



THE SHE-COVERY PROJECT

Confronting the Gendered Economic
Impacts of COVID-19 in Ontario

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 crisis is having a disproportionate economic impact on women. There are several reasons for this. First, temporary business shutdowns and layoffs during the state of emergency most severely affected occupations and sectors that predominantly employ women. Second, these sectors are those in which women entrepreneurs are more likely to operate, and their businesses tend to be newer, smaller, and less well-financed than those owned by men. Third, restrictions on schools and paid child care facilities have shifted additional hours of unpaid family care onto parents, and this work has largely been taken up by mothers. Fourth, while women are dominating the frontline responses to the COVID pandemic, they have not been included in the planning for recovery.

The pandemic has also exacerbated existing inequality and has been especially challenging for certain groups of women, including racialized women, Indigenous women, single mothers, low-income women, immigrant women, women with disabilities, and those living in rural areas.

The long-term impacts of COVID-19 on women in the workforce remains unknown. However, with women’s labour force participation at a record low, decades of progress towards gender equality are at stake. The Ontario Chamber of Commerce (OCC) strongly believes this is not only a watershed moment for women but for Ontario’s economy and society more broadly, as women’s participation in the labour market is a precondition to its fulsome economic recovery and prosperity.

This brief lays out a path to Ontario’s “she-covery” by examining data on the gendered labour market impacts of the pandemic and offering policy solutions to confront both immediate and longer-term challenges. Throughout this, an intersectional lens is essential to ensure no women are left behind.

The critical findings include:



- **Leadership and accountability** begin with a commitment from stakeholders to set collective targets, reward diversity, include women in decision-making bodies, and apply a gender and diversity lens to their strategies, policies, and programs for recovery.



- **Child care** requires a short-term strategy to weather the pandemic and longer-term, system-wide reforms to improve accessibility and affordability.



- **Workforce development** initiatives should focus on defining critical skills, accelerating women’s reskilling, and ensuring their skills are utilized – with a focus on increasing their participation in skilled trade, technology, and engineering roles in fast-growing sectors.



- **Entrepreneurship** should be understood as a pathway to economic growth, and an inclusive ecosystem is critical to supporting women entrepreneurs.




















- **Flexible work arrangements** are one way to level the playing field for women and improve organizational outcomes.

** The title of our brief is inspired by Canadian economist Armine Yalnizyan, who said about the pandemic, “No recovery without a she-covery.”ⁱ*

























SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Leadership & Accountability

RECOMMENDATIONS	GOVERNMENT	
	ONTARIO	CANADA
A. Launch an Ontario She-Covery campaign with targets for women's economic recovery.		
Communicate the business case for diversity and inclusion.		
Set collective targets around indicators of diversity and inclusion.		
Support the development and implementation of evidence-based strategies to advance diversity and inclusion.		
Rally support from employers, unions, post-secondary institutions, and other stakeholders to improve outcomes at multiple stages.		
B. Use procurement to incentivize diversity and inclusion.		
Introduce a diversity component to procurement processes.		
Set targets and track the maturity and success of supplier diversity over time.		
Encourage governments at all levels, as well as corporations, to build capacity for women and diverse entrepreneurs to participate in supply chains.		
C. Include women in all decision-making bodies around economic recovery.		
Apply a gender and diversity lens to strategies, policies, and programs focused on economic recovery and innovation.		
Develop steering committees to tackle specific challenges around child care, workforce development, and flexible work.		
Ensure decision-making bodies include women, child care experts, women entrepreneurs, representatives from sectors that predominantly employ women, and other groups disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.		
Consider establishing a Gender Advisory Council to help inform decisions throughout post-pandemic recovery.		















2 Child Care

RECOMMENDATIONS	GOVERNMENT	
	ONTARIO	CANADA
A. Prepare for a second wave.		
Develop a plan to rapidly increase spacing and staff to allow for physical distancing among children.		
Earmark funding for a second-wave scenario.		
Enhance resources for parents to support their children with remote learning.		
B. Improve long-term affordability and accessibility of child care.		
Immediately launch consultations on long-term child care reforms with parents, providers, employers, and other stakeholders.		
Policy decisions should aim to: increase investment, preserve choice, subsidize both parents and providers, and prioritize equity.		
Establish the National Child Care Secretariat to monitor, coordinate, and evaluate child care measures across Canada and share best practices among provincial and territorial governments.		
C. Address the shortage of early childhood educators.		
Standardize certification criteria, including foreign credential recognition, across Canada.		
Enhance online training programs and fast-track in-school credentials.		
Develop financial support for underemployed populations to access these training opportunities.		
D. Explore creative solutions ranging from in-program changes to workplace-based child care.		
Consult with stakeholders on potential improvements to after-school programs.		
Evaluate demand for workplace-based child care.		
If deemed appropriate, incentivize employers to offer onsite child care and support skilled trades employers with mobile child care arrangements for major projects.		
Consider tax innovation to support women entrepreneurs with children.		



3 Workforce Development

RECOMMENDATIONS	GOVERNMENT	
	ONTARIO	CANADA
A. Support women's reskilling		
Set gender and diversity targets within government-funded reskilling initiatives.		
Design training opportunities to address skills shortages identified through labour market data.		
Partner with colleges and employers to offer financial support (including loans, scholarships, and child care subsidies) that enables women's participation in reskilling.		
Improve access to career pathing and support for women's reskilling and job opportunities.		
Design skilling, upskilling, and reskilling programs that respond to women's needs, including through flexible formats, customized support, and wraparound services.		
B. Scale interventions proven to increase women's representation in skilled trades, engineering, technology, leadership roles, and other traditionally male-dominant sectors and occupations.		
Support evidence-based programs that advance women along the career pipeline, including school outreach, mentorships, apprenticeships, counseling, child care support, employer guidance, and cohort models.		
Consider establishing an Office to Advance Women Apprenticeship in Ontario.		

4 Entrepreneurship

RECOMMENDATIONS	GOVERNMENT	
	ONTARIO	CANADA
A. Foster an inclusive innovation ecosystem for entrepreneurs.		
Address barriers faced by women entrepreneurs at the individual, organizational, and societal levels.		
Further support women-led businesses with financing, legal advice, financial literacy, digital literacy, access to trade, mentorship, professional networking, procurement, and child care.		
Adopt a gender and diversity lens to all innovation programs and business supports to improve access. This includes ensuring support is available for self-employed entrepreneurs and those located in rural and remote communities.		
Leverage the Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub to continue collecting disaggregated data, advancing research-based solutions, and challenging stereotypes.		

5 Flexible Work

RECOMMENDATIONS	GOVERNMENT	
	ONTARIO	CANADA
A. Consider policy options to encourage more employers to offer flexible work arrangements.		
Assess the impacts of flexile work on productivity, congestion, mental health, and other areas of public concern.		
Review mechanisms – such as tax incentives, toolkits, or regulation – to support employers offering flexible work.		
Support programs that develop skills and capacity among employers and workers to take advantage of new working arrangements.		

