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WORK IN PROGRESS

Women in Canada's changing post-pandemic labour market:
Bumpy Ride series, spring 2024 update

Katherine Scott

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Beyond Recovery: Priorities for supporting women and the economy

Work in Progress is part of a larger project, Beyond Recovery, which is working to support and advance a gender-just recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The project's goals are to document and analyze women's experiences, with a particular focus on those of marginalized women in hard-hit sectors, and to provide evidence-based policy proposals to ensure those who are most impacted in this pandemic are front and centre in Canada's post-pandemic future.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC WIPED out 35 years of women’s economic gains in two short months. At the height of the lockdown, women were working 27 per cent fewer hours, in the aggregate, than in February 2020. In total, 2.8 million women lost their job or were working less than half of their regular hours because of the March 2020 economic lockdowns. This report examines what’s happened to women in the workforce since. It finds mixed reviews: many women in higher-paying jobs are now doing better than before the pandemic. However, women in low-paying, pandemic-vulnerable jobs and in the care economy are still having a rough time of things.

Among the report’s key findings:

Pandemic-vulnerable jobs took the biggest hit: The upheaval of the labour market was particularly challenging for the more than 2.5 million women working in front-facing, pandemic-vulnerable industries, including accommodation and food services; arts, entertainment and recreation; other services (e.g., hair salons, garages and laundries) and retail services. These four sectors experienced the largest percentage of declines in employment in the spring of 2020—accounting for one half (49.3 per cent) of total losses and an even larger share (56 per cent) of the losses reported by female workers. Canada’s economy rebounded in 2021 and continued to grow through 2022 and 2023—but strong employment growth wasn’t enough to boost the economic fortunes of all women. By the end of 2022, women’s employment in vulnerable sectors was still 98,000 jobs short of pre-pandemic levels.

The situation of low-waged workers has not improved: The ongoing struggles of pandemic-vulnerable industries remain an important threat to women’s economic security. These are among the lowest-paid jobs in the labour market, with some of the highest rates of part-time work and lowest rates of unionization and access to employer-provided benefits. The current situation of this largely female and racialized workforce is challenging, to say the least. As our case study of hotel workers in B.C. documents, the hotel industry used the crisis to cut costs to the bone by increasing flexibilization of labour and understaffing—even as industry revenues roared back in 2021. Expanded access to temporary foreign workers to address “labour shortages” has further undercut the position of existing workers seeking decent full-time employment, exploiting foreign workers desperate for paid work in the process. Established disparities between low-paid, precarious workers and those in permanent, well-paid jobs appear to be widening.

The care economy still struggles: Health care and social assistance, and educational services, also took a big hit in the spring of 2020, employment falling 446,000, women workers accounting for 82.6 per cent of these losses. By 2022, employment levels had rebounded—notably in hospitals and primary and secondary schools—together increasing by five per cent (or 193,000 jobs) between February 2020 and December 2022, women this time accounting for two-thirds of the gains. These new positions, however, did not begin to make a dent in the demand for care and support, reflected in record-high job vacancies posted over this same period in occupations such as nursing, early childhood education, and community services. Care economy vacancies reached a peak in the third quarter of 2022, averaging more than 166,000 over the year—more than twice the number than in 2019. Vacancies eased only slightly in 2023, even as the number of people employed in the care economy grew. The demand for registered nurses remains particularly high. Hospitals and other community services are still having tremendous difficulty recruiting and retaining staff.

Loss of capacity in health care and social services: What really stands out is the actual decline in the number of care workers in key areas since the pandemic. The number of staff working in nursing and residential facilities fell by -4.9 per cent, or 21,100 jobs between 2019 and 2022, some undoubtedly taking up better-paying offers from hospitals. Child care services have also experienced a large drop in their workforce. In 2022, employment levels were still more than 20,000 positions shy of pre-pandemic levels. Women account for all these employment losses.

The churn of care workers is also extremely high in health care services. While the number of nurses, for instance, has increased, so, too, has the proportion of workers signalling their intention to leave the profession because of punishing working conditions. The high levels of stress associated with working beyond capacity since the beginning of the pandemic has been driving skilled care workers from their jobs. On top of that, wage gains have not kept up with inflation, further eroding the value of women's care labour. It is not surprising that highly skilled workers are turning to private agencies that offer sometimes six times the wage rate and control over their working hours. There was a fleeting moment when care workers were held up as heroes. This moment has passed.

