take a gendered approach to address housing and homelessness, as called upon by the Women's National Housing & Homelessness Network. This includes ensuring safe housing for women fleeing violence, enacting moratoriums on evictions, and providing rent freezes, among other recommendations focused on the safety of women and gender-diverse individuals⁴⁵.

In Alberta, evictions were banned until May 1. Currently, termination notices can be issued if a tenant fails to comply with a payment plan. Rent increases were suspended, and late fees cannot be applied or collected retro-actively until June 30⁴⁶. Utility payments can also be deferred until June 18, 2020⁴⁷. These kinds of actions must be amplified and continue as long as necessary.

Prioritize Child Care for Essential Service Workers

For essential service workers, the majority of whom are female⁴⁸, access to safe, quality child care must be a priority. While the Province of Alberta opened child care spaces for essential service workers in early April, affordability may be a key concern if they were previously relying on family members or unlicensed day homes.

As daycares re-open to the broader public and thereby introduce greater competition for child care, the safety, affordability and accessibility of child care for essential service workers must remain a top priority.

Enhance Support for Civil Society

Over 70% of the charitable and non-profit sector is made up of women⁴⁹. Many of the services in this sector support vulnerable women, and they will play a major role in addressing the immediate and long-term socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. As such, supporting the sector supports women and gender equality. So far, the federal government has invested \$559 million dollars⁵⁰ to the charitable sector and the Province of Alberta has invested \$32 million⁵¹. While this is valuable, it is miniscule relative to the \$9.5 to 15.7 billion dollars Canada's charitable sector is estimated to lose as a result of the pandemic⁵².

Invest in Women-Dominated Industries

Even within our relatively wealthy lands, women tend to hold less secure jobs, earn lower salaries than their partners, and head up most single-parent homes. As such, their attachment to the labour force is already weaker.

In March, Alberta's participation rate for men over 25 was 78.1%, down by 1.7% from the previous month. For women over 25, their participation rate was 63%, down by 1.9%⁵³. This decline further widens the participation rate between men and women, a key indicator of gender equality.

The question is, how likely is it that women will return to the formal economy in the same droves as they left? Or will the impending fiscal austerity lead to even greater employment losses for women?

Historically, austerity measures tend to further disadvantage the groups already disadvantaged, including immigrant, Indigenous and financially insecure women⁵⁴.

However, beyond a moral imperative, it will be an economic imperative for governments to invest in industries largely

Further research on how government interventions might exacerbate negative social determinants of health for vulnerable groups will be critical through all stages.

made-up of women and hit hardest by the pandemic: education, health care, community services, and retail.

This is especially important to consider in Alberta given the budgetary direction the Provincial Government was headed prior to the outbreak⁵⁵.

Investing in women-owned businesses will also be an important focus in the recovery. On May 16, 2020, the Federal Government announced \$15 million in new capital to support women entrepreneurs. The funding explicitly acknowledges the unique and systemic barriers facing women as they start and grow a business⁵⁶.

Further Research COVID-19 Social Determinants of Health

Finally, research that delves into how diverse groups are being impacted are necessary to adapt and improve subsequent actions.

Understanding how different groups are more at-risk of contracting the virus through disaggregated data on COVID-19 patients is important. But it is also critical to understand how government interventions might exacerbate negative social determinants of health for vulnerable groups.

For example, how are different groups coping with the psychological impacts of stay-at-home orders? How is home-schooling going to affect the long-term educational outcomes of those who are poor or otherwise marginalized by intersecting identity factors?

Research into these topics using an intersectional, gender-lens will be fundamental to a successful long-term recovery.

CONCLUSION

The gendered impacts of the pandemic have already set women back. We can hope this is temporary or, for the good of all, we can act. There are at least two options before us.

A Generalized Approach

A generalized approach to the response and recovery will discount the disproportionate socio-economic impacts on women. Taking a one-size-fits-all approach will have compounding, negative spiral effects:

- Women's participation in the labour force will continue to decline
- Without appropriate supports and incentives, they are unlikely to return to work, threatening their household financial stability and with it, their ability to provide for their children or leave unsafe situations if necessary
- With this mass exodus from the labour market, their role in representing gender-diverse experiences, their contributions to the economy, innovation, policy and practice will dwindle

This approach will perpetuate inequalities and potentially erode the gains we have made over the course of the last few decades.

A Gendered Approach

Alternatively, we can apply a gender-lens to all aspects of the response and recovery, taking into account the ways in which men and women, including other identities intersecting with gender, are uniquely impacted. Applying a gender-lens will allow government to target their efforts appropriately and more effectively. By implementing the non-exhaustive recommendations described in this brief, we are more likely to see the following emerge:

- Those contributing to the care economy are fully valued and acknowledged through supportive attitudes, policies and financial compensation
- The cases among health care workers declines and their wellbeing is protected
- All households are able to financially withstand employment and income disruptions
- Women return to the workforce in equal, if not greater numbers, than before
- Women have access to safe, affordable housing options
- Men have the tools, resources and supports to cope with stress in non-violent ways

- Women and girls are able to access robust and comprehensive supports when threatened with violence
- Men take a greater role in domestic and caregiving responsibilities

Men too, have much to gain, as this trajectory is surely to bring a quicker, more sustainable recovery. Indeed, the velocity at which indicators of women's wellbeing improves will be a proxy for our recovery overall.

What is more, this approach tips us toward greater equality in the home, office, and political arena, and creates a safer, more just society. Perhaps even a society that finds the systemic and structural inequalities that so greatly disadvantaged women through this pandemic inexcusable.

SUMMARY OF GOVERNMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure Equal Representation of Women in Decision-Making

- The Provincial Government should invite more women into the Economic Recovery Council and Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society in order to even-out the significant gender imbalance that currently exists at these tables
- The City of Calgary's Community Support Task Force should ensure the designates include an equal number of women; this Task Force is particularly well-positioned to involve and disseminate the influence of women's organizations

Address the Care Economy, Paid and Unpaid

- The Federal and Provincial Governments should ensure financial support and job security legislation continue until, and beyond, the lockdown measures
- The Federal and Provincial Governments should provide financial and skills-training support to primary caregivers regardless of labour force attachment
- All levels of government should encourage men's contribution to domestic duties, including caregiving responsibilities
- The Federal and Provincial Governments must support the wellbeing of health care workers through access to appropriate personal protective equipment and clear, consistent guidelines

Target Women Across All Response & Recovery Efforts

- All levels of government should explicitly employ the use of an intersectional, gender-lens
- The Minister for Women and Gender Equality should report on the gender-based analysis plus it was tasked with as soon as possible to drive and influence spending and policy at the federal level
- Alberta Health should collect disaggregate socio-demographic data on COVID-19 patients to better target responses
- All levels of government should inject significant financial support into the domestic and sexual violence sector
- All levels of government should apply a gendered approach to addressing housing and homelessness
- The Provincial Government should prioritize safe, affordable and quality child care for essential service workers
- All levels of government should enhance support for civil society given the critical role it will play in the recovery, particularly for the women it employs and serves
- All levels of government must invest in women-dominated industries to support the economic recovery overall
- All levels of government should further research the COVID-19 social determinants of health, in terms of the virus itself but also the interventions aimed at reducing the spread and mitigating the economic impacts

ENDNOTES

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