

WOMEN'S SECTOR AT RISK OF FINANCIAL DEVASTATION — Implications for Canada's COVID-19 Recovery



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INTRODUCTION

As a result of decades of deliberate systematic defunding of the women's rights sector under previous governments, women's organizations lost significant capacity to provide critical services and analysis in support of gender equality. These cuts resulted in fewer resources being available for service provision; reduced wages and benefits for employees of women's organizations; and lowered capacity to participate in ongoing training, skills development, and community engagement to better understand and meet the needs of their communities.¹ While investments in the sector under the Liberal government over the past five years has helped the sector recuperate some of its capacity, much of the funding received is tied to project delivery rather than core operational capacity, leaving organizations with little fiscal flexibility to weather crises such as the current pandemic. After months of uncertainty and ongoing challenges, the sector is becoming increasingly vulnerable to the economic and social fallout of the pandemic.

Many studies have shown that women have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and experts have labelled the pandemic-induced recession a 'she-cession'.² While women's organizations are integral in supporting and advocating for women in various situations and with various needs, the gendered impacts of the pandemic not only impact individual women but also impact our organizations, as organizations are struggling to stay in operation. The sector has not only seen a decrease in flexible funding, but with the majority of employees being women with some form of care responsibilities, organizations are losing precious staff capacity as women are dropping out of the workforce, unable to juggle work and care responsibilities.

Against this backdrop, YWCA Canada, the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAOW), the Canadian Women's Foundation, G(irls)20 and Oxfam Canada conducted an online survey to assess the state of the women's rights sector in Canada and the impacts the pandemic has had on these organizations to operate their vital services in Canada.

1 Boucher, Lisa (2017). Funding for Women's Organizations. CRIAOW-ICREF https://www.criaw-icref.ca/images/userfiles/files/Funding4WomensOrgs_Accessible.pdf

2 CBC Radio. (2020, May 9). COVID-19 is Causing a 'She-Cession'. Retrieved 29 September 2020, from: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/costofliving/the-she-cession-business-interruption-insurance-and-tax-tips-for-canadians-now-working-from-home-1.5559652/COVID-19-is-causing-a-she-cession-1.5559655>

The purpose of the online survey was to collect concrete data and first hand accounts from fellow women's organizations to inform our collective advocacy efforts and to propose women's sector specific solutions. In October 2020, to expand the scope of our research and to reach the most women's organizations possible, the survey was sent out to our various networks and shared on social media. The following findings are based on the 117 responses we received.³

KEY FINDINGS

Introduction

The online survey findings confirmed anecdotal evidence showing that the pandemic has had a major impact on women's rights organizations across the country. Women's organizations reported that they have incurred additional costs and expenditures, have been forced to significantly reduce and even cancel their programming and have had challenges in adapting their programming to virtual delivery, while also not being able to access emergency funding.

New Costs and Expenditures and Limitations of Project-based Funding

Women's rights organizations are largely reliant on project-based funding and the limitations of this funding model is all the more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the inflexibility of this funding significantly impacts organizations' ability to withstand this crisis. Nearly 45% of respondents claimed that new costs and expenditures had the most significant impact on their organization. Although this reality is not unique to the women's sector, the historic defunding and concentrated streamlining of project-based funding and grants in the sector has led to unique and hard-hitting challenges and barriers. The lack of core operational funds undermines organizations' ability to adapt to new realities and leaves them without any emergency funds to cover unexpected costs. As one respondent describes it, "the pandemic has led to a vast increase in administrative duties, grant writing, reporting, recovery planning, risk management, supporting team, supervising and initiating plan B for most plans." The same respondent also

³ Methodology: The online survey instrument collected both qualitative (open field response format) and quantitative data (multiple choice). The online survey was open from October 19 to November 6 and was publicized through social media and emailed through the networks of all the survey partners. Recognizing the sensitive data requested around budget, funding and project/program delivery we did not collect identifying information and survey responses were anonymous. As the purpose of the online survey was to identify the unique experiences of women's rights organizations, respondents were asked whether they self-identified as a women's rights organization. To limit the possibility of duplicate responses from the same organization, individual survey respondents were asked whether they were authorized to fill out the survey on behalf of their organization and had knowledge of the organizational budget and structure. The online survey was available in French and English. We received 89 responses in English and 28 in French.

identified that the challenges and barriers born from project-based funding, and exacerbated during the pandemic, would be mitigated through “additional funds to help manage these demands without expectation of further output.”

25% of respondents identified unrestricted funding support as most critical during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to ensure their sustainability. Responding women's rights organizations explained that project-based funding created particular challenges for them during the pandemic with projects not being able to proceed, yet outputs are still expected to be delivered in order to receive funding. As it becomes increasingly difficult for them to deliver on their projects, future funding is in jeopardy, further exacerbating these organization's financial sustainability. Project funding covers key costs such as paying for rent, human resources, technology and other essential expenses. One respondent stated, “if we weren't already struggling to maintain our programs and services due to unsustainable funding models, we would be able to manage through this pandemic without a significant change. What would be more helpful to us is adequate sustainable funding for the CORE [operational] services as well as the gender-based violence related services so that we could focus more of our time and attention on the program delivery and the accommodations required due to the pandemic, and less on grant proposals and developing new programs to fit funding applications.” Access to core funding to cover essential operational costs would enable women's rights organizations to better adapt to the new reality, while having the financial autonomy to invest in the most critical infrastructure to sustain their organization. Without core funding, women's rights organizations will continue to be plagued by precarity. Core funding is needed now, and in the future in order to secure long-overdue justice, security and equality for all women in Canada.

