

Synergy

Workforce Development
for Vulnerable Women to Succeed

EVIDENCE REPORT



June 2023



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



The work that informs this report takes place on and across the traditional territories and current homes to many Indigenous nations. YWCA Canada's national office is located in Tkaronto, also known as Toronto, the traditional territory of the Wendat, the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee and Métis. We acknowledge the enduring presence of Indigenous peoples in this area and recognize the current treaty holders, the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, as contemporary stewards of the land.

We thank our colleagues at YWCA Regina, YWCA Sudbury, YWCA Moncton, YWCA Thompson, YWCA Northwest Territories and YWCA Toronto – particularly Community of Practice (CoP) attendees and report co-contributors Alexis Losie, Bernouse Davilus, Alicia Mazerolle, Kate Wilson, Maui Pare and Tsering Tsomo – for their commitment, insights, and vital contributions to both this report and broader service provision. We acknowledge the time, trust, and engagement of program participants across multiple sites.

This report showcases our collective work towards expanding equity-centered community programming and inclusive labour market access. We hope that learnings from this project will enhance the impact of YWCA Canada's ongoing efforts to advance gender equity for those from structurally excluded communities. We thank the Future Skills Centre (FSC) for partnering with us in this work.

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INTRODUCTION

Synergy: Workforce Development for Vulnerable Women to Succeed is a national participatory research and knowledge mobilization project aimed at advancing gender equity in the Canadian labour market and addressing the unique challenges women and equity-deserving groups face in accessing gainful employment. YWCA Canada and participating Member Associations, with support from the Future Skills Centre (FSC), identified and implemented community-based strategies for enhancing resilience and inclusion in the Canadian workforce.