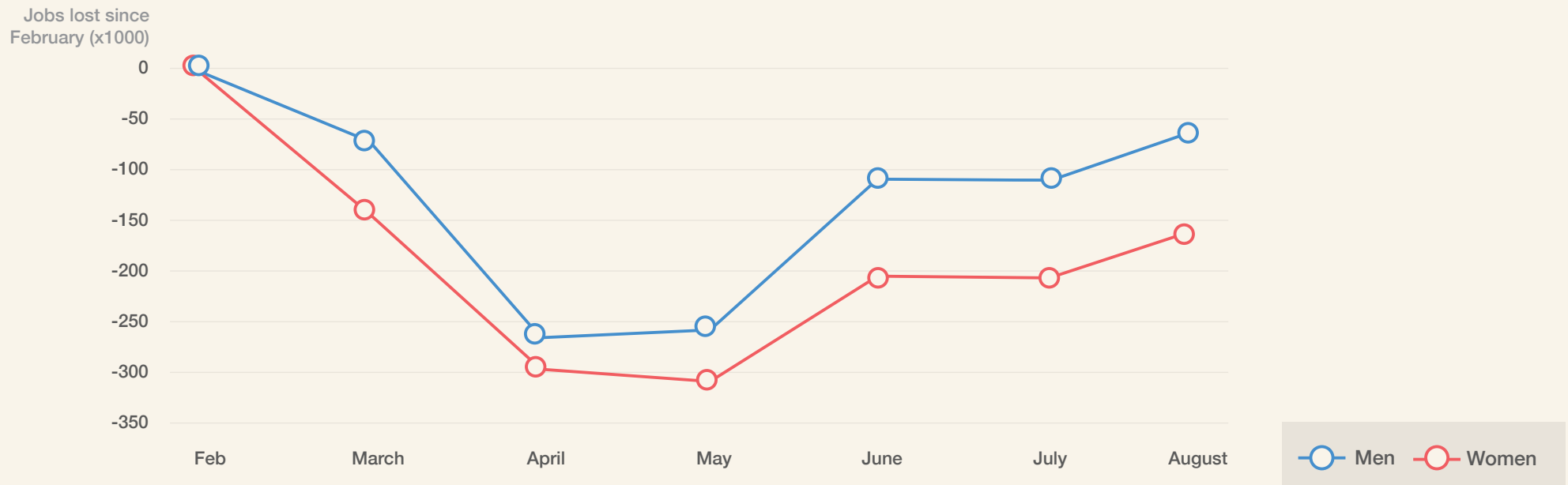
A DIFFERENT CRISIS FOR WORKING WOMEN

When the Government of Ontario declared a state of emergency and mandated the closure of non-essential businesses, the economic impacts were immediate, acute, and disproportionately borne by women. Several economists have accordingly dubbed the crisis a “she-cession”ⁱⁱ or “pink collar recession.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In March, women between the ages of 25 and 54 lost more than twice as many jobs as men in Ontario (see Figure 1).^{iv} Women’s labour force participation rate fell to its lowest level in thirty years.^v Since then, women have seen slower reemployment than men; as the economy gradually reopened between April and August, employment gains in Ontario were 200,200 for men and only 131,700 for women.^{vi}

A primary reason for this job loss disparity is that the occupations and sectors in which women are more likely to be employed were among those most impacted by emergency orders (including retail, food and accommodations, arts and recreation, social services, and other service industries that involve face-to-face contact).^{vii} This differs notably from

Figure 1: Change in Employment since February 2020 (Ontario)





the 2008 financial crisis, during which job losses were more pronounced in male-dominated sectors such as manufacturing and construction, and during which only 18 percent of jobs lost in Canada were held by women.^{viii}

The impact has been more acute for women from minority backgrounds. COVID-19-related job losses have been highest among racialized women, particularly Asian and Black women, as well as younger and lower-income women.^{ix} Single mothers, Indigenous women, immigrant women, women with disabilities, rural women, transgender-identifying women, and other intersectional groups tend to also be experiencing greater financial consequences than most Ontarians.^x

Additionally, the sectors most affected by the economic impacts of COVID-19 are those in which women entrepreneurs are more likely to operate. Their businesses are newer, smaller, less well-financed, and more vulnerable than those owned by men. Women also represent only 16 percent of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with one or more employees, but account for 38 percent of self-employed Canadians. Throughout the crisis, many women entrepreneurs found themselves ineligible for government supports because they did not have staff on payroll.^{xi} Nationwide, 61 percent of women founders reported losing contracts, customers, and clients due to COVID-19, compared to 34 percent of all small businesses.^{xii} In turn, women-owned businesses laid off a disproportionately a higher percentage of their workers than businesses owned by men.^{xiii} Often women-led businesses lacked the financial reserves and technological or financial expertise to adapt. Again, these impacts are compounded for diverse women entrepreneurs.

Another critical dimension to the crisis is child care. The closure of schools and daycare centres left parents with no choice but to assume child care and homeschooling responsibilities themselves, particularly as physical distancing guidelines limited their ability to rely on extended families. In Ontario, only 5 percent of families used child care services from March to June.^{xiv} Many families also assumed care of the elderly as they removed loved ones from long-term care facilities.

Family care during COVID-19 has generally affected mothers more than fathers, and the burden has been greatest for diverse women.^{xv} Racialized Canadians were twice as likely as white Canadians to stop looking for paid work or reduce time spent on paid work as a result of increased domestic responsibilities.^{xvi} Black and Indigenous Canadians were also more likely to say they suffered emotionally as a result of increased care work.^{xvii}





As a result of child care and homeschooling, employment among women with toddlers or school-aged children fell 7 percent from February to May, compared to 4 percent among men with children of the same age across Canada.^{xviii} Since then, unemployment has remained especially high for women with children between the ages of 6 and 17.^{xix}

Unpaid family care also impacted women who did not lose their jobs, limiting their productivity or at least causing emotional stress. This helps explain why journals reported their female academics were submitting fewer papers and starting fewer new projects than their male peers.^{xx}

While this report focuses on economic impacts, it is important to note that women have also been uniquely affected in other ways, including an increase in domestic violence^{xxi} and disproportionate financial losses for organizations primarily serving women and girls.^{xxii}

Finally, while women are leading in the fight against COVID both in the front lines as well as in terms of public health strategy and policy, they have been mostly excluded from the discussions of economic recovery and innovation. Applying a gender and diversity lens to the problems created by COVID-19 as well as the solutions is critical to an effective rebuilding strategy.



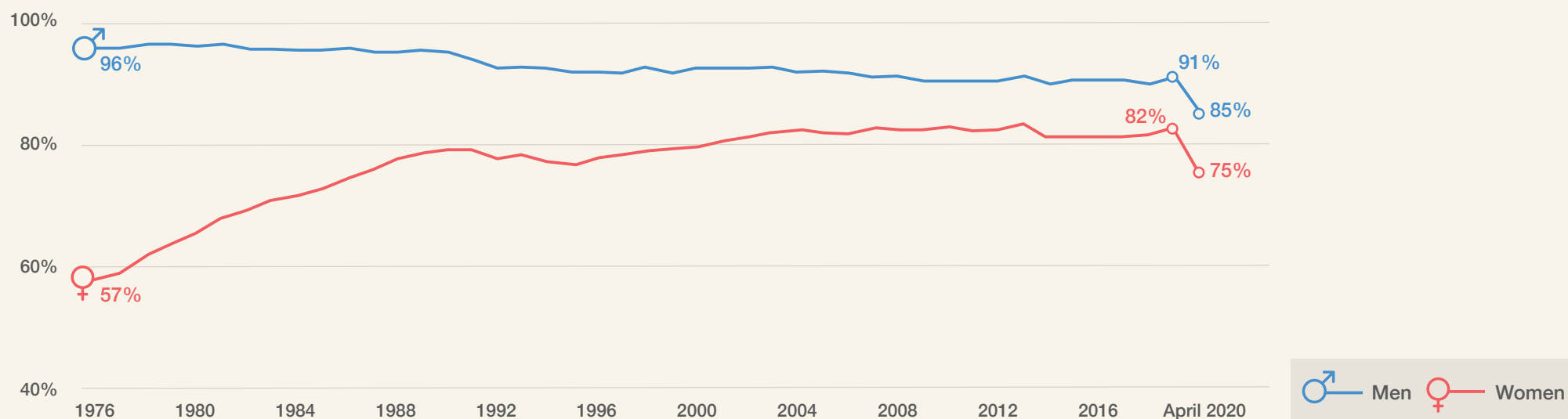
THE BIGGER PICTURE

Some context is needed to illustrate why decades of progress towards economic empowerment are at stake. Women's participation in the labour market has increased dramatically over the past half-century. Between 1976 and 2019, the participation gap between men and women in Ontario narrowed from 39 percentage points to 9 points (see Figure 2).^{xxiii}