Reduction and Cancellation of Programs and Services

51% of respondents stated that their organization was forced to reduce their vital services to women as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, while 48% of respondents had to cancel their programming altogether. This means that a significant amount of women's rights organizations are unable to reach the women they serve as they did before the pandemic. One respondent specified, “our peer group could no longer meet, and because of poverty we could not contact women in the group because they cannot not afford cell phones, have no access to wifi or cell service. Their isolation was profound as they could not reach out to family, access government services online, connect with community, or call friends in times of crisis.” This issue for women's rights organizations is twofold. Firstly, not only are vulnerable women unable to access the specific supports and services of individual women's rights organizations, but they are unable to access agents of socialization and vital general resources to support their day to day needs, like access to a working cell phone. Secondly, as a result of women's rights organizations being forced to cancel or reduce their programming during the pandemic, as outlined above, this often affects their access to funding and resources as much of the funding available to the sector is project-based. Therefore, leaving women's rights organizations working on already stratified budget lines and within tight project-based funding restrictions.

Inability to Access Emergency Funding

The federal and provincial governments have created several emergency benefit programs to assist charities and not-for-profits to weather the pandemic. Yet, 39% of responding women's rights organizations noted that they were not able to access any government funding as their needs did not meet the funding criteria. Some organizations also stated that they did not have the capacity to apply for funding in the first place. As one respondent stated, "We honestly do not have the time to research and apply for many of these [government funding supports] because we are still on the frontlines of trying to deliver services and complete projects. We don't have the capacity." Operating on shoestring budgets already, the extra administrative burden of these programs combined with the increased demand for services, makes these benefit programs out of reach.

Digital Capacity

As some programs and services have moved online in response to public health measures, 20% of respondents voiced concern for service users' ability to access the internet and technology, tools that are often inaccessible for vulnerable community members. A respondent from a rural francophone community identified that, "the loss of contact with the community is a major setback for us. We will have a lot of work to do after the pandemic, despite all our adaptations and efforts. The internet is not accessible to everyone, and not everyone knows how to get connected (especially with the more isolated or older segments of the population)." Another responding women's rights organization echoed this, while also stating that, "equity seeking groups do not have access to the internet or devices to participate in online programming. Service users at home do not have privacy, confidentiality, or safety to receive services from home." These responses speak to the limitations in online service delivery due to a lack of access to technology and/or the internet. Women's rights organizations play a vital role in community members' lives, and they are severely limited in being able to fulfil this essential role without further support and resourcing.

While responding women's organizations expressed concern around service users' ability to access their services, they also identified digital capacity as a serious gap within their own organization. Women's rights organizations reported that their existing limited digital capacity made transitioning to the virtual context during the pandemic difficult. As a result of this challenge, 42% of respondents stated that digital capacity, including financial support for training and transitioning to the digital world, is critical in supporting their organization's ability to function throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Many respondents claimed similar hardships as highlighted by one respondent, "we need to completely adapt programming which has been difficult. Further, we are unsure of the digital efficacy of the modifications and are still grappling with the limited technology we have access to 2 laptops for 7 staff resulting in some being forced to use their personal computers."

RECOMMENDATIONS

As women's rights organizations work from multiple levels of service provision, across sector lines, and on multiple forms of intersecting vulnerabilities and marginalization, they are integral for the advancement of gender equality locally, nationally, and on an international scale through Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In order to continue on the path to gender equality, one that the World Economic Forum (WE) has identified as being over a 100 year long journey,⁴ we must ensure that women are centred in considerations of how to deal with the current pandemic and how to continue to build an equitable society in the future.

We propose the following recommendations resulting from the data gathered in this survey. They represent the needs most commonly noted by the 117 respondents from all parts of Canada. The government must:

Provide an immediate secure, low-barrier, accessible fund during the COVID-19 pandemic that can be used by women-serving agencies and women's rights organizations to cover overheads and essential operational costs to release pressure of existing project funding and downturns in fundraising, to ensure their ongoing survival.

Provide core funding to women-serving agencies and equity-seeking organizations to support continued advances in gender equity in Canada moving forward at a time when the pandemic threatens to roll back decades of progress.

Establish better data gathering and analysis on the women's sector's challenges, led and informed by the sector in partnership with Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) to better understand the challenges the sector faces and to develop solutions that are based on the realities of these organizations. These data and analysis would help inform funding and programming gaps.

Ensure organizations can have full access to high speed wifi and quality broadband wherever they are, without paying extra and excessive dividends for these services. Digital access is essential in COVID-19 both for organizations that are cash-strapped and for communities that have been left out of the existing services, such as rural, remote and northern communities. The government must accelerate plans to improve and extend reasonably-priced digital capacity throughout Canada.

Ensure that all existing gains made in policy to advance women's rights and gender equality are sustained and protected against rollbacks and backlash. Continue to maintain the role of the federal government to enshrine and enhance progress for all women, by prioritizing a gendered intersectional framework for analysis.

⁴ World Economic Forum. (2020, August 21). It's 100 Years Since US Women got the right to Vote, but how has Gender Equality Changed? Retrieved 24 November 2020, from: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/100-years-us-women-right-to-vote-gender-equality/>