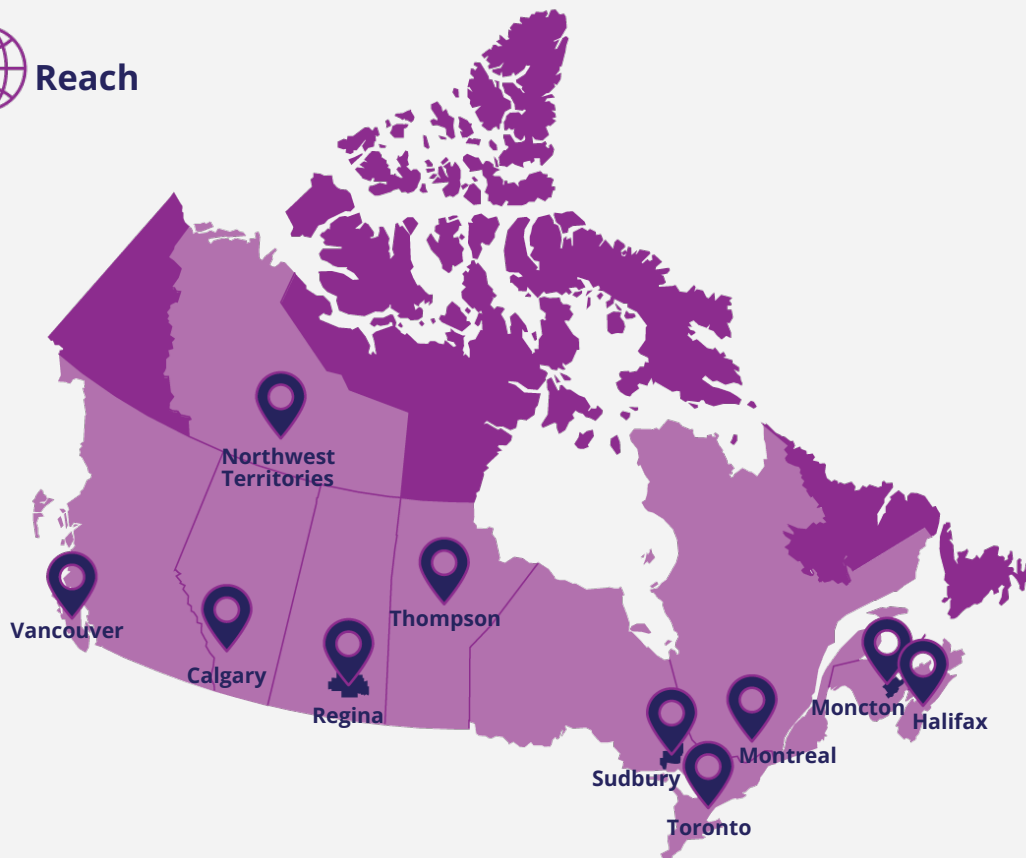
Objectives

Through evidence-informed service delivery and employer engagement

- **Identify** promising workforce development practices
- **Improve** supports and service delivery
- **Implement** key lessons to transform recruitment, retention, and workplace culture
- **Increase** economic empowerment of women and gender diverse people in Canada
- **Inclusive** access and retention of gainful employment in Canada

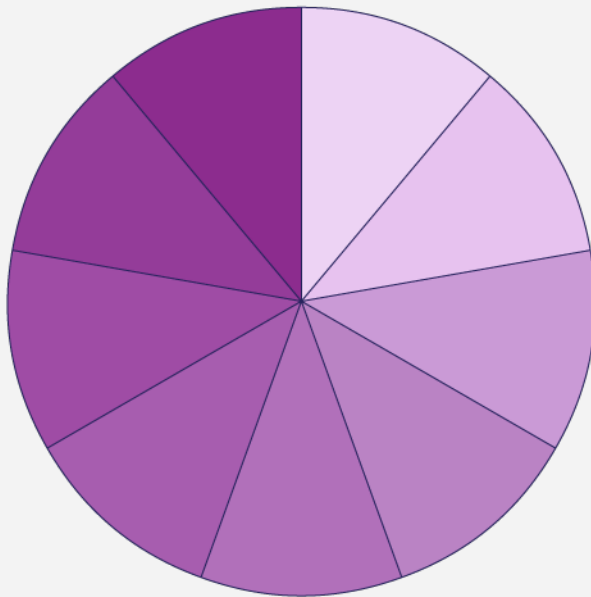


Reach



 **Focus**

Our employment interventions focus on addressing barriers and advancing opportunities for equity-deserving groups in Canada. In particular, women and gender diverse people at the intersection of a range of social and structural barriers (poverty, housing precarity, rural and remote living, immigration and settlement issues, single parenthood, Indigeneity, racialization, disabilities etc.).



- Women and Gender Diverse People
- Rural, Remote & Northern Communities
- Racialized Communities
- People with Disabilities
- Newcomers, Refugees & Immigrants
- Language Minority Groups
- Indigenous People
- Youth
- Single Parents

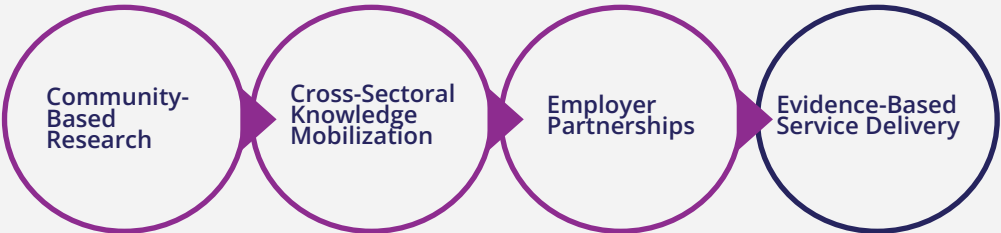
Through our work with over 300,000 women and families across our 30 Member Associations in 9 provinces and 2 territories, YWCA Canada has learned that systemic barriers inhibit women and gender diverse people from accessing the labour market. This problem is exacerbated for those from remote and Northern communities, Black, Indigenous and racialized individuals, disabled individuals those fleeing or experiencing violence, newcomers, single parents, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, those living on low incomes, people with criminal records or previously incarcerated, and those engaged in sex work or substance use.



Key community learnings that center the voices, lived experience, and recommendations of marginalized women and gender diverse individuals were embedded into service provider interventions to improve access to gainful employment.

Through research and engagement with service users, service providers, community organizations and employers across the country, the study sought to learn more about:

- Applying participatory and community-based research practices to the development of workforce interventions for women and gender diverse people facing intersectional and compounding barriers to work.
- Creating pathways from pre-employment programs to securing gainful employment or self-employment for women and gender diverse people.
- Implementing multi-stakeholder strategies for addressing barriers to women’s and gender diverse individual’s labour market access.



