



A TURNING POINT  
FOR WOMEN



The Honourable Rod Phillips, Minister of Finance  
Chair, Ontario Jobs and Recovery Committee  
Government of Ontario  
By email: submissions@ontario.ca

August 4, 2020

***Re: Recommendations for a Gender-Responsive Recovery Plan***

Dear Minister Phillips and members of the committee:

We are writing to share our recommendations on how the Ontario government can support an equitable, gender-responsive recovery plan.

YWCA Toronto is the city's largest multi-service organization serving women, girls, and gender-diverse people. Every day we help our program participants and residents find safety, gain meaningful employment, and access safe, affordable housing. We serve over 13,000 people across Toronto each year. We also engage in systemic advocacy to advance gender and racial equality, reduce poverty, and end gender-based violence.

**Summary of Recommendations**

- 1. Universal Child Care:** Adequately fund the provincial child care system to ensure it can offer high quality, affordable, and accessible services. Women's labour market re-entry is contingent on access to child care.
- 2. Income Security Reform:** Strengthen Ontario's income security system to ensure CERB-level payout for individual and families who rely on this system to survive. Women and children are disproportionately impacted by poverty and require adequate income supports to thrive.
- 3. Women's Employment Programs:** Increase investment in women-centred employment and training programs to counter the enormous pandemic-related job losses faced by women.
- 4. Non-Profit Stabilization Fund:** Implement ONN's proposal for a \$680 million fund for the non-profit sector that has seen an estimated \$1.8 billion in lost revenue in the first three months of the pandemic. The sector needs public funding to continue providing responsive essential services.

5. **Labour Market Reform:** Modify employment legislation to require workers to be paid for at least seven days of sick leave, with an additional 14 days of paid leave during the pandemic, and address the gender wage gap. With gender inequities widening due to COVID-19, it is more important than ever to close the gender wage gap.
6. **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):** Ensure a secure, adequate, and affordable supply chain for PPE and other materials to keep non-profit workplaces, residents, and participants safe.
7. **Safe and Affordable Housing:** Prioritize the creation of safe and dignified housing options that respond to the needs of communities facing homelessness, poverty, mental health issues, and violence. Housing must be adequate, affordable, and include a range of options to ensure that women and non-binary individuals, as well as their children, can live in safety.

## **Further information**

### **1. Universal Child Care**

Access to affordable child care is a key precursor to women's labour market participation. The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women, through heightened job loss and added care responsibilities, means that investment in the provincial child care system will be critical to women's economic recovery. Financial recovery for women will be much slower unless provincial responses include additional and significant investments in our child care system.

YWCA Toronto operates an Early Learning Centre that we are in the process of fully re-opening. However, child care re-opening throughout our province has been slow. With so many multi-service non-profits facing increased deficits and economic uncertainty, many non-profit child care spots are at risk. The child care system pre-pandemic was already unaffordable and inaccessible for many families. The move towards a fully publicly funded system will be integral to supporting women's economic empowerment.

The government should create a defined timeline for the design and execution of an early child care system that is affordable, accessible, high quality and with enough space for all Ontario families. As sector partners such as the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care have suggested, this may mean tripling the child care budget.<sup>1</sup> This is the price to pay for a world-class economy that supports women and economic growth. It is estimated that every \$1 spent on expanding public enrolment in early childhood education leads to a \$6 return in long-term economic

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<sup>1</sup>[https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/aeceo/pages/2559/attachments/original/1590580183/EXEC\\_SUMMARY\\_REOPENING\\_TO\\_RECOVERY.pdf?1590580183](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/aeceo/pages/2559/attachments/original/1590580183/EXEC_SUMMARY_REOPENING_TO_RECOVERY.pdf?1590580183)

benefit. Collaboration with municipalities will offer the opportunity to implement this system appropriately for every community.<sup>2</sup>

## **2. Income Security Reform**

Strengthening Ontario's income security system to ensure at minimum a CERB-level payout for families who rely on this system to survive will be critical to recovery efforts. Poverty destroys lives, limits opportunities, and harms families. It fractures communities and leaves many women and gender-diverse people in unsafe situations. Entrenched and deep poverty is particularly harmful because it creates a sense of hopelessness and negatively impacts both physical and mental health. It can also negatively affect economic growth.