Women now occupy 48 percent of all jobs in the province.^{xxiv} The number of female entrepreneurs has also grown three times faster than the number of men entrepreneurs over the past 40 years.^{xxv} Nationwide, women went from earning 25 percent of household income in 1976 to 42 percent in 2019, accumulating \$240 billion more per year than if their share of income had not increased.^{xxvi}

Such momentum has been possible because both the public and private sectors have taken steps to enable women to participate more fully in paid work through targeted programs, family benefits, workplace accommodations, and support for broader cultural change. In a 2019 survey, 87 percent of businesses agreed they are highly committed to gender diversity, compared to 56 percent in 2012.^{xxvii}

Figure 2: Pre-COVID-19 Labour Force Participation Rates (Ontario, Ages 25 to 54)

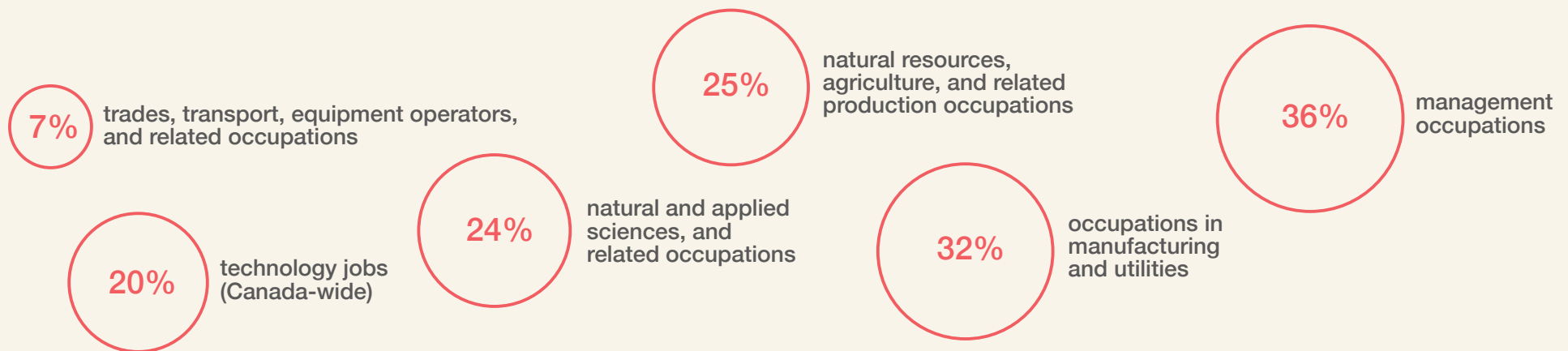


Fueling this progress is a growing recognition that women's representation in the labour market has both social and economic benefits, not only driving gender equality but also household income and workforce productivity. An often-cited report by McKinsey and Company estimated that, by 2026, Canada could add \$150 billion to its annual GDP by supporting women's participation in the workforce.^{xxviii} RBC puts the number at \$100 billion.^{xxix}

However, challenges remain. Women continue to shoulder a double burden of work as they remain responsible for the majority of domestic duties while participating in the workforce at nearly the same rate as men. In Ontario, women spend an average of 50 percent more time on unpaid domestic work than men (2.4 and 3.6 hours per day, respectively).^{xxx} In addition to child care and housekeeping, this includes time spent cleaning and caring for elders, the latter of which is increasing as our population ages.

Additionally, women remain underrepresented by a large margin in certain high-demand sectors, including the skilled trades, technology, and engineering (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Percentage of Women in Selected Professions in Ontario^{xxxi xxxii}



Underrepresentation in these professions is partly a reflection of pervasive gender norms that shape the choices girls and boys make early on in their education. Other barriers include workplace cultures that alienate women, a lack of diverse role models, unpaid care responsibilities, and discrimination. While some barriers limit the recruitment of women, others affect their retention over time.^{xxxiii}

Women also earn less than men. In Ontario, the average pay gap across all occupations means women earn 89 cents for every dollar earned by men.^{xxxiv} This gap is widest for





racialized women and within sectors with less female representation.

Senior leadership positions continue to be dominated by men, with women accounting for less than 20 percent of all directors and officers nationwide.^{xxxv} They are 76 percent as likely as men to be promoted to manager and 64 percent as likely to be promoted to vice president.^{xxxvi} Representation in leadership roles is especially low within the construction, manufacturing, and energy sectors.^{xxxvii}

Meanwhile, the supply and demand of skills is shifting. Technology adoption will require both men and women to adopt new skillsets and in many cases transition into new jobs, and it remains to be seen whether this disruption will help level the playing field for women or set them back. If domestic responsibilities or cultural norms prevent women from participating to the same extent as men in the new economy, gender disparities could intensify.^{xxxviii}

We also know that women-owned SMEs are one of the fastest growing segments of our economy, and women entrepreneurs are narrowing historic gaps, for example, around exports. Still, the evidence is clear that women entrepreneurs across Canada face unique barriers to starting and scaling their businesses. They are more likely to rely on self-financing or government grants, raising just 4 percent of venture capital funding despite representing 28 percent of entrepreneurs.^{xxxix xl}

There are multiple reasons for this, including cultural biases, a higher rate of self-employment, and the fact that women-owned businesses tend to be smaller and newer than those owned by men.^{xli} The evidence of systemic discrimination is also abundant, as most investors still associate entrepreneurship with men and male-dominated sectors. Studies show, for example, identical pitches from men and women produce dramatically different results.^{xlii} Additionally, investors often narrowly associate entrepreneurship with technology, where women are less represented, as opposed to other sectors such as arts, services, and social enterprises; and other supports tend to also favor those sectors.^{xliii} Diverse women entrepreneurs face even greater barriers.^{xliv}

In sum, the pre-pandemic context was one in which gender equality was imperfect but gradually improving. The long-term impacts of COVID-19 on women in the workforce remains unknown. However, we know that sluggish job recovery is putting women at a higher risk of long-term separation from the labour market and future wage penalties.^{xlv} Plainly, this crisis poses a clear risk to both women and the economy.



THE SOLUTIONS

A woman with dark hair in a bun is performing a plank exercise on a grey mat in a living room. She is wearing a black sports bra and leggings. To her left is a laptop displaying a fitness video. In the background, there is a light-colored sofa, a wooden shelving unit with books, and a potted plant.



Leadership and Accountability



Progress on gender equity starts with a commitment at the top. In the coming weeks and months, governments and employers will continue to duly convene a series of task forces, committees, and advisory groups focused on strategizing about Ontario's economic recovery. Each of these decision-making bodies should both contain women and recognize the economic and social importance of advancing women's workforce participation in the post-pandemic era.

Further, the cliché is right: what gets measured gets done. Setting targets and tracking outcomes around Ontario's she-covey builds shared accountability among stakeholders and encourages concrete actions that go beyond platitudes. Targets and evaluation should be informed by data, which means stakeholders will need to coordinate around the collection, analysis, and dissemination of information as they work together to achieve measurable impacts.

WHAT IS BEING DONE?

The Government of Canada uses a process called **Gender-based Analysis Plus** (GBA+) to analyze how its programs and policy decisions may impact people differently based on their gender, as well as race, ethnicity, religion, or age. Further, the federal government has set a target of doubling the number of women-owned businesses by 2025 through its **Women Entrepreneurship Strategy**.

Canada is using legislation to push for more diversity within corporate leadership. Effective January 2020, **Bill C-25** requires federally incorporated public companies to disclose the percentage of leadership positions occupied by women, Indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities, and members of visible minorities, as well as internal targets and policies to increase representation.

