



YWCA
C A N A D A

NATIONAL ADVOCACY.
COMMUNITY ACTION.
UNE VOIX NATIONALE.
DES ACTIONS LOCALES.

Born to be Bold: COVID-19 Update

The Impact of COVID-19 on YWCA programs

Recommendations for the Canadian Labour Market and Gender-Sensitive Responses to COVID-19

Written by Shiva Mazrouei and Cherie Wong

Edited by Sydney Piggott

Translated by Jenny Cloutier



COVID-19 PANDEMIC IMPACT ON YWCA MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS

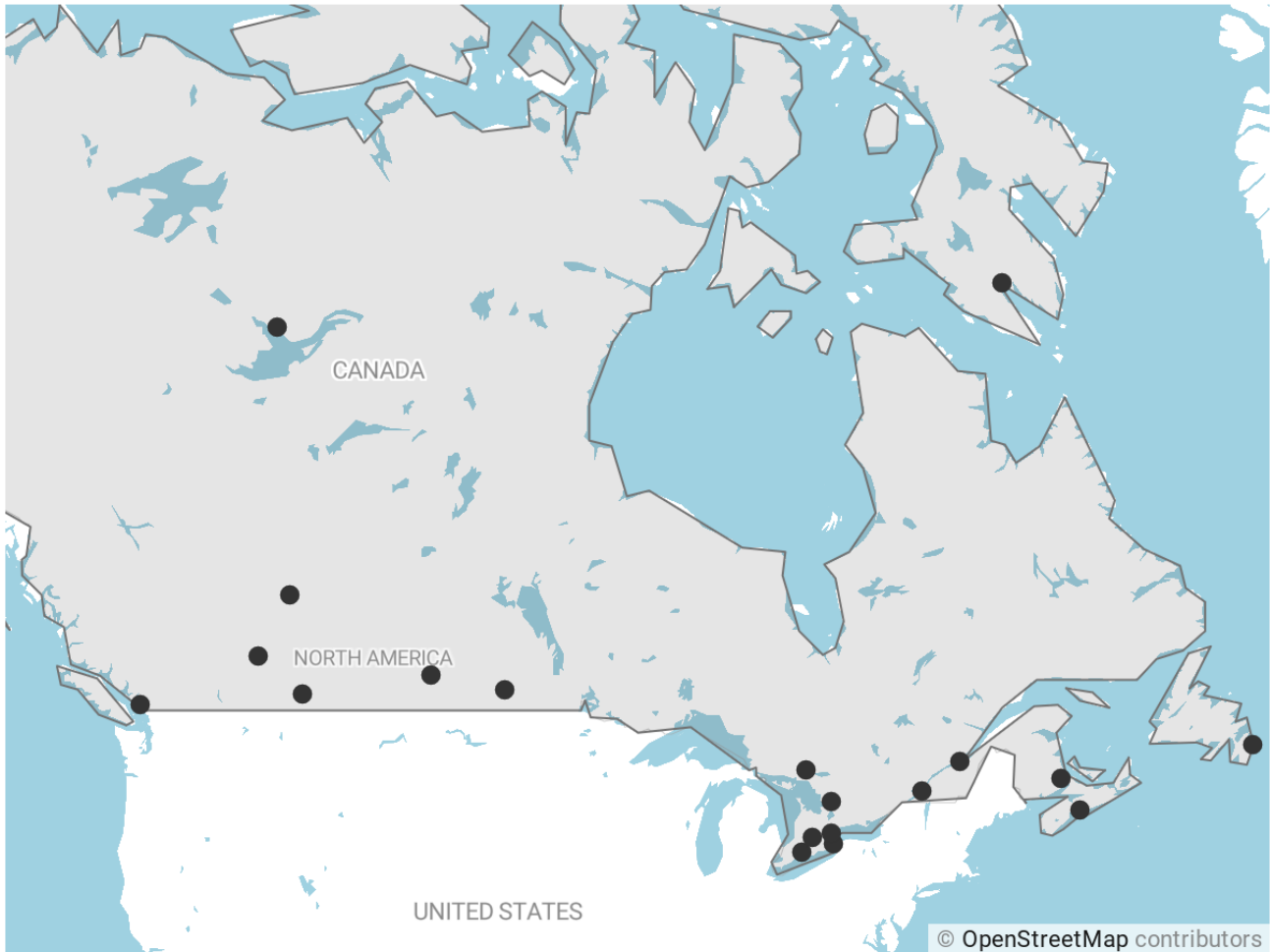
The labour market in Canada has experienced a significant culture shift due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Requirements around physical distancing forced the Canadian workplace and labour culture to [adopt new practices](#), and many workplaces to require employees to work remotely. Although initially a response to physical distancing requirements, employers and the government now have the opportunity to define a new normal in the labour market. In response to the COVID-19 crisis, conventional work culture is adjusting to social changes. This is a crucial moment for employers and policymakers in Canada to boldly adopt policies and practices that empower and accommodate women's needs in the workforce.