New employment opportunities in professional services:

The experiences of workers in low-wage services stand in stark contrast to those of workers in sectors of the economy that were insulated, to a greater extent, from economic disruption. Except for administrative and support services, transportation and warehousing and agriculture, all other industries had fully recovered by 2022. Both male and female workers working in "the rest of the economy" experienced strong employment growth in 2021 and 2022. Among women, four "growth" industries led the way, driving aggregate gains in employment and pushing up wages: professional services employment, public administration, information and cultural industries, and finance and insurance. For example, the share of women working in professional services—such as computer systems design, legal services and accounting—increased by 1.7 percentage points between 2019 and 2022. The relative increase of women working in public administration was even larger, pushing women's share of employment in this industry above the 50 per cent mark. The pandemic appears to be accelerating the shift away from high-contact, typically low-paid, personal and customer service work to better paying jobs in white collar service industries at a time of profound demographic change—opening up opportunities to diverse women workers who have historically faced employment barriers.

But...there's always a but: A sizable group of female workers has moved up the wage grid from lower-paying jobs to higher-paying jobs since 2020—important progress. But many of these women have been channelled into lower-paying jobs within these fields. The gender pay gaps in professional services and in finance and insurance actually widened between 2019 and 2022 as male earnings growth outpaced that of women in these areas. For example, women working in professional services earned 78 cents, on average, for every dollar men earned in 2019. In 2022, the gap had widened, falling to 75 cents on the dollar. This is the

definition of two steps forward, one step back. Lower employment rates, fewer working hours per week, substantial labour market segregation and persistent glass ceilings mean that women are still being paid considerably less than men. Rising living costs have been especially devastating for low-wage workers. There has been a drop in the proportion of women workers earning less than two-thirds of the median hourly wage, but the remaining workers are working for less. Restaurant workers and grocery store clerks, for instance, made less in 2023 than in 2019. Recent immigrants have been especially hard hit. Workers in the care economy also experienced real pay cuts, many subject to wage restraint through the pandemic and beyond. The pay gap between men and women in these services tends to be narrower than in the private sector but wages have fallen behind.

Huge toll on young people: The economic turmoil of the pandemic also exacted a huge toll on young people (aged 15 to 24 years), who make up roughly one in eight workers (13 per cent) but account for almost three in 10 workers in pandemic-vulnerable industries, the majority of whom are young women (54.7 per cent). When the economy shut down in March 2020, overall employment dropped by 35.2 per cent among young workers between February and April, more than twice the overall rate (15.9 per cent). The percentage decrease was predictably the highest among youth working in pandemic-vulnerable sectors, falling by almost half (45.8 per cent) over these two months. Employment levels among young people has oscillated since then, rising and falling as the recovery proceeded. In 2022, 2.6 million young people were engaged in paid employment, effectively the same number that were employed in 2019. But employment among youth in front-facing, personal service work was still lower than in 2019—reflecting the ongoing difficulties. There was no improvement in 2023 as employment growth started to slow in professional services and the financial sector. Youth unemployment rates are trending higher, notably among young women aged 20 to 24 years. Young people including students are having a harder time finding work, a challenge that has the potential of undermining their economic security for years to come.

Lessons learned? A question now hangs over the future of pandemic-vulnerable industries and the millions of women who work there. While the retail sector has fully recovered, we don't yet know whether accommodation and food services, personal services, and others will follow suit, or when. The pandemic highlighted the crucial labour low-wage workers perform in sustaining our collective well-being and the substantial challenges these workers face. Yet, change

does not appear imminent. The deep-seated divide between low-waged, precarious jobs and high-waged, permanent jobs persists as vulnerable temporary foreign workers swell the ranks of the low-waged workforce. The crisis in the care economy impacts millions of women workers and it has certainly not been resolved. The legacy of chronic underfunding, persistent devaluation, and offloading of responsibility for care onto private households—and the women within them—remains. While some women continue to find well-paid care-sector jobs, many others struggle on modest or low wages, piecing together work where they can, working under crushing conditions, every shift understaffed. The COVID-19 crisis illustrated both the shortcomings of existing policies and institutions and what's possible with strong public leadership. The imperative now is to apply the lessons of COVID-19 in service of a more resilient and inclusive labour market and gender-just future. Institutional reforms and greater awareness of the damaging impacts of gender disparities may yet create opportunities for systemic change.

1. INTRODUCTION

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC REPRESENTED a profound economic disruption. The pandemic wiped out 35 years of women's economic gains in two short months. At the height of the lockdown, women were working 27 per cent fewer hours, in the aggregate, than in February 2020. In total, 2.8 million women lost their job or were working less than half of their regular hours because of the March 2020 economic lockdowns. Women's unemployment rate reached 14.1 per cent (Scott 2020).

Women's employment has since rebounded—buoyed by an initial surge in consumer demand and high levels of immigration, even as large numbers of older workers left the labour market. Levels of female employment among all aged 15 years and older increased by 5.5 per cent between 2020 and 2021 and by 4.5 per cent between 2021 and 2022, pushing up women's rate of employment from a low of 54.1 per cent in 2020 to 58.3 per cent in 2022—within reach of the 2019 benchmark (58.5 per cent).