EVIDENCE OF IMPACT: COLLABORATIVE OUTCOME REPORTING

Methodology and Evaluation Strategy

YWCA Canada engaged in participatory approaches to impact evaluation based on quarterly activity reporting, Key Performance Indicator (KPI) surveys, Community of Practice (CoP) meetings, and virtual research visits. Survey tools measured quantitative metrics including program completion, employment status pre- and post-graduation, networking gains, and changes to participants’ self-reported confidence and readiness to apply for employment, make career advancements or start their own businesses after program completion. Member Associations were involved in collaborative outcome reporting through CoP meetings and virtual visits to share cross-learnings, challenges, and engage in discussion.



Key Findings: Program Statistics and Impact Metrics



Impact



Collaborating with **10** YWCAs in **9** provinces and territories



Developed **3** online training modules to strengthen capacity of employers and employment service providers



Improving supports and service delivery in **4** YWCAs (Regina, Sudbury, Moncton, and Thompson)



Organized **3** national employment equity roundtables featuring **6** employers from different sectors and **3** civil society organizations



2500+ women and gender diverse people benefitted from skills training and pre-employment programming



Over **75%** of participants completed employment readiness and placement programs



Insights

We bring together industry leaders and social impact organizations to discuss bold steps in advancing gender equity in the workplace

500+

registered attendees at roundtables

1450+

unique YouTube views

222,500+

audience reached through social media and web content

25+

employers engaged to deepen commitments to gender equity

To grow our evidence-base and develop a rich picture of which interventions were most effective, replicable, scalable, and appropriate in each community or local context, YWCA Canada supplemented participant surveys and quarterly activity reports with CoP meetings where program staff and coordinators could openly share challenges they encountered, changes that were actioned, and impacts and benefits of these efforts for participants and the broader communities served.

This collaborative, mixed-method approach to outcome and impact reporting enabled partnering associations to present evidence of how a specific program positively impacted beneficiaries over time while contributing to the program improvement and continuous learning of all partners.

In addition, these forums allowed the YWCA research team to validate and ground the survey findings and follow-up on any reporting gaps.

EARLY LEARNINGS: THE CASE FOR A COMMUNITY BASED LENS

In May 2020, as part of the *Born to Be Bold: Measuring success for women's access to the labour market* project funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE), YWCA Canada surfaced promising practices and priorities for equitable economic empowerment and workplace inclusion of multiply-marginalized women and gender diverse people through research with 10 YWCA Member Associations (Calgary, Halifax, Moncton, Montreal, NWT, Regina, Sudbury, Thompson, Toronto and Vancouver).

Member Associations identified promising practices to address these employment barriers and, more fundamentally, to enact a structural shift in the labour market.

The following promising practices were shaped by and shared with the broader YWCA movement to inform YWCA program standards and practices. They have been tested, operationalized, and integrated into Member Association programs:

4 Community-informed Strategies to advance inclusive labour market access in Canada



**Flexible
Work**



**Childcare
and Transport**



**Training
and Skill
Recognition**



**Peer
Programming**

The practices identified through this research demonstrate the ways in which community-led insights can support cross-sectoral action to advance women and other marginalized groups in the workforce, improve access to gainful employment, increase overall economic growth and gender equity.

Across the YWCA movement, these insights continue to inform how we move forward, plan, and deliver services and programming.

EMERGING PRACTICES: COVID-19 AND HOLISTIC SUPPORT STRATEGIES

This section traces how Member Associations have embedded these principles into their existing suite of employment training and advancement programs to better respond to emerging needs in communities. Member Associations noted that the COVID-related turn to remote and virtual programming/work has deepened access divides for those with limited digital literacy or limited access to digital infrastructures including internet connections, devices, and other technological barriers. The also identified the disproportionate burden on women and gender diverse people who work at home while balancing the care needs of children and other family members. Notably, participants were unable to access childcare supports and on-site childminding facilities when attending virtual programs. Another significant challenge encountered by programs delivered online or in hybrid formats was how to create and maintain safety and spaces where people feel like they can belong, trust, and connect with other participants.

