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Issue Brief: Gender and COVID-19

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This series of Issue Briefs explores the unique ability and experience of local government in responding to COVID-19. They are designed to inform and support FCM's capacity building programs for local governments in Canada and internationally. These briefs provide insight into the challenges and opportunities faced by local government in responding to COVID-19 and the importance of their role in supporting communities at the local level.

COVID-19 is Deepening Gender Inequality

Gender, racial, and economic disparities are being amplified by the pandemic, and the most profound impacts are felt by those facing multiple forms of disadvantage. Of the groups that are the most vulnerable to the social and economic repercussions of the pandemic, women are bearing the brunt of the negative effects. Informal and temporary workers, low-paid workers, and single parents are more often women.¹ Worldwide, 67% of people living in homelessness are women. In Canada, while 9.4% of people fall below the low-income cut-off, some groups are much more likely to be poor than others.² These include first nations women (living off reserve), visible minority women, women with disabilities, single parent mothers, and single senior women. Globally, women are the majority of older persons, and older women tend to face lower life incomes and lower pensions, with less access to care.³

In cities and towns around the world, local governments are trying to understand and address the needs of their citizens in this time of crisis. As more data on the different impacts of the crisis emerge, municipal governments are well placed to apply a gender lens to their response, recovery planning and decision-making. As the level of government closest to citizens, local governments also have an imperative to do so to adequately serve residents, especially the most vulnerable.

1. Context: The Emerging Picture

Across social, political, and economic spheres, the impacts of the virus are exacerbated for women and girls. The gendered impacts of the virus are summarized broadly below.

- **Gender-based violence is increasing exponentially:** Confinement orders mean that women with violent partners and family members are increasingly exposed to physical and psychological abuse without access to people and resources that can help them.⁴
- **Women's health is at risk:** In addition to the health risks women face because of increased levels of gender-based violence, the pandemic is putting women's health at risk in other ways. Women may be at greater risk of exposure due to the occupational sex-segregation. The majority of healthcare workers are women - 70% globally - and in some countries, women have less access to personal protective equipment or

¹ <https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/uk-policy-briefings/crises-collide-women-and-covid-19/>. See full report: <https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/FINAL.pdf>

² <https://www.homelesshub.ca/about-homelessness/population-specific/single-women>

³ <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406>, p.14

⁴ In France, reports of domestic violence have increased by 30% since the lockdown on March 17. In Cyprus and Singapore helplines have registered an increase of calls of 30% and 33%, respectively. Increased cases of domestic violence and demand for emergency shelter have also been reported in Canada, Germany, Spain the UK, and the US. In Australia, the government said that Google has registered the most searches for domestic violence help in the past five years during the outbreak, with an increase of 75%.

correctly sized equipment.⁵ Additionally, resources for sexual and reproductive health services may be diverted to the pandemic response. This has occurred repeatedly during health crises where resources and priorities have been diverted away from sexual and reproductive health services and toward the frontline response.⁶ This may result in increased maternal mortality and morbidity, increased rates of adolescent pregnancy, HIV and sexually transmitted diseases.⁷

- **Women are disproportionately affected economically:** Economic impacts are compounded for women. Women tend to earn and save less, as they often occupy part-time jobs or jobs in the informal sector, which also implies limited or no access to health benefits and sick leaves and other social protections. Women also form the majority of single-parent households.⁸ With the confinement measures taken by most countries, and the economic crisis that is anticipated, the economic impact of COVID-19 on women could be devastating.
- **Women are performing a disproportionate share of unpaid work:** Even before COVID-19, women were doing three times as much unpaid work as men. Since the pandemic began, demands for care work have intensified with children out of school, sick family members, and overwhelmed health services. Women's jobs are disproportionately affected as they take on greater care demands at home. School closures may disproportionately affect education outcomes of adolescent girls who take on more chores and care work burdens.