The employment recovery has been broad-based; women with disabilities, racialized workers, Indigenous Peoples and other marginalized workers all made important employment gains between 2020 and 2022. We have also seen a shift in the composition of the labour market itself in the aftermath of pandemic crisis period. A particular confluence of forces came together to open up employment opportunities in certain high-waged sectors of the labour market, including information industries and professional and scientific services. At the same time, the gendered underpinnings of the care economy were graphically exposed, raising critical questions about wages and working conditions of care workers, as well as the place of women's traditional work—caring, clerical, catering, cashiering and cleaning—in today's economy.

This brief looks at the question of women's labour market transitions in greater detail—tracking changes in employment in three different groups of industries and how women have fared through the 2019 to 2022 period.¹ It examines several specific sectors, providing a labour market profile both before and after the initial pandemic crisis, relying, as well, on the findings of qualitative studies of frontline workers who were most impacted by the pandemic to describe the experiences of different groups of workers. Have the benefits and risks of the employment recovery been equitably shared? How are current labour market developments impacting women's wages and security? Are current trends disrupting long-established patterns of gender segregation?

These questions have taken on greater urgency as the economy has weakened in the face of an aggressive campaign of interest rate hikes by the Bank of Canada, which was designed to reign in high inflation, and renewed calls for government austerity from corporate elites and right-wing political movements. Ongoing geopolitical turmoil, persistently low levels of business investment and the expansion of precarious forms of employment likewise threaten recent employment gains and portend greater financial hardship. Marginalized communities who bore the brunt of the pandemic now face substantially higher costs of living than just a year ago. What might we expect looking forward—in a future characterized by population aging and lower levels of economic growth?

The next section of the report examines the gendered character of Canada's labour market, setting up the project's key research questions and research approach. Section 3 then provides a top-level overview of labour market developments from 2019 to 2022, describing the recession in 2020 and the circuitous, multi-pronged path of employment recovery thereafter. Section 4 examines the unique experiences of women workers in greater detail, looking at the pandemic's impact on workers in pandemic-vulnerable sectors, the care economy and growth sectors of the economy. Section 5 takes up the question of labour market transition, gender segregation and women's earnings. In the conclusion, we discuss the potential implications of our findings for women's future employment and economic security and what's needed to move towards a gender-just future.

2. GENDER SEGREGATION IN CANADA'S LABOUR MARKET

AN INTRACTABLE CHALLENGE

OVER THE LAST 50 years, the gap in employment rates between men and women has narrowed substantially as women moved into the labour market in large numbers. The gap in employment rates grew from roughly 30 percentage points in 1976 (72.7 per cent vs 41.9 per cent) to about eight percentage points in 2019 (66.2 per cent vs 58.5 per cent)—before the pandemic hit. Over this same period, women's income from employment increased, helping to reduce the gender gap in annual earnings from 56.2 per cent in 1976 to a still sizable 27.3 per cent in 2019.² Looking at another measure, the disparity in median hourly wages narrowed from 21.2 per cent in 1997 (the first year for which we have comparable data) to 15.4 per cent in 2019.³

Several factors help explain women's economic progress, including growth in full-time employment, longer job tenure, and higher levels of educational attainment. Many more women now work in higher-paid professional occupations, such as in law and social, community and government services and in unionized (typically public sector) workplaces.⁴ In recent years, stronger labour standards and pay equity

provisions, expanded access to caregiving leaves, and improvements to minimum wage laws have also played a key role in enhancing women's economic security.⁵

Yet disparities persist—particularly among mothers with young children, women with fewer years of formal education, and women confronting overlapping sources of discrimination. Research has repeatedly shown that Indigenous, racialized, disabled and immigrant women have worse labour market outcomes, including lower employment and lower earnings, than their non-Indigenous, non-racialized, non-disabled, Canadian-born peers.⁶ If Indigenous and racialized women had been making the same annual salary as their white male peers in 2020, their bank accounts (and the Canadian economy) would have been \$57 billion richer.⁷