When individuals and families fall into the cycle of poverty it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, to leave that cycle without assistance. An extensive examination of Ontario's income security system conducted by the Income Security Reform Working Group, the First Nations Income Security Reform Working Group, and the Urban Indigenous Table on Income Security Reform produced many recommendations captured in the 2018 [Income Security: A Roadmap for Change](#) report. We ask that the government review and implement the recommendations proposed in this report.

We also urge that the top-ups on OW and ODSP that began during the pandemic are made permanent.<sup>3</sup> Assistance rates pre-pandemic were inadequate to meet basic needs. Previous reductions to social assistance programs have also caused distress and confusion for recipients. Consistently accessing this new level of assistance will create favourable conditions for everyone in need of support to live full and healthy lives in our communities. Any effective approach to recovery must address the harmful effects of poverty and seek to reduce them.

For more information about YWCA Toronto's approach to poverty reduction, please refer to our [Poverty Reduction Strategy Submission](#).

## **3. Women's Employment Programs**

Over the course of COVID-19 women's participation in the labour force has reached a historic low.<sup>4</sup> Increased investment in women-centred employment and training programs will help address the gender gap in the skilled trades and technology sector. Despite the proven success of gender-specific skilled trades programs, funding agreements are on a yearly basis. It is difficult to respond to community needs, plan for the future, and recruit and retain staff when it is unknown whether funding will be renewed. What would be helpful are three-year, five-

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ontario.ca/page/final-report-and-recommendations-gender-wage-gap-strategy-steering-committee#section-5>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mcsc.gov.on.ca/EN/MCSC/PROGRAMS/SOCIAL/odsp/index.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/women-employment-canada-covid-19-1.5652788>

year, and/or longer-term funding models that allow organizations to provide a continuity of service and build meaningful relationships with training institutes, employers and unions.

We believe women and gender-diverse people need specialized support from employment service providers in order to address gender-based inequities. We urge the provincial government to increase and annualize funding specifically for women and gender-diverse people in skilled trades and employment services, and to ensure such services are offered by gender-based organizations.

The provincial government can also play an increased role in creating employment and apprenticeship opportunities for equity-seeking groups including women, Indigenous peoples, Ontarians with disabilities, racialized workers, LGBTQ2S+ communities, and newcomers. The government should explore leveraging the province's infrastructure commitments to push businesses to implement equity-based hiring practices.

#### **4. Non-Profit Stabilization Fund**

The non-profit sector has seen an estimated \$1.8 billion in revenue losses in the first three months of the pandemic. At YWCA Toronto, we are projecting a deficit of over \$1 million. We encourage the government to implement Ontario Nonprofit Network's (ONN) proposal for a \$680 million non-profit sector fund. Without this fund, many non-profits will simply not be able to survive. We know that Ontario's 58,000 non-profits provide invaluable policy work, advocacy, and services to all residents, even throughout the current pandemic. Without our work many communities in our province would be without essential services.

The non-profit sector plays a key role in Ontario's economic recovery. With a million workers, 80% of whom are women, we are a vital part of a vibrant and prospering economy. Layoffs and shut downs in our sector will be felt unequally by women workers in our province and the communities that rely on our services. We urge the government to adopt ONN's recommendations and look forward to supporting their implementation.