[YWCA's Born to be Bold project](#) identified numerous barriers and recommended practices for increasing women's access to gainful employment. Though the data collection and report findings were completed prior to COVID-19 crisis, the current pandemic context has only magnified existing inequities and further demonstrated the need for person-centered solutions in accessing and thriving in the labour market. The proposed practices must be adapted to the current circumstances in order to provide employers and policy makers an opportunity and method to improve and create long-term change in women's access to, and participation in, the labour market.

To better inform our project and deepen our understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on programs, YWCA Canada distributed a short survey to YWCA Member Associations to measure three key areas of service provision: program operations, service user experience, and program needs. We received 22 responses, from 19 member associations. The overall trends are highlighted below.

PARTICIPATING MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS

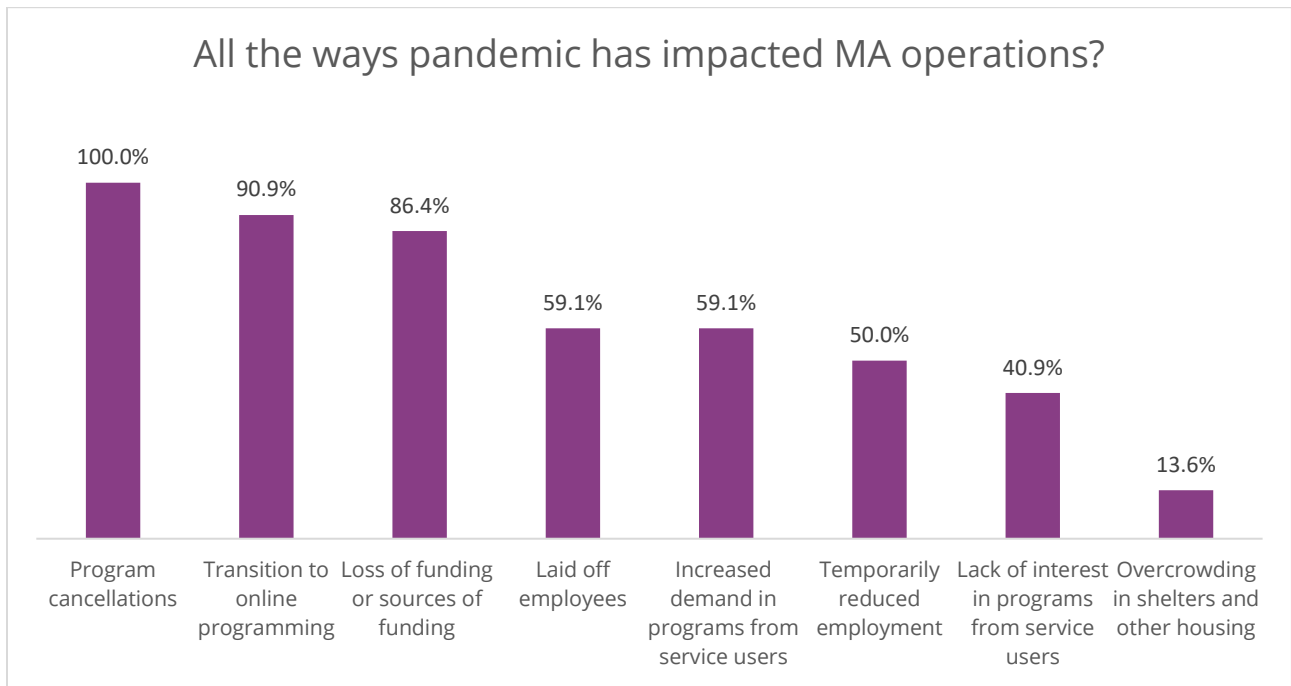
YWCA Member Associations



Source: YWCA Canada • Created with Datawrapper

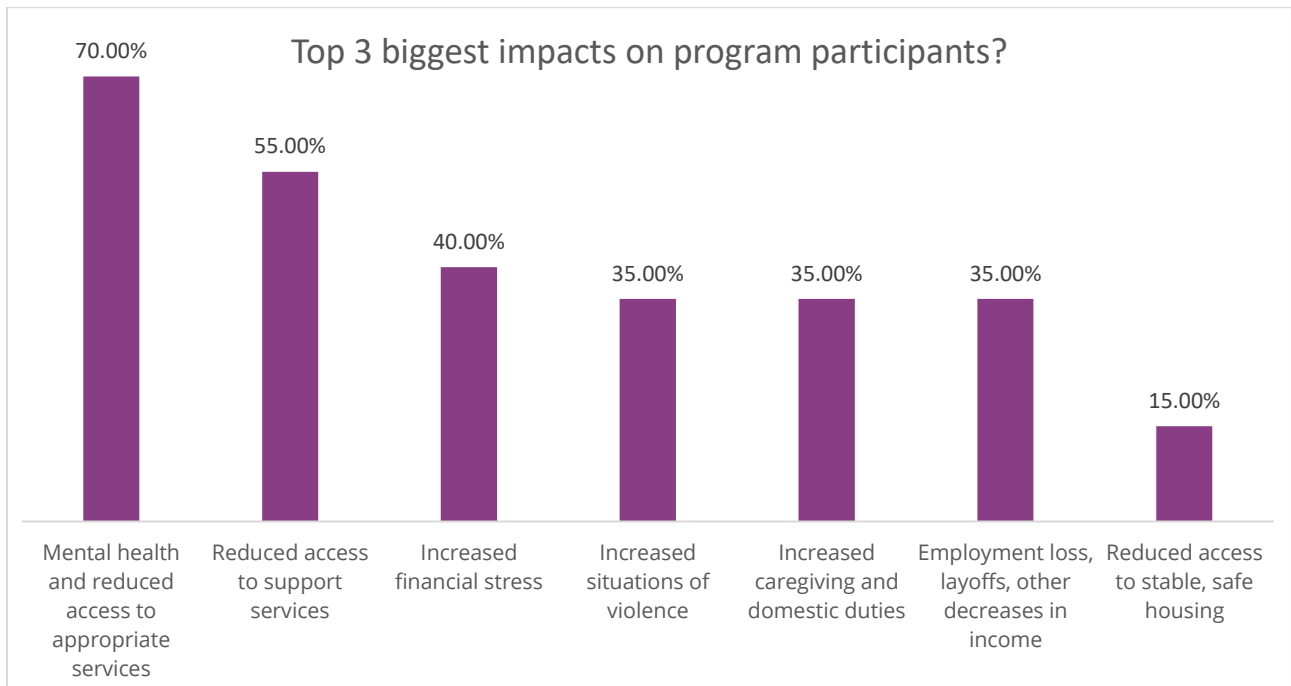
Our member associations (MAs) continue to run and offer a variety of programs including permanent and temporary housing, along with programming for women, programming for young women, and employment programs.

All participating MAs have cancelled some programming in response to the pandemic: 90.9% of responding programs have transitioned to online programming and 86.4% have suffered from loss of funding and funding sources.