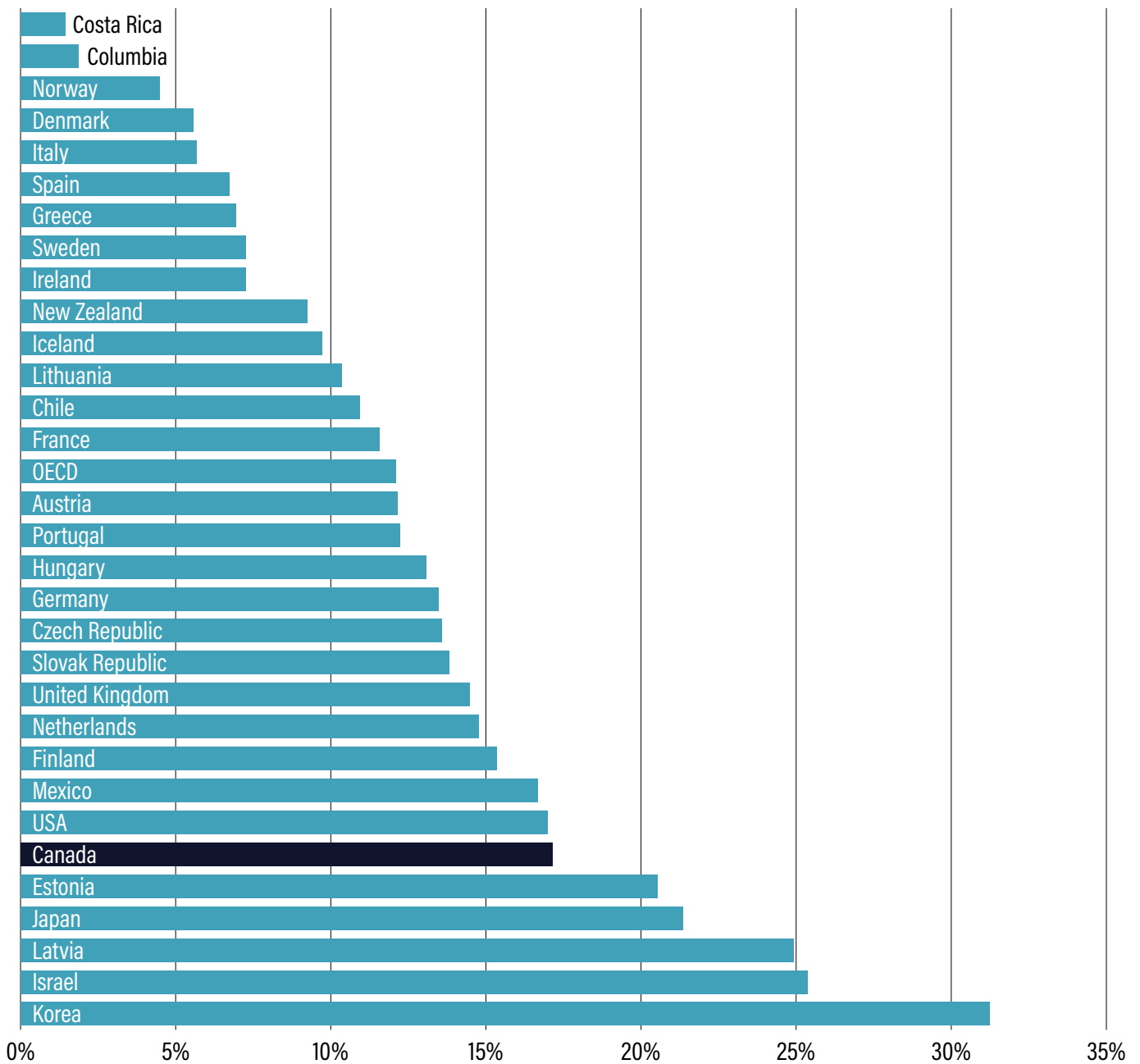
Canada's gender pay gap remains one of the highest in the OECD.⁸ It is the product of entrenched systemic biases, the unequal burden of care, and outright discrimination. The gendered division of labour across and within occupations and industries is another manifest source of economic disparity.⁹ Despite the movement towards equal labour force participation, and women's higher levels of education, women (and other marginalized groups) continue to be concentrated in lower paying sectors of the economy, notably in care work fields presumed to align with their "natural" or "traditional" abilities and interests.¹⁰

The comparatively few women who work in "non-traditional" jobs earn more than other women, but they, too, generally earn less than their male peers.¹¹ Indeed, a 2019 CCPA study found that women in the C-suite earn only 68 cents for every dollar their male colleagues make—an average difference of \$950,000 less a year.¹² Women make as much or more than their male colleagues in only seven of the top 20 female occupations.¹³ Women's work is more poorly paid even in these sectors precisely because the majority of workers are female; it simply isn't valued as highly.¹⁴ The work done by marginalized women workers is valued even less, concentrated as they are in the most precarious and difficult jobs.¹⁵ In 2021, among full-time, full-year workers aged 25 to 64 years, non-racialized women made 82 cents, on average, for each dollar non-racialized men earned. The figure was just 74 cents among racialized women.¹⁶ Looking at the total population of workers, the disparities are even larger.