Ontario has similarly moved to advance more women in leadership positions. In 2016, through its **Get on Board** plan, the Province set two targets: women should make up at least 40 percent of appointments to every provincial board and agency by 2019, and businesses should appoint 30 percent women to boards by 2022.^{xlvi}

Meanwhile, more and more businesses are pledging their support for gender equity in the workplace. For example, in 2018, the Global Compact Network Canada launched a three-year project with federal funding, called **Gender Equality Leadership in the Canadian Private Sector**. With participation from employers across the country, the project is aiming to release a blueprint, assessment tool, and resource database by October 2020.

There are also sector-specific initiatives. **Equal by 30** is a campaign working towards equal pay, equal leadership, and equal opportunities in the clean energy sector by 2030. Signatories include the Government of Canada and several organizations operating in Ontario, including Ontario Power Generation, Bruce Power, Efficiency Canada, Enbridge, and others.



In 2017, Electricity Human Resources Canada launched the **Leadership Accord for Gender Diversity**, a public commitment by employers, educators, unions, and governments to promote diversity and inclusion within the energy sector. Employers are encouraged to use the self-assessment tool to evaluate and improve upon the effectiveness of their diversity practices.

The Canadian Apprenticeship Forum is in the process of establishing a **National Strategy for Women in Trades**, which will include a target for participation and retention of females in skilled trades careers. The Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters aims to increase women in manufacturing jobs by 100,000 from 2018 to 2023 as part of its **We Can Do It** campaign.

INTERNATIONAL TRENDS TO ADVANCE WOMEN IN TRADES: THE NEED FOR LEADERSHIP

Women's underrepresentation in the skilled trades is a concern for labour markets around the world. Women consist of only 9.8 percent of trades workers in the United States, 6.8 percent in the United Kingdom, and 5.7 percent in Australia.^{xlvii} Even in countries considered to have traditions of strong apprenticeship systems – such as Austria, Germany, and Switzerland – women represent fewer than 15 percent of trades workers.^{xlviii}

Such persistent gender gaps suggest that greater leadership and accountability are needed to advance the recruitment and retention of women in the skilled trades. Concrete action plans with measurable objectives are currently being developed in many jurisdictions, though there is still a long way to go.

In six Canadian provinces, there are dedicated Offices to Advance Women Apprenticeship. These offices provide wraparound services that connect women with job opportunities, offer networking and mentorship, and guide employers and unions towards meaningful progress. Newfoundland was the first province to introduce this model ten years ago and has since reached the highest level of women's representation in Canada.^{xlix}

In Massachusetts, women's enrollment in construction-related training programs has increased each year since 2012, reaching 19.7 percent of students in 2019-20.^l The state's success is a product of multi-stakeholder initiatives led by groups such as the Policy Group on Tradeswomen's Issues (PGTI). In 2008, PGIT set an ambitious goal to increase women's representation in the union construction trades to 20 percent by 2020. Since then, it has developed into a collaboration of more than 100 industry partners. Accountability is established through workforce monitoring groups known as Access and Opportunity Committees that review compliance, share best practices, and help stakeholders develop strategies. Support from unions and employers is essential to this model, and outcomes vary significantly depending on their commitment to the target.



1.a. Launch an Ontario She-Covery campaign with targets for women's economic recovery.

Gender equality will only be a priority during economic recovery if stakeholders rally behind a collective purpose and measurable goals.

As a starting point, the Government of Ontario should communicate the business case for women's economic recovery, namely how gender diversity benefits companies' bottom lines and the broader economy. This will help to obtain real buy-in from employers, unions, post-secondary institutions, households, and every stakeholder in between.

Collective targets should include indicators of both diversity and inclusivity. Where targets already exist, they should be incorporated into a broader she-covery strategy. Relevant indicators include:

- Employment and labour market participation rates
- Representation, retention, and career progression in traditionally male-dominant sectors
- Enrolment in diverse educational programs and apprenticeships
- Youth awareness of, and interest in, diverse career options
- Entrepreneurial diversity and success
- Representation in leadership positions
- Gender pay gap
- Gender gap in hours spent on unpaid domestic activities
- Accessibility and affordability of child care

These should be whole-of-society targets, a shared set of priorities that encourage intervention at multiple levels rather than placing the onus on any single stakeholder group. Leaders should commit to setting internal targets that are reasonable but aspirational, monitoring progress along relevant indicators, and reporting periodically on measures taken.

To be clear, we are not recommending mandatory quotas. In fact, neither targets nor strategies should be legislated, since a one-size-fits-all solution is rarely appropriate. Further, stakeholders should be encouraged to be creative about the solutions they deploy to mitigate gender imbalances. Some organizations may decide to adjust their procurement and/or hiring practices to make them more inclusive. In some cases, cohorts or quotas may be used to build a critical mass of women and change internal cultures. While sharing best practices is helpful, government should avoid presupposing what makes the most sense for each organization.

1.b. Use procurement to incentivize diversity and inclusion.

As the largest customers in the economy, governments have tremendous power over suppliers. Currently, public-sector request for proposal (RFP) processes are driven almost entirely by short-term cost considerations. Companies with strong diversity and inclusion models are not rewarded, despite evidence of their economic and social value.

Using procurement to reward diversity has many benefits – listed in the Government of Canada’s resource, “The Business Case for Supplier Diversity in Canada” – including more robust supply chains and increased economic development. Importantly, it does not require compromising on the quality or the cost of services and products, nor does it require changing the requirements for all suppliers.^{lii}

The Governments of Ontario and Canada should adjust their RFP processes in a way that creates opportunities for diverse entrepreneurs and suppliers that demonstrably support diversity and inclusion. Changing the incentive structures is the most powerful way to change outcomes. Again, communicating the business case will encourage governments at all levels as well as corporations to take these steps.

Other jurisdictions provide a helpful template. Toronto was one of the first municipalities in Canada to implement supplier diversity, and the practice is common in the United States. Further, certifying bodies such as Women Business Enterprises Canada can make it easier by confirming when businesses are majority owned and managed by women.

Finally, federal and provincial governments should set targets and track the maturity and success of its supplier diversity efforts over time. Several tools are available to help with this, including the Organizational Analysis: Self Assessment Guide and the Sample Supplier Diversity Reporting Scorecard.^{liii}

1.c. Include women in all decision-making bodies around economic recovery.

Steering committees should be established to tackle specific challenges outlined in this paper. Decision-making bodies within both the public and private sectors should include representatives from groups disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Where appropriate, economic recovery planning should be informed by women entrepreneurs, child care experts, and representatives from sectors that predominantly employ women, such as retail and social services.

Additionally, the Government of Canada should consider establishing a Gender Advisory Council similar to the one established during Canada's G7 presidency in 2018 and renewed by France in 2019.^{liv} Ultimately, diversity of perspective will help governments – as well as businesses – think more holistically about post-pandemic recovery and economic well-being.

Analyses of government programs should consider who benefits and who is excluded from their design and implementation with key performance indicators that consider gender and diversity and appropriate accountability frameworks.

Child Care

2



As long as COVID-19 is still a threat, government's priority must be to ensure parents have access to safe and reliable care arrangements for their children. Alternatively, parents (especially mothers) will be forced to cut back on paid work, careers and household finances will suffer, and economic recovery will stagnate.

Moreover, child care affordability and accessibility are long-term challenges that predate the pandemic. Most child care providers rely on parental fees for revenue, while government focuses on demand-side support for parents through cash transfers. In Ontario, parents may be eligible for the Ontario child care fee subsidy, the Canada Child Benefit, the Child Care Expense Deduction, and the Ontario Child Benefit.

