

Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the Upcoming Federal Budget 2021

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- **Recommendation 1:** That the government reform the Employment Insurance benefit system to address inequities for precariously employed/marginalized groups in the workforce by decreasing minimum work hour requirements, expanding eligibility, and increasing benefit rates
- **Recommendation 2:** That the federal government provide up to 4 billion over the next two years to fund universal access to childcare nationally
- **Recommendation 3:** That the government enshrine housing as a universal right, improving access for marginalized groups by enhance the National Housing Co-investment Fund by \$3 billion a year to create more rental housing at affordable rents and increasing the Canada Housing Benefit budget by \$250 million per year
- **Recommendation 4:** That the government empower women's anti-violence non-profit organizations to deliver crucial public services in a sustainable manner through the funding of a long-term sector stabilization fund directed toward operating costs

Addressing the problem of gender-based violence in Canada via social determinants:

While I write this submission as a private citizen, my motivation is drawn from my years of experience as a women's anti-violence worker, and my expertise as a registered clinical counsellor specializing in addressing the trauma of gender-based violence. In my work with women attempting to navigate and escape violence in their personal lives, it is abundantly clear that the factors that barrier them from safety, drive them to stay in dangerous situations, and prevent them from accessing their full potential to participate socially and economically are driven by systemic and material. Lack of income, housing, support with caregiving, and access to psycho-social support from a vastly underfunded social safety net both contributes to the creation of the cycle of gender-based violence, and perpetuates it. As Canadians enter into the long-term recovery and adaptation process to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that women are disproportionately negatively impacted as rates of gender-based violence increase, demands on women's unpaid caregiving labor increases, women who make up the majority of the low-wage/precariously employed workforce lose their jobs and income at a much greater rate than male counterparts, and the social services they rely on struggle to adapt to dramatically increasing demand without sufficient stable funding. As a committed advocate, I submit these budget priority recommendations to address intersecting socio-economic determinants of women's health and safety by ensuring access to these material needs.

Recommendation 1: That the government reform the Employment Insurance benefit system to address inequities for precariously employed/marginalized groups in the workforce by decreasing minimum work hour requirements, expanding eligibility, and increasing benefit rates.

Canadian women continue to earn less income than male counterparts, and make up the majority of the workforce in low-wage, service-oriented sectors that are highly precarious. This places them at greater risk for poverty over all. However, particularly during times of economic downturn, such as the current COVID-19 crisis, women are further disadvantaged with regards to access to income supports. Canadian women consistently have less to access employment insurance benefits than men because they work fewer hours on average—often patching together multiple low-paid positions, and dedicating hours to unpaid family caregiving—and are therefore less likely to meet the hours threshold needed. While the recent CERB benefit has begun to address this challenge, as these benefits expire, the women who do access employment insurance will continue to see smaller benefits, as these are typically tied to wages, which are still lower than men's. During the COVID-19 pandemic 120,000 women have lost their jobs compared to 55,100 men, and twice as many women are working part-time, largely due to lack of access to childcare, while also earning much less per week.

Reform to Canada's Employment Insurance program can address some of these inequities:

- The government should maintain a decrease in the requirement of hours worked to receive benefits. This would allow more precariously employed women to obtain benefits, and stay out of poverty as we recover from the pandemic.
- Broaden the definition of family care to increase eligibility for family caregiving benefits to support those caregivers (primarily women) who will continue to be required to devote labor hours to this work.
- Implement an increase of benefits to 75% of wages which can be more efficiently delivered through the EI system as opposed wage top ups through individual employers.

Recommendation 2: That the federal government provide up to 4 billion over the next two years to fund universal access to childcare nationally.

Access to quality childcare remains an unaddressed determinant of a gender equity, and a persistent income security issue for families of all income levels. There can be no such thing as women's full liberation and participation in society without the community care of children. 80% of health care workers are women, caregivers are women, and the education field also relies on women. Sustainable economic recovery relies on their ability of workers to regain their earning power. But before caregivers can return to work, they need access to affordable child care programs. Clearly, the Canadian economy cannot function, or recover, without the full participation of women. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, families faced excessive fees for childcare, and a drastic shortage of licensed spaces. The market-based system of childcare centers was already fragmented, underfunded in wages and capital cost, and highly dependent on parent revenue.

