

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

**By: BC Women's Health Foundation**

**Recommendation: That the government provide \$13.5 million in funding for Canadian COVID-19 and Women's Health Research Initiative, which will uncover the impact of COVID-19 on women's health as both part of the response to the pandemic and of the initial phase of the National Institute for Women's Health Research.**

## Committing to gender equality in the COVID-19 recovery through women's health research

In a commitment to improving gender equality in Canada, the federal government included a National Institute for Women's Health Research in the mandate letter delivered to the Minister of Health with the support of the Minister of Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) and Rural Economic Development. This institute brings together experts in women's health from across the country to tackle persistent gaps in research and care using an intersectional approach.

It is important to consider the gender inequity that has been exacerbated by COVID-19 in developing the federal government's recovery plans. It is critical to understand how the economic, systemic, and societal impacts of this pandemic have and will continue to negatively impact women's health in Canada.

The BC Women's Health Foundation (BCWHF) is committed to supporting the momentum generated by the federal government on gender equality, the continued need to address COVID-19 and its commitment to building a National Institute for Women's Health Research. **We propose developing a multi-disciplinary research initiative focused on the impacts of COVID-19 on women's health, which will bring government and stakeholders together to address the existing and amplified inequities in women's health outcomes and research funding from the pandemic.** The proposed National Institute is based on our previous submission for a [National Centre for Innovation + Excellence in Women's Health Research](#), a not-for-profit institute dedicated to advancing women's health in Canada and globally. We envision an institute that will focus on women's health from microscope to patient care from health promotion to policy development across all life stages and social determinants of health. This would demonstrate the government's GBA+ commitment, and it would provide an ideal opportunity for the government to cement its legacy as a worldwide leader in gender equality.

### THE REALITY

**COVID-19 has magnified women's health inequities:** While COVID-19 has impacted all of society, it has greatly [magnified existing gender inequities](#). Women are experiencing the [lowest levels of labour force participation in three decades](#), [disproportionate caregiving responsibilities](#), increased levels of [gender-based violence](#), and greater [risks of exposure to COVID-19](#) linked to their higher representation as [healthcare workers](#) and other female-dominated industries. These examples only scratch the surface, are not isolated from one or another, and have **substantial, long-term consequences on women's mental and physical health.**

**Disparities in research funding for women's health:** [Huge inequities in funding already limit women's health research](#). Women's health is distinct; women have unique biological vulnerabilities to heart disease, chronic disease, reproductive and sexual health issues, and can experience cervical, ovarian, and uterine cancers. Social determinants impact women more and intersect with physical health conditions. The research that informs medicine - prevention, diagnosis, and treatment - [routinely fails to consider the impact of sex and gender](#). Tragically, research into the impacts of COVID-19 on our society's health has

also largely lacked a gender lens<sup>1</sup>, evidenced by the lack of women's health research projects [funded](#), female authorship in [publications](#), and attention to sex- and gender-based analysis, which was previously determined as a priority by funding agencies. **We crucially need more research into the immediate, short, and long-term impacts of this pandemic on women to inform our economic recovery and prevent the worsening of gender inequities.**

**Gender-focused COVID-19 recovery is essential:** Women must be considered in the COVID-19 recovery plan. Not only because we should work towards a gender-equal society, and because women make up the [majority](#) of our healthcare sector workers, but because healthy women are [crucial in our economic response and recovery](#) to this pandemic. Improving women's participation in the workforce can [significantly increase GDP growth](#) for Canada<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, women account for millions of hours of [unpaid caregiving](#), which have greatly [increased](#) during the pandemic. Women also significantly invest in the human capital of the [next generation](#), providing longevity to economic security. Improving gender equity in the workforce also fosters stability and [improves competitiveness](#). **Women cannot afford to be left out of efforts to restart Canada's economy.**

**Opportunity for government to build on its legacy of gender equality:** This government has already made tremendous strides in gender equality. It has committed to applying the rigorous Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) lens on all policy proposals and to include sex and gender-based analysis in government-funded health research. Yet this is not enough. **This government has the historic opportunity to correct this and position gender at the forefront of our pandemic recovery, furthering its legacy as a global leader in equality.**

## THE SOLUTION

The **Canadian COVID-19 and Women's Health Research Initiative** will be a collection of over 20 research studies focused on the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and public health countermeasures on women's health, investigating the direct health impacts, health system impacts and socio-economic impacts with a focus on actionable recommendations. The initiative incorporates foundational research infrastructure from data management to partnerships to knowledge translation.

### Direct women's health impacts

We do not fully understand the sex and gender differences and implications of COVID-19. While the Immunity Task Force supports studies that measure the immune response, it is essential also to consider the unique biology of women's bodies, intersections with social determinants of health, and the significant health impacts of public health countermeasures. This research looks into the impacts of COVID-19 and related countermeasures on women's physical and mental health, including pregnant women, pregnancy outcomes, and those with complex chronic diseases.

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<sup>1</sup> BC Women's Health Foundation with Prof Liisa Galea (2020) *Let us use this time to address inequities in women's health research*. Policy Options. *In press*. This publication quantifies and explains the impact of funding inequities in women's health research which have been replicated in recent COVID-19 research funding distribution.