Even with government subsidies, Canada (outside Quebec) has one of the least affordable child care systems among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.^{lv} Under the existing model, any costs associated with increased compensation and quality improvements are borne by parents, which has kept wages low in the (largely female) child care workforce for decades and made it difficult to recruit and retain sufficient qualified workers. This also puts licensed child care providers in a precarious financial position, a reality that has become especially apparent during COVID-19. As a result, supply of licensed child care is limited in most provinces and parents are left to rely on more expensive options, such as nannies, or decide that one parent, usually the mother, will take an extended period off from paid employment.

While child care is an issue for most working mothers, it can be especially challenging for women in sectors with non-traditional working hours that do not align with licensed child care hours. Some daycares do offer longer hours, but these are rare in Ontario. When both parents work shifts, they are typically forced to rely on nannies. Anecdotally, we know that a lack of flexible child care options has led many women in Ontario to abandon their careers in the trades and natural resource sectors.

WHAT IS BEING DONE?

In the initial stages of the pandemic, the Ontario government introduced a Support for Families program to help parents purchase educational materials to support learning at home, and the federal government increased the Canada Child Benefit by \$300 per child to support parents with additional costs. More recently, the federal government is proposing a new Canada Recovery Caregiving Benefit, valid until September 2021, to support Canadians unable to work as a result of caregiving.





Unlike other provinces, Manitoba took a unique approach to child care during the crisis by offering \$3,000 grants to early childhood educators willing to independently offer child care services in their homes or in the community. The Temporary Child Care Services Grant was offered Early Childhood Educators (ECE) II or III, Child Care Assistants or new graduates of the Early Childhood Education program.

As Ontario began to emerge from lockdown, the provincial government announced a plan to reopen schools in September with enhanced health and safety protocols. Some secondary schools will only partially reopen, although these children are older and should not require parental care. The Province has also announced more than \$350 million in funding to support the safe reopening of schools and will allow school boards to access \$500 million of their own reserve funds. The Government of Canada is also providing \$381 million to support the reopening of schools in Ontario. Funding will help pay for protective gear, cleaning supplies, additional staffing, and other costs.

Meanwhile, licensed child care centres have been permitted to reopen at full capacity in September under enhanced health and safety procedures. The Governments of Canada and Ontario are supporting licensed providers with funding to absorb added costs, including nearly \$147 million through the Canada-Ontario Early Learning and Child Care Agreement and \$234.6 million through the Safe Restart Agreement.

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In terms of longer-term child care reforms, in the last election, Prime Minister Trudeau promised to address shortcomings in the system by creating 250,000 additional child care spaces across Canada, with at least 10 percent reserved for care during extended hours, and establishing a national secretariat to lay the groundwork for a pan-Canadian child care system.^{lvi}

The Ontario government has committed to creating up to 30,000 licensed child care spaces in schools over the next five years.^{lvii} Ontario also began introducing full-day kindergarten in public schools in 2010, which has proven to increase the labour force participation of women, particularly those who are traditionally most excluded.^{lviii}

Child care advocates have been calling for a fundamental reform, with some suggesting a universal approach should be taken and others arguing for more incremental improvements to the existing market-based approach. The conversation has recently attracted new energy and attention during the pandemic.

Ultimately, child care and education are social infrastructure. They help people get to work, much like roads and other physical infrastructure. Parental leave policies are also important but tend to penalize women via a higher pay gap in the long-term. There is also strong evidence that investing in high-quality education and early child care has a high multiplier effect as it creates a productive, well-adjusted future workforce.



INTERNATIONAL APPROACHES TO CHILD CARE

Increasingly, industrialized governments are making it a priority to guarantee accessible and affordable child care, though their approaches vary.

Some jurisdictions, such as Quebec, have universal and fully subsidized child care. A recent study shows that most European countries provide universal access, but the age of eligibility, the level of subsidy, and the governance systems differ.^{lix} Eight European countries – Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Finland, Sweden, and Norway – guarantee a spot for each child soon after its birth, and the duty to provide these places usually falls on local governments. Most governments also have policies in place to further reduce fees and offer priority access to disadvantaged families, including those living in poverty, single-parent households, and certain minorities.

Other countries, like South Korea, combine elements of a market-based system with the benefits of substantial public investment.^{lx} Korean parents can choose between several different types of child care, including centre-based daycare, home-based childminding services, and services outside usual daycare hours. The government's approach subsidizes both the demand-side (parents) and supply-side (providers). In 2006, the government extended subsidies to private daycare providers in addition to public ones by offering a 'basic subsidy' equivalent to the standard per-child care cost minus the per-child user fee. The resulting mixture of public and private child care services gives parents access to several affordable and flexible options.



2.a. Prepare for a second wave.

At this stage, no one knows whether COVID-19 infections will remain low in Ontario this fall or if we will see a second wave of infection growth. Given the uncertainty, government should work collaboratively with school boards, teacher unions, municipalities, and parents to be prepared for a second-wave scenario. Minimizing risk will require increased physical distancing of students and staff, as this has been effective in countries that reopened schools earlier, while overcrowding led to outbreaks elsewhere.^{lxi}

Physical distancing will lead to a shortage of both spaces and staff. Space can be created by repurposing available facilities such as universities and community centres. Governments can support this process by fast-tracking approvals for these satellite locations, in collaboration with municipalities. For example, the City of Toronto has already identified numerous facilities that its school board can use for additional classroom space.^{lxii}

To address staffing shortages, Ontario should consider Manitoba's approach of providing grants directly to early childhood educators and qualified program graduates to set up child care at home and in community settings. This solution offers additional flexibility for parents, including those who may prefer to share the cost of at-home care with other families. Grants should be extended to unlicensed child care providers, who may provide home-based care to a maximum of five children under Ontario law.^{lxiii} Partnering with not-for-profit organizations such as the YMCA and Pathways to Education can also help to temporarily expand both space and staffing.

A sudden change in the schools and child care arrangement will put women's workforce participation at risk. Therefore, the government needs to be prepared to act quickly. Provincial and federal funds should be earmarked in advance to allow for a nimble approach.

Additional support is also needed to facilitate remote learning for K-12, since much of the homeschooling work falls to women who are already overburdened and/or ill-equipped to do this work. Remote learning resources should protect the quality of learning for students while making things as easy as possible for parents.

2.b. Improve long-term affordability and accessibility of child care.

The Governments of Canada should immediately begin working with provinces and territories on meaningful child care reform. Consultations should seek input from parents, child care providers, employers, and other stakeholders.

More specifically, child care reforms should:

1. **Increase investment:** Enhanced public spending will be necessary to address deep-seated challenges in the child care system. However, government funding can and should coexist with a market-based system, as seen in South Korea (see above). On the federal side, child care transfers to provinces and territories should be increased and tied to measurable improvements in accessibility, affordability, and quality of care.
2. **Preserve choice:** One of the benefits of a market-based approach is that it provides more options for parents to choose between licensed daycares, home daycares, nannies, before- and after-school services, and informal care. Public policies should focus on improving accessibility and affordability while retaining choice.
3. **Subsidize parents and providers:** Under the market model, affordability and accessibility can be improved through tax benefits and other cash transfers to both parents and child care providers. While the current system leans towards supporting parents, directly subsidizing educators and providers can help address low wages and talent retention. Similarly, government can consider incentivizing employers to offer workplace-based childcare through tax benefits and operating grants (see Recommendation 2d).
4. **Prioritize equity:** Research suggests that, in order to be effective, child care policies should target populations for which child care costs and access are significant barriers to labour force participation. In Canada, this would include:
 - Low- and middle-income parents. Income-dependent child care subsidies can help to ensure public funds are directed at parents that benefit most. Additionally, the federal government should consider reforming the Child Care Expense Deduction to increase the amount and rebalance support towards lower-income parents.^{lxiv}
 - Parents working irregular hours. Child care is currently more expensive and less accessible for parents working outside the 9-to-5 timeframe. Support should be targeted towards flexible arrangements for these parents to allow more women to participate in these jobs, including women in policework, health care, skilled trades, and other sectors.