The Situation in Canada:

Evidence on the gendered impact of COVID continues to mount in Canada:

- According to Global News, the number of calls to Vancouver's Battered Women's Support Services crisis line has tripled.⁹
- The Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses says 20% of the 70 shelters it represents have had increased crisis calls¹⁰, and some police services are noticing more domestic violence reports.¹¹
- Statistics Canada found that during the week of March 15-21, employment dropped by five per cent among women aged 25 to 54, which was more than twice that of men¹². Nearly half of this decrease was among women working in part-time, often low-paying jobs in the service and care industries.
- An April 2020 survey by Vanier Institute of the Family suggested that more women than men reported feeling anxious or nervous very often or often due to the pandemic, and that more women than men reported difficulty sleeping very often or often since the beginning of the pandemic.¹³
- While more men are dying from the virus globally than women, in Canada, 53% of total deaths were women and 47% were men. The reasons are not fully understood yet, but this is thought to be because there is a higher representation of women in nursing homes, where many of the cases and deaths have been

⁵ In Spain, 72% of infected health-care workers were female. In Italy, 66% of infected health-care workers were female

⁶ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30526-2/fulltext#bib7](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30526-2/fulltext#bib7)

⁷ The UN has predicted a potential 500 000 deaths from AIDS in 2020-2021 if health services are disrupted.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/saharan-africa-aids-deaths-double-due-covid-19-200511163012208.html>

⁸ <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406>

⁹ <https://globalnews.ca/news/6789403/domestic-violence-coronavirus/>

¹⁰ <https://toronto.citynews.ca/2020/04/08/domestic-violence-calls-surge-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>

¹¹ <https://nationalpost.com/news/crime-in-a-time-of-covid-19-how-the-pandemic-is-changing-criminality-in-our-neighbourhoods>

¹² <https://ipolitics.ca/2020/04/09/youth-women-precarious-workers-bear-brunt-of-covid-19-job-losses-statistics-canada-finds/>

¹³ <https://vanierinstitute.ca/do-adults-in-couples-have-better-mental-health-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

concentrated. In addition, because more women work in “caring professions” like personal support workers and workers in long-term care facilities, these individuals have been more exposed to the virus.¹⁴

2. Strategies and Recommendations for Local Governments to Address the Gendered Impacts of COVID-19

Governments at all levels are being called on to integrate a gender perspective into all phases of planning and implementation of their response. Some of the central components of a gendered response to COVID-19 include:

1. **Uphold and fund services to reduce gender-based violence.** Local governments can coordinate police efforts, social services, and health units to ensure the safety of and necessary care for the victims of domestic violence. Local governments can help raise awareness of domestic violence and of the organisations and helplines that are providing counselling and support. They can also allocate additional spaces for temporary shelters.
2. **Ensure that women’s voices and interests are reflected in the decision-making around the pandemic and the response.**¹⁵ UN Women’s Policy Brief on the Impact of COVID-19 on Women states that “Evidence across sectors, including economic planning and emergency response, demonstrates unquestioningly that policies that do not consult women or include them in decision-making are simply less effective, and can even do harm”¹⁶¹⁷. Local governments are uniquely placed to bring women to the table and ensure the inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders, including local women’s groups and other civil society organisations/community structures in the response planning. Local governments can also consult with employers and trade unions representing female-dominated labour market sectors, and with women working in the informal sector.
3. **Collect and analyse data disaggregated by gender, age, race, and other vulnerability factors to underpin policy, service design, and budget decisions.** Disaggregated data is necessary to fully understand the economic impacts, care burden, incidents of sexual violence and abuse, and crisis recovery. While many countries have offered emergency response and support packages to the private sector, it is not yet clear what the take up will be and whether these will help women’s incomes recover at the same rate as men’s.¹⁸ Disaggregated data will be the foundation upon which local governments design and deliver a response to COVID-19 that addresses the needs of the most vulnerable groups, including through gender-sensitive budgeting.
4. **Review budgets and services with a gender and inclusion lens.** In the immediate term, cities are responding to the gendered implications of the crisis through new services and budget allocations. Examples include:
 - Emergency measures for women experiencing gender-based violence, such as helplines, legal counselling, and emergency shelters
 - Housing for women experiencing homelessness
 - Free public transit
 - Funding to social services, programs, and spaces for women

