

# Engineers Canada's submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women on the Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women

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## Recommendations to the federal government

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**Recommendation 1:** That the federal government work collaboratively with the engineering profession in supporting the recruitment, retention, and professional development of women in the engineering profession.

**Recommendation 2:** That the federal government support outreach programs, bursaries, workplace mentorships, and work-integrated learning opportunities that encourage women to pursue engineering.

**Recommendation 3:** That the federal government provide funding towards the creation of diversity, equity and inclusion training modules for enterprises.

**Recommendation 4:** That the federal government create incentives and programs that encourage gender parity on corporate and non-profit boards, and in senior leadership.

**Recommendation 5:** That the federal government decouple parental leave from Employment Insurance.

## Overview

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Engineers Canada is the national organization that represents the 12 provincial and territorial engineering regulators that license the more than 300,000 members of the engineering profession in Canada. As the only national voice for the engineering profession, our organization has a long-standing history of working and collaborating with the federal government in order to help inform and develop legislation, regulations, and policies.

Engineers Canada would like to thank the members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women for the opportunity to provide our comments on the *Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women*.

## The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's participation in the national economy

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While the federal government continues to respond to the most pressing public health concerns as a result of COVID-19, Engineers Canada would like to extend its assistance and offer recommendations to the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women regarding its current study on the *Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women* to ensure that future economic recovery measures bring economy prosperity and support to women.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, engineers—as part of listed essential services—have been playing a crucial role in supporting frontline workers and communities across Canada. Engineers possess the skillset for innovative solutions to flourish in complex global situations, such as the design of personal protective equipment or the development of diagnostic tools to effectively screen large populations. They also play an important role in developing infrastructure that can mitigate COVID-19 exposure such as heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems, physical distancing design, and others. Engineers will continue supporting Canadians by playing an important role in the immediate, short-, and long-term economic recovery of Canada.

In May 2020, Statistics Canada reported that 1.5 million more women than men lost their jobs over a two-month period due to the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup>. Women in Canada are also shouldering the burden of unpaid care work at home, in addition to other factors, causing a decline in women's active participation in the national economy.<sup>2</sup> With women making up approximately half of Canada's workforce, it is imperative that the federal government continue to support diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, such as Engineers Canada's [30 by 30 initiative](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada (2020). "Measuring labour market impacts as COVID-19 restrictions gradually ease." Retrieved November 6, 2020 from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200605/dq200605a-eng.htm>

<sup>2</sup> *IBID*.

## Women's participation in Canada's engineering profession

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Women continue to remain severely underrepresented in both post-secondary engineering education and the engineering profession, as only 14 per cent of practicing professional engineers are women and 22 per cent of undergraduate engineering students are women.<sup>3</sup> The engineering profession can better understand, and therefore protect the public interest, if it is representative of the demographics of the Canadian public. The profession requires problem solvers from diverse backgrounds to address challenges in the public's interest and to promote Canada's innovative capacity.

To address these concerns, Engineers Canada continually works to promote diversity, equity and inclusion to attract and retain individuals in the engineering profession who reflect the demographics of Canadian society. Although all Canadians have the same opportunities to enter engineering, accessibility and feasibility are not the same for all demographics, largely due to systemic barriers that disproportionately impact underrepresented groups. Engineers Canada is actively working to support the recruitment, retention, and professional development of women in the engineering profession; specifically, through our [30 by 30 initiative](#). This initiative has a goal of raising the percentage of newly licensed engineers who are women to 30 per cent by the year 2030. Thirty per cent is universally held as the tipping point for sustainable change. Reaching 30 by 30 will help drive the shift in the overall membership of the engineering profession as more women continue to enter the profession. Nationally, this figure is currently at 17.9 per cent. Reaching 30 by 30 will help drive cultural change in the engineering profession, supporting the even greater involvement of women in engineering.