While child care falls under provincial jurisdiction, a National Child Care Secretariat would be valuable to monitor, coordinate, and evaluate child care measures across Canada and share best practices among governments.^{lxv}

2.c. Address the shortage of early childhood educators.

For Ontario's childcare sector to meet the needs of parents, it needs an adequate supply of qualified workers. The Canadian Chamber of Commerce's Council for Women's Advocacy outlines three solutions to address the shortage.^{lxvi}

First, the Governments of Ontario and Canada should immediately begin working with other provinces and territories to standardize or harmonize certification criteria, including foreign credential recognition and bridging. Removing existing interprovincial inconsistencies is essential to an efficient labour market.

Second, the two governments should work with post-secondary institutions to enhance online training programs and fast-track in-school credentials for early childhood educators, particularly in communities with the greatest shortages.

Third, governments should develop financial support for underemployed populations to access these training opportunities. This includes low-income women, immigrant women, women with disabilities, racialized women, and women living in Indigenous, rural, remote, and northern communities.^{lxvii}

2.d. Explore creative solutions ranging from in-program changes to workplace-based child care.

The Governments of Ontario and Canada should harness the energy of this moment to explore creative solutions to child care by consulting with parents and experts.

Existing programs – such as after-school programs – can be expanded to improve accessibility for parents at a low cost. Local demand should be evaluated in partnership with service providers to determine the most valuable courses of action for different communities.

Another option to consider is workplace-based childcare. Although rare in Canada, it could provide a win-win for working parents and their employers, especially for companies looking to recruit and retain young talent. It would also free up spaces in community child care centres. A previous Canadian program offered employers a 25 percent tax credit on costs to build child care facilities. However, take-up of this incentive was low, in part because it did not cover operating costs.

The Governments of Ontario and Canada should evaluate demand for such a program in different communities and workplaces across the province. If deemed appropriate, an incentive could take the form of a tax credit or grant. While it may not make sense for smaller employers to set up their own onsite daycare, they would benefit from collaborating on a shared space if located in close proximity.

Onsite childcare would be especially transformative for the skilled trades, where employers could offer satellite child care as needed. In this case, the government could help cover the costs of renting an additional office-style trailer and paying child care educators for the duration of the project.

Finally, governments should apply a gender and diversity lens to the tax system to better support women entrepreneurs with child care. Currently, business owners can write off a series of expenses, including golf memberships and meals, but child care is not an option. This penalizes women entrepreneurs.

Workforce Development

3



Long before COVID-19, women's workforce development has been recognized as a critical opportunity – not just for women but also for the broader economy, as workforce diversity is a known driver of innovation and resilience.^{lxviii}

In Ontario, women's participation in the labour market is also an opportunity to address a growing shortage of talent in specific sectors, including the skilled trades and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). In the trades, demand for workers is being driven by large-scale infrastructure projects and an aging workforce, and post-pandemic infrastructure investments will only create additional job opportunities in these sectors. Demand is also growing in STEM as technology displaces routine jobs, and the pandemic is expected to accelerate this disruption since firms tend to accelerate automation in a period of recession.^{lxix}

According to RBC, about half a million jobs are not expected to return in Canada this year, most of which are occupied by women.^{lxx} Large-scale reskilling will be needed to pivot workers, and it will be important to identify the barriers that may prevent women from participating in training opportunities.

WHAT IS BEING DONE?

Stakeholders from both the public and private sectors have invested in many initiatives to support women in the workforce and women entrepreneurs in Ontario. A few examples are:

WOMEN IN TRADES, TECHNOLOGY, AND ENGINEERING

Skills Ontario's Young Women's Initiatives are a series of career exploration events and hands-on programs that provide skill development and mentorship opportunities to young women from grades 7 to 12.

These programs reach 4,000 young women annually, with 91 percent of participants saying they are more likely to investigate a career in the skilled trades and technologies as a result.

ADaPT (from TECHNATION and Ryerson University, with support from the Future Skills Centre) is a work-integrated learning program that provides alternative pathways for women and underrepresented groups into information and communications technology roles. Over the last four years more than 250 women have participated from twenty universities, with a placement rate of 88 percent. The program runs face-to-face, online, and blended learning modules.





Aecon and LiUNA's Women in Trades program offers hands-on training, mentorship, and field experience to support women interested in careers in the construction industry.

George Brown College's Women Transitioning to Trades and Employment is a five-week Trades and Career Preparation program for women and gender non-binary people interested in employment in the trades.

KickAss Careers aims to engage, educate, and encourage youth to consider careers in mechanical, industrial, technology, and construction sectors through school and community outreach.

DiversifySTEM is a microlearning app and website developed by the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers that provides actionable lessons to promote diversity and change culture in STEM workplaces.

Queen's University has historically been a national leader in women's engineering. Women's representation in the undergraduate Engineering program is around 30 percent, and a Chair in Women in Engineering has recently been appointed to help move the needle further.

Women's Enterprise Skills Training of Windsor offers workshops, training, transportation, and a pre-apprenticeship program for women with no prior experience who are interested in becoming millwrights or machinists. Supported by the Government of Ontario, the program is designed to meet current labour market shortages and address industry's specific needs in these trades.

WOMEN IN ENERGY

Women in Nuclear Canada is focused on promoting public awareness about the contributions of nuclear technology and promoting career interest in nuclear engineering, science, technology, and the trades, especially among women and young people. Members are supported through mentorship, networking, professional development, and advocacy.

Electricity Human Resources Canada offers multiple resources to support women in energy, including the **Connected Women Mentorship Program** and the **Illuminate Opportunity toolkit** for employers.

nPower Canada works with employers to define needs and provide training and work experience for marginalized youth - more than 50 percent of them women - to transition into tech roles with a placement rate of over 80 percent.

Ontario Tech's Women for STEM program includes mentorship and networking opportunities, scholarships and bursaries, and promotion of women's achievements. ^{lxxi}

Canadians Learning Code (formerly Ladies Learning Code) is a community-based, peer-to-peer network that provides practical training for girls, women, and teachers to demystify technology and build confidence.

Ontario Network of Women in Engineering focuses on supporting current female engineers and encouraging the next generation of women to pursue careers in the field, with hands-on programs to introduce girls to different careers in STEM.

The Canadian Centre for Women in Science, Engineering, Trades and Technology (SETT) focuses on encouraging women to enter, stay, and grow in SETT careers. Its Leadership Program consists of workshop modules for women professionals, students, and employers.

Women in Renewable Energy is a volunteer-run organization that provides educational field trips, monthly networking meetings, an awards recognition program, student bursaries, speed mentoring, blogs, and other initiatives to support students and emergent professionals interested in employment in Canada's renewable energy sector.

Women in Energy Canada runs a mentorship program and hosts events focused on advancing professional opportunities for women in energy.



Education policy also influences the choices girls make about their future occupations. The Ontario government's recent decision to end streaming will remove a discriminatory practice that steered students into particular career paths. In addition, their curriculum reforms will equip students with better coding and financial literacy skills early on, which is equally important in encouraging girls to pursue male-dominant fields.

RECOMMENDATIONS

3 WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

3.a. Support women's reskilling.

Over the coming months, the Governments of Ontario and Canada will actively invest in initiatives to support economic recovery. Some of these programs will require government leadership, others will be led by the private sector. Reskilling will be especially important for sectors where a large number of jobs are at risk of not returning, such as tourism and hospitality.

Diversity targets should be integrated within all of these investments to actively seek participation from women, Indigenous people, people with disabilities, and other underrepresented groups.