The segregated character of Canada's labour market has been markedly resistant to change. In 2021, the majority of women (54 per cent) were employed in just 20 occupations, all involving the "5 Cs": caring, clerical, catering, cashiering and cleaning. This is only a slightly smaller

Figure 1 Gender wage gap among full-time employees, 2022 or latest available

Difference in median annual earnings



Source: OECD (2024), Gender wage gap (indicator)

share than in 1987, when 59 per cent of women were employed in these same occupations. By contrast, just 19 per cent of men were employed in “female” occupations in 2021 compared to a similarly low 16 per cent in 1987—a three percentage point increase over 34 years.¹⁷ While women have a strong economic incentive to move into higher paid “male”

occupations, not so among men. Men's limited movement into female-dominated occupations remains a key barrier to any future progress.¹⁸

Linda Kaida and Monica Boyd's review of occupational segregation in Canada between 1991 and 2016 provides further evidence of women's slow progress in recent years. Over this 25-year period, they found that there were only small movements of women out of highly female-concentrated, low-paid occupations, such as clerical work, into higher paid positions in more gender-integrated professional and managerial roles—a much slower rate of improvement compared to the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, women's representation in heavily male-dominated occupations in areas such as repair, construction, or transportation was virtually unchanged.¹⁹ Emma Quinn and her colleagues likewise conclude that there was little change in the segregated character of Canada's labour market between 1991 and 2016: half of 500 detailed occupational categories were dominated by either men or women (with representation of 75 per cent or greater) at the time of each census over this period of time.²⁰

These findings are particularly troubling in light of the continuing importance of industry and occupation (and related job characteristics) on the size of the gender pay gap relative to men and other measures of women's economic security.^{21,22} They also highlight the scale of the challenge in making further progress in reducing gender inequality against a backdrop of labour market polarization linked to the impact of automation and new technologies, the premium attached to higher education, and comparatively lax state oversight and regulation of labour markets in many jurisdictions as the scale and type of precarious work has expanded.²³

The following paper unpacks women's labour market experiences during the 2019 to 2022 period, focusing on, in particular, industrial changes that have occurred in the aftermath of the pandemic. Not only is industry an important determinant of the quality of employment that individual workers experience, it provides a window for exploring the dynamics and direction of economic restructuring.²⁴ For our study, we have chosen to look at three different groups of female workers to examine the pandemic's economic impacts, drawing on custom cross-tabulations from Statistic Canada's Labour Force Survey on employment and wage trends by industry category at the two-digit, three-digit and four-digit NAICS²⁵ code levels:

- Workers in front-facing, pandemic-vulnerable industries who experienced the largest comparative employment losses during the

spring of 2020 and the most difficult recovery, including (72) food and accommodation services; (71) arts, entertainment and recreation; (81) other services such as hair salons and cleaners; and (44-45) retail services.

- Workers employed in the care economy, including (61) educational services and (62) health care and social assistance.
- Workers employed in industries that were relatively protected from the economic fallout of the pandemic and rebounded strongly over the 2020-22 period, including (54) professional, scientific and technical services; (51) information and cultural industries; (52) finance and insurance; and (91) public administration.

The report describes the experiences of each group of workers, highlighting not only the similarities and differences between each of the three, but also some of the variations within each grouping and individual two-digit industry categories. The conclusion considers the findings in light of macroeconomic trends and discusses implications for the pursuit of economic equality.

3. UNEQUAL RECESSION, UNEQUAL RECOVERY

THE CORONAVIRUS CUT A swath across regions of the country as millions of women lost their job or faced reduced hours with the introduction of preventive public health measures to contain the circulation of COVID-19. In previous recessions, women's work in the service sector had offered some measure of protection against job loss—but not during the COVID-19 pandemic. In spring 2020, women's rate of employment dropped by more than 10 percentage points. Low-wage workers—overwhelmingly women, highly racialized—accounted for the largest share of these losses. Between February and April 2020, fully half (52 per cent) of all low-wage workers earning \$14 an hour or less were laid off or lost the majority of their hours.²⁶ This included 58 per cent of low-wage women and 45 per cent of men in this earnings bracket.²⁷

The upheaval of the labour market turmoil was particularly challenging for the more than 2.5 million women working in front-facing, pandemic-vulnerable industries, including accommodation and food services; arts, entertainment and recreation; other services (e.g., hair salons, garages and laundries) and retail services. These female-majority industries,²⁸ along with administrative and support services, are the lowest-paid sectors in the Canadian economy²⁹ and the largest employers of part-time labour. Over one-quarter (28.5 per cent) of all new immigrants (less than

10 years in Canada) and temporary residents work in accommodation and food services.³⁰ Together, these four sectors experienced the largest percentage of declines in employment in the spring of 2020—accounting for one half (49.3 per cent) of total losses and an even larger share (56 per cent) of the losses reported by female workers.³¹ They have also experienced the most difficult recovery and are still struggling to find their footing more than three years later, as described below.