¹⁴ <https://globalnews.ca/news/6920505/more-women-have-coronavirus/>

¹⁵ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/3/news-checklist-for-covid-19-response-by-ded-regner>

¹⁶ <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406> p.3

¹⁷ To note: despite the fact that women represent 70% of the global health workforce fighting the pandemic, only 10% of the representatives of the U.S. Coronavirus Task Force are women, 20% of the WHO Emergency Committee on COVID-19 are women, and 16% of the WHO-China joint mission on COVID-19 were women. See: <https://www.womeningh.org/operation-50-50>

¹⁸ <https://urbact.eu/exploring-gendered-impacts-covid-19>

- Investments in critical services such as mental health resources and childcare supports, particularly for single mothers and women who provide essential services
- Accessible information and services (i.e. free Wi-Fi access for low income neighbourhoods, information available in multiple languages)
- Increasing the amount of accessible outdoor public space

As economic recovery planning gets underway, local governments can apply an inclusive approach to fiscal decision-making by engaging women in decision-making processes, using gender-disaggregated data, and integrating gender-based assessments to inform new or adjusted policies, services or programs.

5. **Deliver gender-specific programming and apply an intersection lens.** Local governments are being called on to apply an intersectional gender equality and inclusion lens to all phases of planning and implementation of their response.¹⁹ With robust data based on consultations with people of diverse identities, municipal governments can craft recovery programs and policies that will address the inequalities that have been deepened as a result of the crisis. Local governments can apply Gender-based Analysis (GBA+) to any recovery policies and measures to ensure that the needs of most vulnerable are accounted for.²⁰

3. Examples of Gender Related Municipal Responses to COVID

City	Intervention
Brasilia	Violence against women can be reported through the Electronic Police Station.
Seine-Saint-Denis	To ensure the safety of women victims of domestic violence and their children, the Seine-Saint-Denis department in conjunction with the Bobigny court has financed hotel rooms in which violent spouses will be forced to stay by court order.
Barcelona	Offering assistance to victims of domestic violence through phone lines.
Madrid	Red de espacios de igualdad (Network of equality spaces)- individualized services offering psychological, legal and professional development support with adapted services for the current COVID context.
Montevideo	Emergency phone line established by the city's secretariat for Diversity for LGBTQ+ people with HIV.
Mexico City	Communication campaign "#QuedateEnCasaCDMX #Conigualdad y reparte el quehacer (stay at home and with equality and sharing of chores). Continued judicial accompaniment for women living in situations of violence and requiring legal advice.
Frankfurt	Frankfurt (A Gendered Landscape partner) has prepared extra space for women and children escaping violence, and created multi lingual information.
Ottawa	Unsafe at Home Ottawa project – text and chat support for victims of violence and abuse.

¹⁹ <https://www.cawi-ivtf.org/open-letter-calling-gendered-response-covid-19>

<https://urbact.eu/exploring-gendered-impacts-covid-19>

<http://www.womentransformingcities.org/>

²⁰ <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/april-2020/heres-how-municipalities-should-respond-to-covid-19/>

<u>Lima</u>	The city has set up a temporary women’s shelter for female victims of violence and their children.
<u>Bogota</u>	The city developed “At home without violence” – a strategy to prevent violence against women during the quarantine. Includes increased resources for online and phone legal and psychosocial assistance, and information campaigns. The city has also established daily campaigns to fight discrimination against transgender populations.
<u>Edmonton</u>	Free transit service.
Poltava	Local Social Services co-finance the rent for the Women’s Shelter and coordinate the efforts of local charities to support the shelter with food and other necessary resources.

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