Training programs should also prioritize skills shortages, using labour market data to ensure that training opportunities are available to meet demand in high-growth industries. For example, in the skilled trades, Ontario is facing a dire shortage of boilermakers, bricklayers, and welders but an ample supply of electricians and plumbers.^{lxvii}

A plethora of training opportunities already exist in Ontario, but individuals often lack the financial means to participate. Federal and provincial governments should partner with colleges and employers to jointly sponsor financial support that enables women's participation. Targeted supports could include low-interest loans, training scholarships (which can be geared towards particular sectors), and/or an extension of the Canada Emergency Response Benefit for women in training.

Many mothers will not be able to participate in training opportunities unless they have access to child care. In the short-term, subsidies for licensed or at-home child care will be critical to ensuring women can participate in training and re-employment in the early months of economic recovery.

To ensure maximum impact, governments should design skilling, upskilling, and reskilling programs that are responsive to women's needs. Flexible formats, customized support, and wraparound services are all best practices in program design.

GLOBAL COMMITMENTS TO PROMOTE WOMEN IN TECHNOLOGY

Countries around the world have made progress in bridging the wage gap and advancing women in technology, but there is more to be done, particularly in the wake of COVID-19. Ensuring that women have access to technology skills and infrastructure will enable them to increase their income and employment opportunities while advancing socioeconomic equality.

The Group of Twenty (G20) has focused on coordinating policies to tackle gender stereotypes; enable enhanced, safer, and more affordable access to digital tools; and catalyze stronger cooperation across stakeholders to remove barriers to women's full participation in the digital world.^{lxixiii} Organizations within G20 countries have initiated a range of innovative programs to address these issues. For example, in Australia, the Dream Collective launched a new program called She Pivots to support women whose jobs have been impacted by the pandemic.^{lxixiv} The free program includes online training modules as well as connections to employers such as Amazon Web Services, Canva, and Datacom.

Two weeks after launching, more than 900 women had signed up for the program, which aims to support 10,000 women.^{lxixv} A similar program could be developed in Ontario with support from employers and government to help women transition their careers post-COVID-19. Other relevant programs in Ontario include the Advanced Digital and Professional Training (ADaPT) program and other work-integrated learning and upskilling programs.



3.b. Scale interventions proven to increase women's representation in skilled trades, technology, and other traditionally male-dominant, high-growth occupations and sectors.

During recovery, federal and provincial governments should expand programs that have been effective at increasing women's participation and retention in professions in which they are typically underrepresented. Employers, unions, schools, non-profits, and post-secondary institutions need to work with government to support these initiatives.

Evidence suggests that programs should target multiple stages along the career pipeline:

- **Elementary and high schools** influence how girls and boys perceive their future career options. Exposure to diverse role models in technology and the skilled trades (for instance, through classroom visits) has been shown to increase students' interests in these careers.^{lxixvi} Earlier interventions tend to be most effective, as younger students are more malleable. Teachers and guidance counsellors should be required to develop a better understanding of different career paths and use labour market data to inform students about their options.
- **Mentorship** leads to less turnover by supporting women as they navigate the many challenges of working in a male-dominated industry. Mentorship programs should be actively supported by employers and government.
- **Child care support** for women makes it easier for women with children to participate in industries with non-traditional working hours and encourages young women to consider these occupations. Supports can include subsidized home-based care and onsite child care (see section on Child Care).

- **Guidance**, how-to manuals, and sharing of best practices make it easier for employers to support women. For example, government can provide employers with information about practical accommodations tailored to different work environments – such as uniform adjustments, parental leave policies, and flexible work (discussed in the next section) – which incidentally benefit both genders and especially help employers recruit and retain more women.
- **Diversity cohort programs** can help change workplace cultures. When an employer assembles a critical mass of women within a department or crew, the internal culture becomes more inclusive, and this culture tends to outlive the existence of the cohort. The cohort model can also improve secondary and post-secondary learning environments.

Additionally, in the skilled trades, **pre-apprenticeships and apprenticeships** can be especially elusive and/or discouraging for women. Employers should consider allocating a percentage of apprenticeship slots for women, and unions should commit to policies and programs that advance women past the apprenticeship stage. Government can incentivize these initiatives by offering wage subsidies and/or grants tied to diversity targets. Ontario should consider establishing an Office to Advance Women Apprenticeship, an approach taken in six other provinces.^{lxxvii} These offices connect women with opportunities in the trades, offer networking and career services, and guide stakeholders towards meaningful progress.

Entrepreneurship

4



As discussed above, women entrepreneurs face unique challenges to starting and scaling their businesses. This is a missed opportunity. We know that Ontario's economic recovery will largely be driven by entrepreneurs engaged in launching and scaling new enterprises. The inclusion of women and other disadvantaged groups in the entrepreneurial ecosystem is necessary for both their own recovery and that of the entire province. Closing the gender gap in entrepreneurship alone could add up to \$81 billion to Canada's GDP. ^{lxxviii}

WHAT IS BEING DONE?

WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

Canada's Women's Entrepreneurship Strategy is a whole-of-government approach taken by the Government of Canada to support women entrepreneurs with access to financing, talent, networks, and expertise. Additional funding was committed to the strategy as part of the government's response to COVID-19. **The Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub** (WEKH) is promoting a more inclusive innovation ecosystem by advancing research, best practices, and tackling stereotypes with its "See it. Be it" campaign. In response to COVID-19, WEKH has made changes to its programs to ensure that the needs of women entrepreneurs are met, recently launching a new sharing platform with the Forum for Women Entrepreneurs and inspired by SheEOs' "Ask/Give" platform.

The Rebuild Reopen Revive Initiative was launched in 2020 to assist women-led businesses in southern Ontario with reopening. Funds can be used to purchase personal protective equipment, reconfigure workspaces, and enhance online capacity. The program is funded by the Government of Canada and delivered through regional partners.

Women's Enterprise Organizations of Canada (WEOC), an association of members that include provincial enterprise centres, provides an array of services to support women entrepreneurs, including skills training, financing, networking, and export opportunities. Over the past twenty years, WEOC members have provided \$220 million in direct and leveraged financing, as well as services, to 90,000 women entrepreneurs.

The Women in Technology Venture Fund is a venture capital fund managed by Business Development Canada that invests in technology companies owned by women. In 2019, the fund reached \$200 million, making it the largest venture fund of its kind. A total of \$14 million was invested in nineteen companies, bringing the total direct investment to more than \$17 million.

The Black Business Professional Association (BPPA)'s new Boss Women Entrepreneurship Training program is helping women become successful business leaders with practical tips, tactics, and strategies for female success. The initial cohort includes 62 women with diverse business aspirations.

SheEO supports and grows women-led ventures with social goals. "Activators" contribute \$1100, producing a pool of \$2 million to support women led businesses selected by the activators with interest-free loans of around \$100,000 and extensive peer-to-peer supports. Results have included triple-digit revenue growth year-over-year, 276 jobs in 2019 (from 28 ventures) and significant social and environmental impacts on the sustainable development goals.

The Big Push seeks to level the playing field for women in tech by providing them with the capital, hands-on support, and other resources they need to scale their businesses. Over 600 senior-level business and technology executives from various industries and backgrounds offer their time and expertise to help scale women-led companies.



WE-HUB with Scadding Court and the Diversity Institute, supported by the Province of Ontario, provides entrepreneurial training and opportunities to test market products and services with a focus on low-income women, including racialized, immigrant, and refugee women.

The Canadian Aboriginal Business Council, the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association of Canada, and the LIFT Circle (an initiative of the Indigenous Lift Collective) are collaborating on sharing tools tailored to the needs of Indigenous women working with the WEKH. Indigenous women are more likely to be entrepreneurs than other women.