#### **5. Labour Market Reform**

The pandemic has called into question who is considered an essential service worker, and how such workers are treated and paid. Since many frontline workers are racialized women who tend to be underpaid, we do hope the government's response to this pandemic includes strengthening our provincial labour standards. Broad labour market reforms to protect workers and improve working conditions in particularly feminized industries are needed. This pandemic has highlighted the importance of cleaners, personal support workers, and retail workers in keeping our society functioning. Stabilizing historically precarious work should rise to the top of provincial employment issues.

Establishing a livable minimum wage of at least \$15 per hour and empowering workers to stay home, with pay, for two full weeks when they are ill are two recommendations that can be immediately implemented. Two additional labour reforms for the government to consider are pay equity reforms and equal pay for equal work, as suggested in the 2015 [final report](#) of the Gender Wage Gap Strategy Steering Committee. The benefits of these practices have been discussed at length<sup>5</sup>, and what is needed now is mandatory deployment across industries.

COVID-19 has shown us just how important stable and equitable income is when individuals and society are put under strenuous conditions. Women and gender-diverse residents must have the same access to financial resources as men.

#### **6. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**

Procuring PPE has been an ongoing challenge, compromising our ability to keep our staff and residents safe. Until recently, it was difficult for our Association to obtain PPE from our provincial/municipal partners. More recently we have received a steadier supply, albeit at a premium cost. We would like to re-iterate the importance of securing an adequate and affordable supply chain for PPE and other materials to help keep our workplaces safe.

We suggest that the government explores ways to plan as systems of service, rather than have services siloed by their source of their funding. It is unsafe, and untenable, to have non-healthcare-funded community services vulnerable to a lack of PPE and safety directives, while healthcare-funded community services are benefitting from these resources and guidance.

#### **7. Safe and Affordable Housing**

The government should expedite the increased creation of a range of housing options that are safe and dignified. The housing needs of communities facing marginalization and Ontarians on low-incomes must be prioritized – especially women and gender-diverse people who are homeless due to violence.

The pandemic has drastically underlined the importance of affordable and supportive housing options. While the well-being of our residents and staff remains our top priority, it has been difficult to implement social and physical distancing guidelines in our shelter portfolio. Through a generous donation from a private foundation and close collaboration with the City, we were able to move some shelter residents into two hotels which enabled us to adhere to public health guidelines more effectively.

Physical distancing has been a key component in preventing the spread of the virus and has forced shelters to limit the number of residents in our facilities. Though necessary, the

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ontario.ca/page/final-report-and-recommendations-gender-wage-gap-strategy-steering-committee#section-5>

restriction of new intakes contributes to the ongoing challenge for women fleeing violence: there simply is not enough shelter space. Prior to COVID-19, Violence Against Women (VAW) shelters were at capacity with fairly slow discharge rates due to the lack of affordable housing options. Now, due to the pandemic, women will likely have to endure violent relationships longer, especially when many people are still working from home and the opportunity to access support safely and confidentially is limited.

Emergency shelters are ultimately a band-aid solution to homelessness and precarious housing. The lack of purpose-built, affordable housing has contributed to Ontario's homelessness and created unsafe living conditions for women, gender-diverse people, and children. There is a pressing need and moral imperative for a coordinated housing strategy that creates safe, secure and affordable housing, and a coordinated plan to ensure effective support for tenants with complex needs. These housing plans must be rooted in an equity framework – a one size solution will not fit all residents. We urge the government to use an intersectional gender-based analysis when addressing the housing issue and implementing solutions in an effective manner.

## **Conclusion**

COVID-19 has presented many challenges but has also offered an unprecedented opportunity to address inequities that have stubbornly persisted in our province. Provincial leadership continues to be crucial in ensuring the well-being of residents and advancing a recovery plan that serves the interests of women, girls, and gender-diverse communities. The degree of cooperation between all levels of government has also been incredibly important to our collective safety and resilience. We hope the province will build upon the successes of these joint efforts.

We look forward to meeting with you or your representatives at your earliest convenience to discuss our recommendations and how YWCA Toronto can partner with the government to support recovery measures.

Sincerely,



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