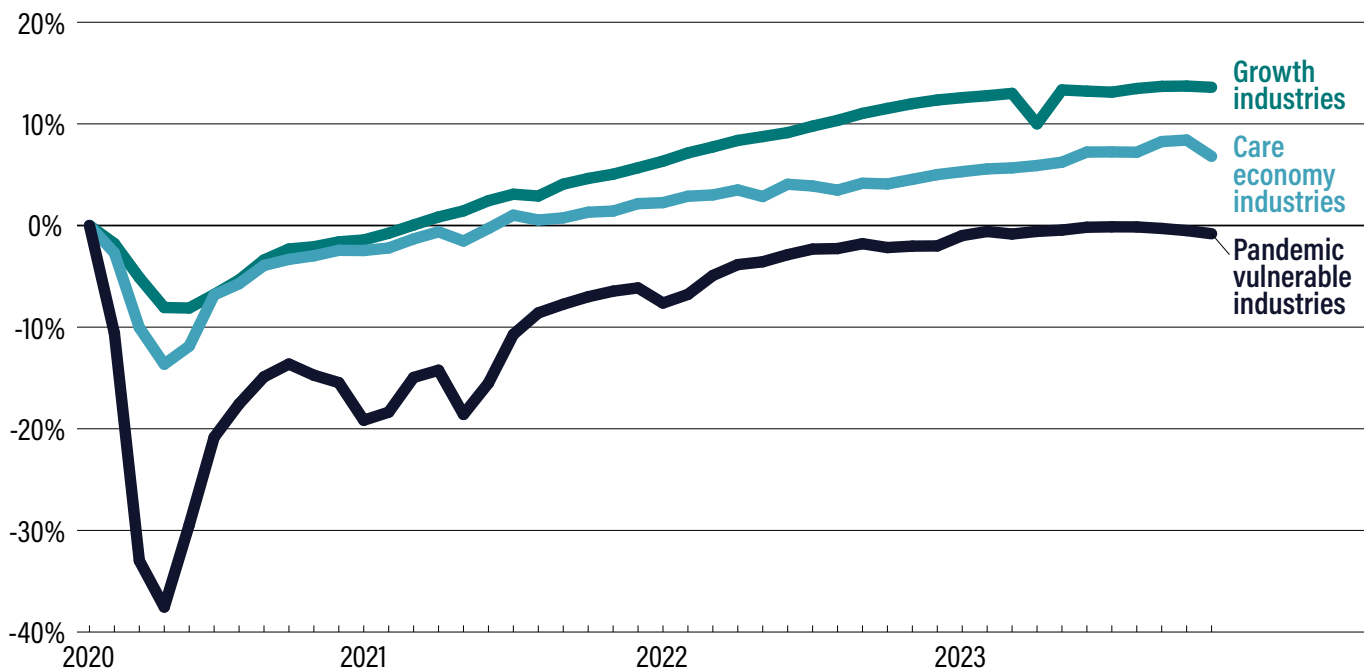
Other industries were similarly impacted by public health closures and business disruptions. The many women working in the care economy³² experienced a sharp drop in employment between February and April 2020. Levels of employment in health care and social assistance, and educational services, fell by 446,000 over these two months, women workers accounting for 82.6 per cent of these losses.³³ By 2022, employment levels had rebounded, but the workforce crisis precipitated by the pandemic—in a sector strained and drained by years of austerity—continues to impact workers and undermine services to those in need.³⁴ The high levels of stress associated with working beyond capacity since the beginning of the pandemic has driven skilled care workers from their jobs and many permanently out of their professions. The massive backlog in services and high levels of staff turnover mean that there is no respite in sight for current workers.³⁵ The deterioration of working conditions in the care economy is set to impact women's employment and economic well-being for years to come.

For another group of industries, however, the pandemic's employment impacts were short-lived and/or much smaller in scale. Construction and manufacturing, two sectors largely staffed by men,³⁶ experienced a sharp decline in employment in spring 2020—men accounting for 75.9 per cent of 563,000 in total losses—and a sharp rebound through the summer and fall of 2020.³⁷ Other “white collar” or professional sectors—such as professional, scientific and technical services, finance and insurance, and information and culture—were largely insulated from the employment turmoil and its financial impacts as employers pivoted to remote or hybrid work arrangements. The public sector shifted quickly, too, as governments ramped up to respond to the scale of the crisis. Together, these four industries—characterized as “growth industries” for the purposes of this report—recorded 105,000 job losses between February and April 2020, representing only 3.5 per cent of the total, and quickly rebounded in the following months. These sectors were poised for sustained growth when the economy fully re-opened in 2021.³⁸

The economic fallout of the pandemic continues to shape and constrain women's economic opportunities and financial security. Early

Figure 2 Change in level of employment relative to February 2020

Pandemic vulnerable, care economy and growth industries, population 15+ years



Note Pandemic vulnerable industries: Retail, Arts, Accommodation & food, Other services. Care economy sectors: Health care and social assistance; Educational services. Growth sectors: Information, Professional services, Finance and insurance, Management, Public administration.