The ATB Financial Build Her Business campaign is a unique cohort-based crowdfunding initiative that uses rewards-based crowdfunding as a funding option. For example, a jewelry designer looking for funds to support expansion might reward everyone who contributes \$100 with an original piece of jewelry. If the entrepreneur meets their goal, funds are released. In its second year, 32 women participated in the campaign and more than half (53 percent) met their funding goal with an average raise of \$5,377 per campaign – exceeding the average raised by other crowdfunding campaigns (\$824 with a 22 percent average success rate).

RECOMMENDATIONS

4 ENTREPRENEURSHIP

4.a. Foster an inclusive innovation ecosystem for entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurial diversity should be recognized as a powerful strategy for Ontario's economic recovery and long-term prosperity. Since women and other underrepresented groups face challenges to entrepreneurship at multiple levels, the innovation ecosystem as a whole needs to become more inclusive.^{lxxxix} Programs that target women are important, but real progress will come from eliminating barriers that women face in accessing mainstream resources.^{lxxx}

Accessing capital is one challenge that may require creative solutions. Traditional loans are not always the best option for women founders that are unable or unwilling to take on additional debt, in which case micro-grants and crowdfunding may be more appropriate.^{lxxxi}

Aside from financing, women entrepreneurs would benefit from legal advice, financial literacy and digital literacy training, access to export opportunities, mentorship, and professional networks. Information about incorporation and cooperative business models should be disseminated widely to help them navigate economic recovery. Access to procurement and child care (each discussed in previous sections) are also incredibly important for women entrepreneurs.

Further, governments should consider how women entrepreneurs have been excluded from programs in the past and ensure a diversity lens is taken to all innovation programs and business supports going forward. For example, the way in which entrepreneurship is defined can often disqualify women founders, particularly as they are more likely to be self-employed.^{lxxxii} Similarly, it is important to reach out to women entrepreneurs in remote and rural areas to ensure they are tuned into available programs.^{lxxxiii} Inclusive innovation also requires recognizing that technology is not the only channel for entrepreneurship and uplifting founders in a wide variety of sectors.

The Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub (WEKH) should continue to be leveraged as a platform for assessing barriers, rolling out solutions, and evaluating the effectiveness of efforts to advance women and other underrepresented entrepreneurs. Additional disaggregated data is needed to understand specific challenges for diverse demographics.^{lxxxiv}

Flexible Work



Flexible work arrangements (such as telecommuting, flexible hours, four-day workweeks, and job sharing) can help level the playing field for women, whose careers are often penalized when family care prevents them from spending as many hours on paid employment as their male colleagues.

Although diversity is important, flexible work helps achieve an equally important objective: inclusivity. Research shows that industries with more flexible working arrangements tend to have lower gender pay gaps because women are able to upskill more easily.^{lxxxv} Further, countries with more women working from home tend to exhibit higher employment rates among mothers.^{lxxxvi}

Flexible work should be championed as a solution that benefits the workforce at large, not just women. These practices have been shown to improve companies' innovation outcomes while reducing turnover intention among employees.^{lxxxvii} Governments and communities also benefit from reduced congestion and pressure on transportation infrastructure.

Telecommuting and flex hours are offered in many 9-to-5 workplaces. Outside office settings, it can take the form of job sharing or flexible shifts. In the skilled trades, job sharing arrangements have allowed many women (and men) to continue working and progressing in their fields after having children. Alternatively, the lack of accommodation for new mothers and pregnant women remains a significant barrier to long-term retention of women in trades.^{lxxxviii}

A less common form of flexible work is the four-day workweek, which has an added benefit during COVID-19 of encouraging more people to travel domestically and support local tourism and hospitality industries. This is partly what prompted New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, to recommend shorter workweeks as a way to rebuild the economy in the aftermath of the pandemic.

It should be noted that flexible work can unintentionally penalize women's careers. If women are less physically present at work, their male colleagues may be rewarded with more opportunities, particularly in sectors where there is already a culture biased towards men.^{lxxxix} Ideally, both men and women should be encouraged to adopt flexible work as needed, sharing domestic responsibilities and career opportunities equally.



In addition, working effectively in these new working arrangements requires attention to the skills of managers and workers as well as infrastructure. The digital divide affects women more than men – especially rural women and low-income women – and has massive implications for the ability to adapt to remote work as well as e-learning, e-health, and service delivery.

WHAT IS BEING DONE?

In 2019, amendments to the *Canada Labour Code* came into effect to give employees in federally regulated sectors the right to request flexible work arrangements, but most employers are not required to offer such arrangements and the culture in many workplaces continues to discourage employees from requesting them.^{xc}

Since COVID-19 forced non-essential businesses to close their physical workplaces, telecommuting and flexible hours have quickly become the norm for many organizations. Post-pandemic, it remains to be seen how many employers will continue offering that flexibility to employees, but it is worth considering as a long-term mechanism for gender equity and other benefits.

FLEXIBLE WORK: IT WORKS

Several employers around the world have had success with flexible work policies. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation is one of many Canadian companies that have adopted a Results-Only Work Environment (ROWE™), meaning employees are free to choose when and where they work to deliver results.^{xc} Microsoft Japan piloted a four-day workweek in August 2019 and found its sales increased by nearly 40 percent.^{xcii}

Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria experimented with a variety of flexible work policies and, within a year, reported that productivity had increased and 61 percent of employees reported an improved work-life balance. In the United States, flexible work arrangements have been shown to improve employee satisfaction, increase retention, and reduce associated turnover costs in several companies, ranging from consulting to manufacturing.^{xciii}

Some businesses have taken COVID-19 as an opportunity to experiment with similar policies. Laridae, a management consultant firm in Peterborough, Ontario, is piloting a four-day workweek and the University of Trent is currently evaluating its outcomes.^{xciv}

Meanwhile, Google has decided to tackle the issue beyond its own organization. The Work Culture Reform program – part of Google's Womenwill initiative – offers employers and employees in Japan online courses and toolkits to support flexible work.^{xcv} The program has proven to be effective in equipping both workers and employers with a better understanding of how to successfully implement flexible work arrangements.



5.a. Consider policy options to encourage more employers to offer flexible work arrangements.

Flexible work policies should primarily come from employers themselves. However, the federal and/or provincial government could play a role in encouraging, enabling, or incentivizing them. First, government should consult stakeholders on flexible work and carry out a cost-benefit analysis to quantify impacts on productivity, congestion, mental health, and other areas of public concern.

The findings of this review should be used to determine whether government policies to support flexible work are warranted. Policy options may include tax incentives, changes to Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) premium structures, changes to labour standards, or other tools.

Employers and employees may also benefit from information about how to successfully implement flexible work arrangements, as demonstrated by Womenwill's Work Culture Reform program in Japan (discussed above). Guidance is particularly helpful for managers in non-office work environments, where the practicalities of flexible work are less intuitive. The Government of Ontario could therefore support employers with how-to manuals and recommendations tailored to different job settings, relying on learnings from those that have experimented with the practice.

Messaging around flexible work should frame it as a family-friendly policy and/or one that supports general work-life balance for all employees, rather than a solution specifically for women. Otherwise, flexible work may penalize women by reinforcing a perception that women need more workplace accommodations than men.

CONCLUSION

As COVID-19 propelled women's labour force participation to a record low, it presented a fork in the road for gender equality in Ontario. Whether the pandemic will set back workplace diversity or accelerate it will depend almost entirely on how decision-makers in both the public and private sectors approach economic recovery. Solutions outlined in this report would not only support women but place the economy on an even stronger growth trajectory than before the pandemic.

There is no doubt that this province, filled with leading innovators and economic potential, can lead a she-covey. However, simply recognizing the problem is not enough. A collaborative response will be necessary from government, businesses, post-secondary institutions, unions, and other stakeholders to remove systemic barriers to women's workforce participation. Setting collective targets and building diversity into decision-making structures will provide the right foundation for meaningful impact.



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