To empower women to contribute fully to economic recovery, and redress long-standing inequity in participation due to disproportionate caregiving burdens the federal government should take the bold initiative to create universal childcare:

- Provide an initial 2.5 billion for early learning centers to increase spaces, and expanding the number of licensed facilities in the next year, and increase another 2 billion in the following year
- Fund/legislate increases in wages and other compensation for those who work in early learning and child care to ensure the return and retention of staff to the sector.
- Create interim full-day child care programs for school age children 12 years of age and younger until schools are re-opened across the country.

Recommendation 3: That the government enshrine housing as a universal right, improving access for marginalized groups by enhance the National Housing Co-investment Fund by \$3 billion a year to create more rental housing at affordable rents and increasing the Canada Housing Benefit budget by \$250 million per year.

While many Canadians will experience homelessness, women are uniquely vulnerable. Many women face an unthinkable choice between staying with a violent abuser, and becoming homeless. This threat of a total loss of stability for themselves, and often dependents, prevents many women from leaving abuse, perpetuating the cycle of violence. Housing is a recognized human right, as an abstract theory. However, to make this right a reality, particularly for women fleeing violence, concrete contributions to the available stock of rent-geared to income housing, as well as income supports that actually match cost of living is necessary. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted public health risks exacerbated by homelessness. Canadians cannot self-isolate, maintain distance, and prevent the spread of disease without stable, long-term housing.

The federal government can, and has a duty to, enact this right through increased funding for housing development and housing related income supports, particularly geared toward the most vulnerable:

- Enhance the National Housing Co-investment Fund by \$3 billion a year to create more rental housing at affordable rents. While the government has previously demonstrated leadership by creating this fund, it is clear that the current level of funding is insufficient to demand.
- Increase the budget of the Canada Housing Benefit program by at least 250 million per year, which, when added to provincial contributions would allow over 200,000 precariously housed Canadians to remain in housing.

Recommendation 4: That the government empower women's anti-violence non-profit organizations to deliver crucial public services in a sustainable manner through the funding of a long-term sector stabilization fund directed toward operating costs.

Non-profit societies are a key arm of Canada's social safety net. In particular, women's anti-violence service organizations are on the frontlines of ensuring gender equality, addressing the impacts of systemic and interpersonal violence, and responding to the disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women. Women's anti-violence organizations provide direct interventions, advocacy, and wraparound services spanning from support with family and criminal law concerns, operating housing programs, locating housing, applying for income supports, education, harm reduction, skills development, public health, and delivering highly skilled mental health and trauma counselling. Despite the invaluable contributions of these

agencies to the wellbeing of women, and Canadian society more broadly, they remain, as a female dominated social caregiving sector, chronically underfunded, devalued, and overtaxed with unmanageable workloads. Women's anti-violence organizations, in particular, are among the lowest paid, even within the broader non-profit sector. These organizations continue to struggle to recover from a watershed shift toward austerity in the late 1990s and early 2000's which resulted in fewer organizations, with less funding, more highly taxed staff left to address increasing complexity of client needs. As the social isolation measures required by COVID-19 increased incidents of gender-based violence and decreased women's capacity to access life saving anti-violence services, these services were also negatively impacted by having to respond to increased crisis, adapt to remote work without adequate funding for technological adaptations, and face loss of donorship.

However, even prior to the pandemic, these essential agencies have been funded only through an irregular patchwork of unpredictable donations, corporate gifting, and grants. This funding model is precarious, and exacts an additional time-consuming burden on over-taxed workers to research, apply for, and constantly seek contract renewal. These agreements are also insufficient to maintain sustainable workforces and service delivery, as the grant funding model typically only last for 1-3 years, is often dedicated to pilot projects that cannot be maintained after the end of a grant, and often specifically prevent agencies from using funds to maintain current operating costs. This model is extremely fragile, contributing to high worker burnout, inconsistent service delivery, and unconscionably long wait times for access to service for vulnerable women.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of critical women's anti-violence services the federal government must increase a stable funding envelope to these organizations:

- Create a sector stabilization fund of at least 7 billion, with a portion proportionate to the number of women's anti-violence organization dedicated specifically to these agencies.
- Legislate that this fund provides for direct operating costs, without requiring the creation of new pilot projects.
- Maintain this fund as an increase to long-term government contracts, rather than simply topping up with short-term, emergency response-based funding.

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