Source Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0220-01—Employment and average weekly earnings (including overtime) for all employees by industry, monthly, seasonally adjusted.

Table 1 Change in employment by industry group, 2019-22

All workers 15+ years

	2019-20	2020-22	2019-22
Rest of economy	-3.1%	9.1%	5.7%
Care economy	-2.3%	9.5%	5.7%
Growth sectors	1.7%	13.1%	15.0%
Pandemic vulnerable	-13.3%	9.2%	-5.3%
Total	-5.6%	9.1%	3.0%

Source Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0023-01

on, there was hope that the pandemic-induced recession would be sharp and short-lived. As noted, there was an initial surge of employment through summer 2020, until a second wave of community infections in the fall triggered an equally sizable second wave of employment losses. Repeat in 2021: employment rebounded and retreated through a third and fourth wave of infections, ranging in severity in different regions of the country. As economist Jim Stanford noted, Canada's employment

recovery did not so much resemble the desired “V” but, rather, took the shape of the Loch Ness monster: a partial rebound followed by successive ups and downs.³⁹

Canada’s recovery is best viewed as proceeding along multiple tracks—a description that highlights the very different experiences of workers engaged in pandemic-vulnerable industries and those in the rest of the economy. As noted, while some groups of workers experienced little economic disruption, others in vulnerable sectors and precarious employment situations were trapped on an economic roller coaster. By the end of 2021, total employment (both men and women) in pandemic-vulnerable industries had still not recovered to pre-pandemic levels, down a total 259,000 jobs between February 2020 and December 2021.⁴⁰ The largest losses were among accommodation and food service workers (-165,000 jobs), those employed in arts and entertainment (-46,000 jobs), and other services, such as personal services (-30,000 jobs). A year later, by December 2022, the situation had improved, but levels of employment were still below pre-pandemic levels (-85,000 jobs).

Looking at the year as a whole, the size of the workforce in pandemic-vulnerable industries was 5.3 per cent smaller in 2022 compared to 2019—a difference of 253,000 jobs. As Table 2 below shows, three of the five sub-sectors struggling with the greatest losses were food services and drinking places, personal and laundry services, and accommodation services.

By contrast, workers in the “rest of the economy” (with some notable exceptions, such as administrative and support services) had fully recouped their pandemic-related employment losses by fall 2021 as economic bottlenecks resolved and pent-up consumer demand, including for deferred care, exploded. By December 2021, total employment in the rest of the economy had surpassed February 2020 levels by 1.6 per cent (204,000 jobs). A year later, employment levels were 5.8 per cent higher (750,000 jobs) than in February 2020. By December 2022, most industries in the “rest of the economy” had recouped their pandemic losses, with the exception of administrative services (-1.0 per cent), real estate (-0.5 per cent) and wholesale trade (-0.5 per cent).⁴¹ The respective change in employment in “rest of the economy” industries between 2019 and 2022 was roughly the same—at 5.7 per cent.

Of this group, professional services led the way, with an increase of over 200,000 jobs (21.3 per cent) between February 2020 and December 2022—driven, in part, by the surge in demand for services as businesses pivoted to remote work. There were also large job increases in finance and insurance (10.3 per cent) and construction (10.2 per cent), followed

Table 2 Change in employment by industry, 2019-22

All workers 15+ years, 3 digit NAICS

Top five	Change (×1,000)	Women's share loss/gain
Professional, scientific and technical services	252.0	54.4%
Educational services	140.6	61.5%
Hospitals	137.7	73.9%
Federal government public administration	94.9	56.1%
Construction of buildings	63.9	21.9%
Bottom five		
Truck transportation	-39.4	-7.4%
Accommodation services	-42.8	62.1%
Personal and laundry services	-48.3	89.0%
Administrative and support services	-62.0	72.9%
Food services and drinking places	-127.4	60.8%
Total	571.8	51.7%

Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, Custom Data

by management (8.3 per cent),⁴² public administration (7.6 per cent) and information industries (7.1 per cent). The four “growth” industries that posted the smallest employment losses in spring 2020 accounted for the majority of employment gains by the end of 2022, at 57.7 per cent—an increase of over 400,000 jobs. Job growth here was concentrated, as we discuss in greater detail below, in computer systems design, residential construction and federal administration.