<sup>2</sup> BCWHF calculated that the Canadian economy lost \$17.9 billion in 2018 in forgone labour participation alone due to women missing work through poor health, demonstrating the crucial link between healthy women and healthy economies.

This knowledge is essential for understanding the health implications of this disease, guiding the next phases of pandemic management, and developing a new public health model with sex and gender differences at the forefront.

### Healthcare systems impacts

Changes to healthcare delivery, policies, and the redirection of research funds have had significant repercussions on how the health system functions. This research explores the healthcare system impacts of COVID-19 on women's health, including:

- Understanding consequences for healthcare workers;
- The impact of changes in accessing healthcare (including reproductive, perinatal, maternal and mental health, and surgical and screening services);
- Realities for women working, or, being cared for, in long term care homes;
- Impacts on scientific research; and
- The consequences of change in support from the not-for-profit sector.

This research will illustrate where we can course correct in funding, policy, and practice, to prevent increasing the already unacceptable inequities in women's health.

### Societal impacts

This research explores the societal impacts of COVID-19 on women's health while considering intersectionality and geography. Projects will focus on the economics of public health countermeasures, health implications of increased caregiving responsibilities, the realities for Indigenous populations, women's mental health, and gender-based violence. Through partnerships with research institutions and other front-line organizations, this research will uncover the depth of health equity implications to ensure decision-makers have the information required to prioritize shifts in investment and policy development in women's health.

### Research infrastructure

Virtual research infrastructure will be foundational to this research initiative and includes research management, statistical analysis, data management, policy analysis, partnership management, grant development, knowledge translation, and communications. It will also provide opportunities and support for the next generation of women's health researchers with allocations toward additional research projects under the three focus areas: direct health impacts, healthcare system impacts, and societal impacts.

## Foundations for the National Institute for Women's Health Research

A not-for-profit institute dedicated to advancing women's health in Canada and globally is still an urgent priority considering the gendered health inequities being amplified and magnified today. Yet we recognize that little can be implemented without considering the colossal impacts of this pandemic. A phased approach to the development of the National Institute with an initial focus on COVID-19 women's health research provides an ideal solution to initiate this government's legacy commitment to the health of women in Canada and gender equality.

Intentionally inherent within its structure, the Canadian COVID-19 and Women's Health Research Initiative builds upon key components of a National Institute:

- **Multi-disciplinary research:** Projects provide a collective, multi-disciplinary assessment of the impacts of COVID-19 on women's health. Research leads span specializations including complex chronic disease, neurobiology, psychology, reproductive health, sociology, economics, Indigenous health, health system science, and public policy.
- **Intersectional research:** Projects adopt best-practice, intersectional approaches to research, on, for, and with women. They factor life stages and social determinants into research, practice, and policy. BCWHF is experienced in serving women across a vast geographical landscape (over [a third](#) living outside large urban areas), and its research always includes women in rural and remote communities.
- **Bridging the evidence-to-practice gap:** Integrating researchers, clinicians, patients, and policy developers will make it possible to leapfrog the average [17-year research-to-practice timelines](#) and provide actionable recommendations for spending, research, innovation, policy and practice in our pandemic recovery efforts.
- **Convening exceptional talent:** Our established research network features some of the most esteemed researchers in Canada. It provides the infrastructure to support students and trainees, developing the next generation of exceptional women's health researchers, while laying the foundational talent and network for a National Institute.
- **National scope and partnerships:** While led and coordinated in BC, alongside internationally recognized leaders at the [Women's Health Research Institute](#), research projects will be national in scope, application, and collaborations. Partnerships will be paramount in leveraging opportunities for impact and span national academic and clinical institutions (including in Quebec), health authorities (including our partners at the First Nations Health Authority), government, industry, and rural communities. We would also ensure the BCWHF-inspired Women's Health Collective Canada (WHCC)<sup>3</sup> is engaged.
- **Data hub:** With the recent growth in collaborations and data sharing, this is an ideal time to develop a national framework for women's health data. We are committed to supporting the collection, management, and analysis of data so that researchers have the information they need to deliver impact.
- **Funding structures:** Funding infrastructure is essential for the sustainability and longevity of research. Building on the established BCWHF funding processes, and recognizing the holistic nature of women's health research, this initiative provides the infrastructure to fund additional research projects under the three focus areas.

These key components provide the foundations for a National Institute for Women's Health Research. The next phases will build on each of these elements in a detailed business plan. Within five years, it is intended that this National Institute will have approximately 500 associated research scientists, students, and staff.

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<sup>3</sup> The WHCC is a historic partnership of Canada's leading women's health and hospital foundations (BCWHF, Royal Alexandra Hospital Foundation, and Women's College Hospital Foundation), as well as leadership of all three corresponding research institutes dedicated to women's health research.

## SUMMARY

BCWHF is recommending the government provide funding in the amount of \$13.5 million for the Canadian COVID-19 and Women's Health Research Initiative, which will uncover the impact of COVID-19 on women's health as both part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and form part of the initial phase of the National Institute for Women's Health Research.

Canada has an opportunity to advance women's health equity during this pandemic, address inequities in the healthcare system, ensure gender is considered in Canada's economic pandemic-recovery plan, and ultimately improve the lives of over 50% of Canada's population.

**Healthy women everywhere, capable of anything.**