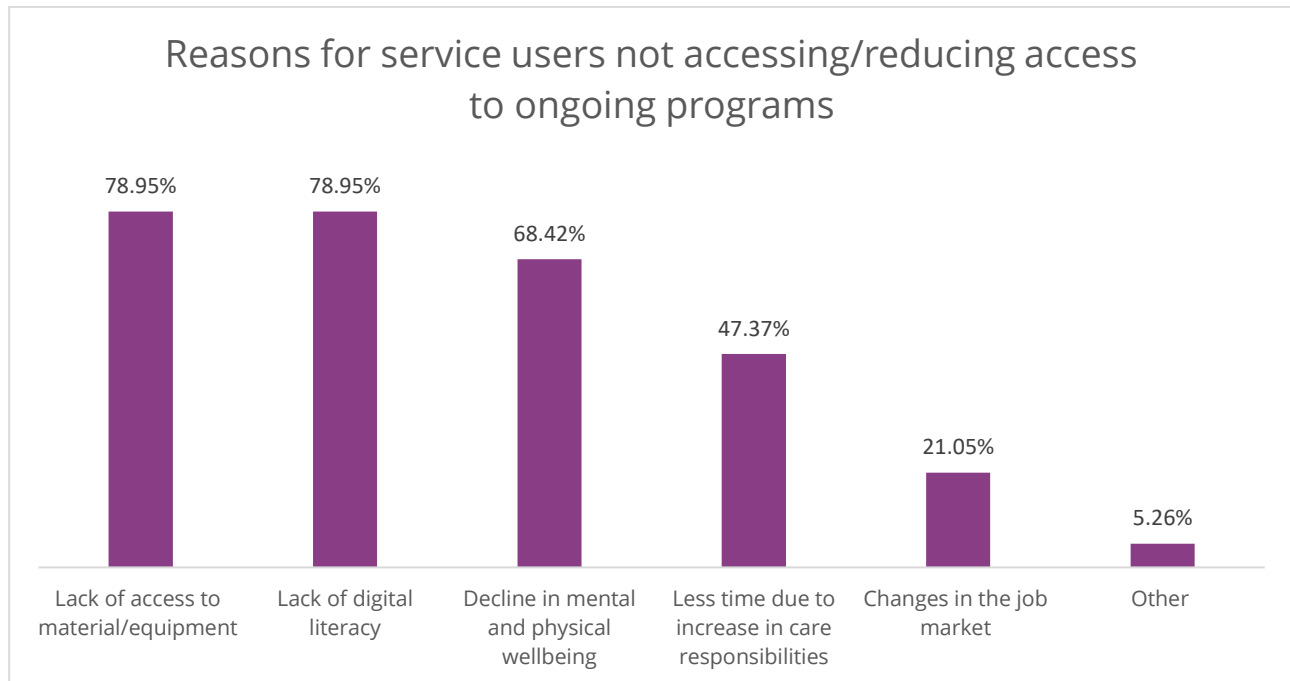


Many MAs have not yet seen any benefits in the forced transition to online programming; however, 57% indicated an increased flexibility in program design as a positive outcome of this shift, noting the opportunity for innovation in program design and delivery. One respondent noted an increase in participation from folks in rural communities.

When selecting the top three biggest impacts of the pandemic on program participants, 70% of respondents noted a decline in mental health and wellbeing and reduced access to the appropriate services, demonstrating the far-reaching impacts of the pandemic and related isolation measures. Respondents also further identified situations of domestic violence, isolation, and living with abusers as having large impacts on participants' mental health and wellbeing, ultimately affecting participants most during this pandemic.



79% of respondents indicated the lack of access to equipment and material, as well as lack of digital literacy as the top barriers stopping participants’ access to programming. Many also indicated that a lack of digital literacy access to information technology (IT) equipment, laptops, and computers were the biggest challenges currently being faced as programming has moved online.



Mental health support, digital and online programs' training, access to technology, along with additional funding were the additional needs expressed by MAs to be able to continue to provide programming during and following the pandemic.