We are also committed to ensuring that once in the engineering profession, women remain in the profession. Our organization has designed and implemented diversity, equity and inclusion strategies, with a focus on women and Indigenous peoples' participation in engineering. One area that is crucial for the retention of skilled and valued talent is improving career transitions, specifically when it comes to managing leaves of absences; a key concern during the COVID-19 pandemic for women across industries. Engineers Canada's member association, the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Alberta, created a planning resource guide titled "Managing Transitions" upon which Engineers Canada's and Geoscientist Canada's "[Managing Transitions: Before, During and After Leave](#)" is based; the guide outlines best practices for employees and employers managing maternity or parental leave in Canada's engineering and geoscience professions. This document includes checklists for planning, taking and returning from maternity or parental leave for employees, supervisors, and designated leave liaisons, as well as a matrix for employers to assess their current approach to leave which will help them generate ideas for policies and initiatives to enhance retention in the workforce.

The work of retaining women within the engineering profession is closely linked to addressing institutional barriers that hinder their career advancement and success. There are a variety of human resource practices that can level the playing field for professional women, including gender neutral job descriptions,

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<sup>3</sup> Engineers Canada (2020). "2020 National Membership Information – Data for 2019." Retrieved November 6, 2020.

gender-balanced hiring panels, flexible work hours, part-time opportunities, parental leave top-ups, mentorship and sponsorship programs, and pay equity. Pay equity allows for an equal level playing field for new parents to decide who should stay at home versus who returns to the workforce. Finally, to counteract the fact that women are continuing to shoulder the majority of unpaid care work at home, more needs to be done to protect women's career advancement. Incentives and programs that encourage employers to increase gender parity on Boards and in senior leadership positions are important to ensure women do not pay a penalty for being parents and caregivers.

Moreover, the project-based nature of engineering work can result in women experiencing a variety of career obstacles when on parental leave. To stay connected to their clients and projects, engineers may benefit from being able to work on projects while on leave to maintain their professional relationships and relevance through continued involvement on often high-profile projects. Parental leave benefits should be decoupled from the current Employment Insurance (EI) program to allow flexibility for individuals desiring work during leave while simultaneously supporting their ability to maintain professional relationships. The current restrictions for parental leave within the EI program are limiting to engineers desiring to work during leave, particularly women. A federal policy that allows compensation for part-time work, as well as an EI top-up, is required. Women should not have to volunteer or work for free to stay engaged in their profession. Allowing women to work part-time, while receiving parental leave benefits would encourage retention while simultaneously protecting professional competence. A separate process for parental leave that does not require parents to cease working in order to raise a young family would help mitigate denial of opportunities and assignments and support a more flexible framework for young women considering both their careers and having children.

Some of the Canadian provincial and territorial engineering regulators have been tracking the pandemic's impact on attrition rates of their members since the start of the pandemic. For the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists New Brunswick (APEGNB), 29 per cent of their members who participated in the association's survey (both men and women) indicated that the biggest challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic was balancing responsibilities at home with work life and their career, while 15 per cent stated that completing current projects was their biggest challenge. Other provincial and territorial regulators have also been monitoring the number of membership fee reduction applications that have been submitted since the start of the pandemic.

## Recommendations

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Engineers Canada would like to offer the following recommendations to the members of the standing committee. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we recommend that the federal government:

- Work collaboratively with the engineering profession in supporting the recruitment, retention, and professional development of women in the engineering profession. With women making up approximately half of Canada's workforce, it is imperative that the federal government support and improve current diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, such as Engineers Canada's [30 by 30 initiative](#).
- Support outreach programs, bursaries, workplace mentorships, and work-integrated learning opportunities that encourage women to pursue engineering.
- Provide funding towards the creation of diversity, equity and inclusion training modules for enterprises. Diverse, equitable and inclusive workplaces are more creative, cognitively flexible, collaborative, productive, and successful.
- Create incentives and programs that encourage gender parity on corporate and non-profit boards, and in senior leadership.
- Decouple parental leave from Employment Insurance.

The federal government's willingness to coordinate and collaborate with key stakeholders, particularly the engineering profession, is essential in supporting women and protecting their economic security. The engineering profession is ready and willing to provide transparent, accountable, and credible work to the federal government's initiatives to support women's active participation in the national economy. Our past involvement with the federal government demonstrates how we can constructively engage and support your efforts.