To account for the challenges and changing needs associated with remote/hybrid service delivery and social isolation, a number of Member Associations expanded their culturally responsive programming and holistic supports. Program coordinators offered programming that was asynchronous, available on weekends, or during school hours to increase accessibility for people with children and embedded Talking Circles facilitated by Elders, culturally resonant food, and more group counselling to mitigate isolation and make participants more open to individual referrals. This resulted in increased connection and community engagement, particularly amongst rural, Indigenous and Immigrant communities.

Effective interventions for individuals and groups at the intersection of a range of systemic barriers (such as housing precarity, rural and remote living, poverty, immigration and settlement issues, single parenthood, Indigeneity, racialization, disabilities etc.) **require holistic, person-centered approaches to program design and delivery** that are responsive to shifting circumstances. Through our feedback and validation process, it became apparent that many promising workplace practices are limited to larger, better-resourced employers and overwhelmingly only available to non-frontline workers. To ensure we are creating resources that are relevant to workplaces where vulnerable women and gender diverse people are employed, we expanded partnership development, piloted promising practices, and convened cross-sectoral exchanges to discuss the possibilities of adopting and scaling the project recommendations.

Our research and knowledge mobilization work has focused on these complexities and convened cross-sectoral conversations to envision policies that center the needs of women and gender diverse people in

4 Holistic support strategies



**Continuity of
Supports and Peer
Engagement**



**Digital
Connectivity**



**Capacity Building
and Trauma-
Informed**



**Culturally
Responsive and
Wraparound Supports**

HOW WE MOVE FORWARD: BUILDING FEMINIST FUTURES OF WORK

Community organizations have the potential to be catalysts and key contributors to broader labour market changes. Evidence-based recommendations from equity-deserving groups and the sector that serves them are essential to designing policies that meet the need of women and gender diverse people. A key learning from the project (and YWCA's broader work with equity-seeking communities) is that most employment interventions have not fully considered (or been resourced to support) the economic and social responsibilities of participants.

Partnerships between educational institutions, employers and community organizations have helped develop continuing training opportunities that are responsive to in-demand skills or industry changes and deliver it in formats that are flexible and suited to those seeking to acquire new skills. When women and gender diverse people are trained for high demand jobs, their employment opportunities expand and that is good for the entire economy.

Multi-Service Organizations (MSOs) such as YWCA Canada are deeply connected to communities they serve and offer a broad range of services in response to emerging community priorities. People facing multiple, complex, and interrelated challenges can tremendously benefit from sustained, comprehensive, and integrated supports over time. Even when MSOs do not directly provide a certain service, they usually have the connections and local knowledge to provide referrals, resource navigation, and collaborate effectively with other organizations that can offer the service.

YWCA Canada and YWCA Member Associations offer a suite of supports including housing services, educational and training programs, harm reduction services, survivor support, financial literacy programs, job development, youth programs, and childcare supports. Staff at YWCA Member Associations work with individuals and families in the community to co-create development plans; understand what supports are needed to achieve those outcomes and what barriers may impede them; provide those services in a coordinated way; and follow up to ensure the individuals and families attain their goals. Community organizations, such as YWCA Member Associations, understand the context of their clients' lives and are uniquely positioned to offer holistic support.

Flexible funding streams are required to better resource MSOs to provide coordinated services. Evaluations methods must also be adapted to be outcomes-oriented and not target-based. To realize the full potential of MSOs for social impact, it is necessary to break down organizational silos and ensure diversified and flexible funding to improve service quality and client-centric outcomes.

Meaningful inroads to workforce participation also depend on strengthening the care economy. Any progress made towards improved wages and work conditions for women and gender diverse people in Canada must be accompanied by continuous investments in the care economy. **As Canada's second-largest childcare provider, we know that coordinated care services can help build an inclusive workforce and dismantle barriers to decent work.**

Through the Synergy project, YWCA Canada has partnered with employers to fostering gender-responsive, inclusive, family-friendly work policies, such as pay equity, maternal and paternal leave, flexible working arrangements, and adjustments to compensation matrices that include care allowances. In these and other ways, YWCA Member Associations across the country work to address systemic barriers and provide inclusive services that leave no one behind.