When selecting the top three resources necessary to conduct work, financial and IT support and equipment were the top resources identified by respondents.



*Select top 3

THE CANADIAN LABOUR MARKET AND GENDER-SENSITIVE RESPONSES TO COVID-19

Considering the above outcomes, as well as the gendered impact of COVID-19, the following are recommendations in developing a gender-sensitive response to COVID-19.

DEVELOP AN ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY

In response to the pandemic and ensuing practices, as well as in creating recovery plans, employers should develop a holistic organizational strategy to guide their operations and support their workers. Robust organizational support is critical for [women and marginalized people who face disproportionate rates of violence](#) and [financial stress](#).

Employers must create a strategy that puts the survival and [wellbeing of people](#) first. Each organization is unique in its work, people, and culture; organizations must look to their people to

develop an equitable, person-centered strategy that takes into account the diverse identities and needs of women.



Top 30 most frequently occurring words in response to the Born to be Bold Survey question: “Based on your experience, what would be the best practices for employers to increase access to good jobs/ gainful employment?” represented as a word cloud.

ADOPT FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE LONG TERM

The current shift towards virtual remote work is an important step toward an equitable labour market. In the Born to be Bold findings, flexible working arrangement is a top request and recommendation from research participants. 63.1 percent of survey respondents selected “flexibility of work hours” as a component of their ideal job (of up to five factors). Flexibility in working conditions was also directly mentioned in 52 percent of focus groups and interviews.

As one Born to be Bold focus group participant clearly stated, “Life doesn’t fit into a 9-5 box.”¹ Flexibility in work hours and location will enable women to access the labour market while balancing their other responsibilities, such as unpaid domestic care, homeschooling, and caring for elderly family members. In addition to flexibility in work locations, employers should seek to apply flexibility in work hours and schedules. This is especially important for women, amidst and beyond the COVID-19 crisis, as it will enable employees to tend to [increased domestic responsibilities](#) during conventional work hours.

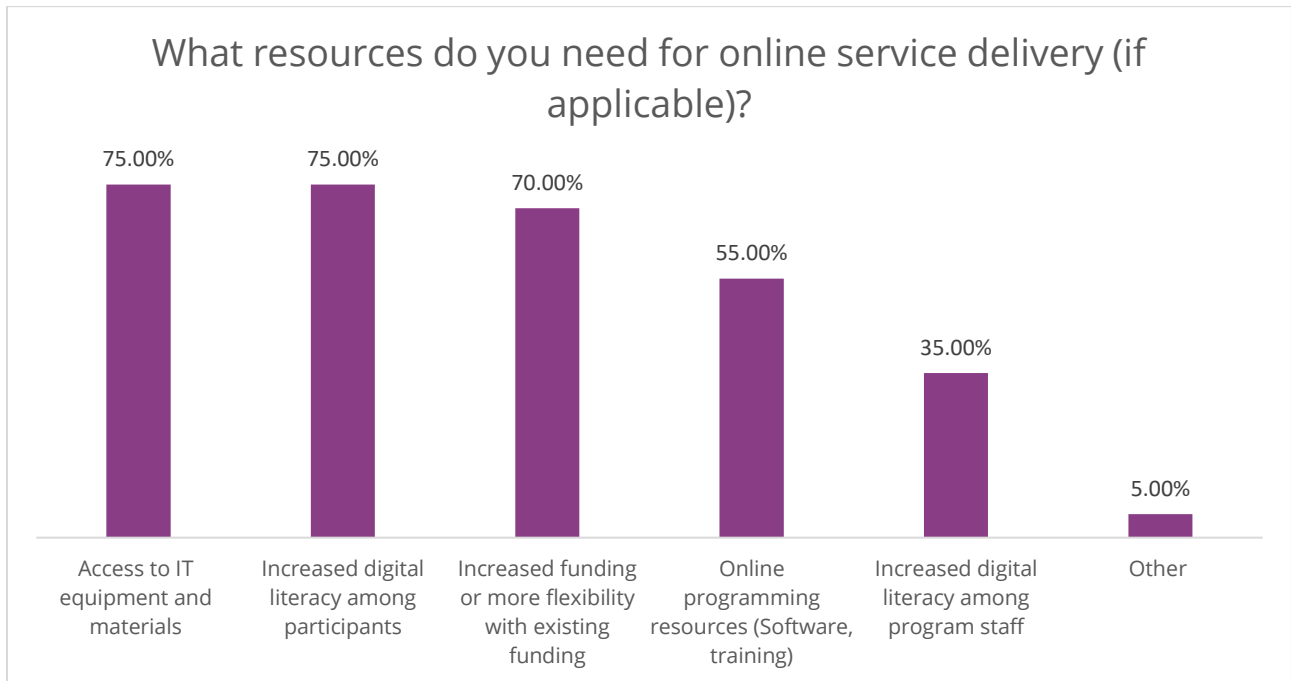
Under distancing measures, Canada has observed a [rise in domestic violence](#). With the implementation of virtual remote work, it is important to also create a safety strategy and [concrete measures](#) to support victims of abuse and violence.

¹ Born to be bold focus group participant, Vancouver BC, January 2020

PROVIDE FUNDING TO SUPPLY EQUIPMENT AND RESOURCES

The Canadian government and employers must equip the labour market with efficient tools to enable a smooth transition. As employers provide adequate equipment and technology for in-person work, employees must also be provided with tools for virtual remote work. Not every household has access to a computer or reliable wireless Internet connection, which becomes a barrier to participate in the labour market. Providing funding and equipment would alleviate the financial burden affiliated with virtual remote work. The Canadian government should create grants to supplement Canada's transition into virtual working arrangements. Employers should create budget lines dedicated to supplementing costs incurred from virtual working arrangements including, but not limited to, Internet and phone expenses, virtual conferencing platforms, and office equipment.

YWCA Member Associations identified access to IT equipment and materials, in addition to digital literacy training for service users, as the top two resources required to deliver services online. This demonstrates the need for increased access to equipment and training in order to make remote workplaces more accessible and sustainable.



PROVIDE TRAINING AND CLEAR GUIDELINES FOR REMOTE WORK

Virtual remote work is a fairly new practice for the majority of the labour force. It is important to create training programs and guidelines to empower employees to utilize the different equipment and technologies that are introduced to the transition working arrangements into virtual operations.

Formalized training and guidelines can empower employees in their work, ensuring they are and feel equipped to carry out their responsibilities.

PROVIDE CHILDCARE, ALLOWANCE, AND OTHER SUPPORT

Childcare availability has a direct impact on women's participation in the labour market, as for many it has “felt like [you] had to put [your] life on hold until kids were old enough to go to school.”² A lack of accessible, affordable, safe and non-discriminatory childcare was distinctly mentioned as a main barrier to accessing gainful employment in 77 percent of [Born to be Bold](#) focus groups and interviews. Childcare support must be offered to parents, during and [beyond the COVID crisis](#). There is no one-size-fits-all solution; thus, it is important to offer a variety of childcare options.

Distancing measures, school closures, and childcare facilities' closures have also brought forth additional barriers. Childcare support systems and other childminding options are also limited. In addition to childminding duties, parents are expected to assist and support an e-learning curriculum. Working parents are put under extraordinary pressure, as they are expected to balance childminding and working. On-site, free, and extended hours of childcare must be offered to essential workers.

As childcare services reopen, childcare allowances can also ease financial strain and ensure employees are able to carry out their duties without the financial and emotional burden to secure childcare. In addition to childcare, instituting paid leave (and two-week paid sick leave) is an important measure that would ensure employees do not have to choose between financial stability, their wellbeing, and domestic responsibilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the flow of the labour market and conventional work culture. The existing disparities in labour market practices have been amplified by the current crisis. Now is the opportunity to use this disruption as a way to redefine how we work, by creating employment that works for everyone, no matter their circumstances.

² Born to be bold focus group participant, Yellowknife NWT, October 2019