There were gains as well in health care and social assistance, and educational services—notably in hospitals and primary and secondary schools—together increasing by five per cent, accounting for one-quarter (or 175,000 jobs) of all employment growth between February 2020 and December 2022. These new positions, however, did not begin to make a dent in the demand for care and support, reflected in record-high job vacancies posted over this same period in occupations such as nursing, early childhood education, and community services. Care economy vacancies reached a peak in the third quarter of 2022, averaging more than 166,000 over the year—more than twice the number than in 2019. Health care workforce shortages accounted for the overwhelming majority of this gap. Vacancies eased only slightly in 2023, even as the number of people employed in the care economy grew.⁴³ The demand for registered nurses remains particularly high.⁴⁴

Table 3 Job vacancies by industry sector, 2019-23

Annual average

	2019	2021	2022	2023*
Rest of economy	371,434	535,496	646,779	542,350
Care industries	80,030	131,760	166,724	167,433
Growth industries	83,020	114,513	137,914	99,637
Pandemic vulnerable industries	168,379	246,161	297,965	229,837
Total	539,809	781,659	944,746	772,183

* Average for 2023 includes first three quarters

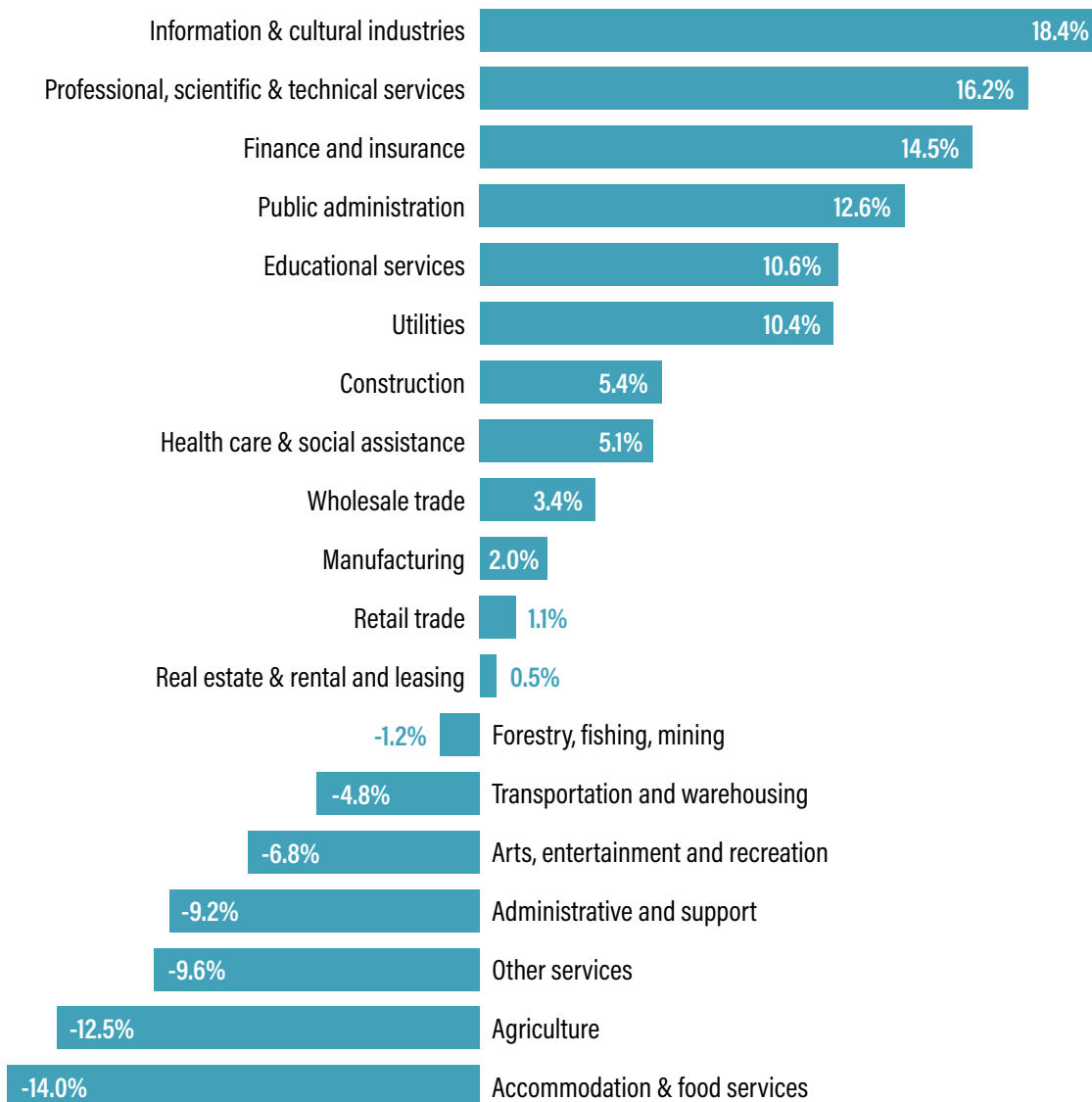
Source Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0400-01—Job vacancies, payroll employees, and job vacancy rate by industry sector, quarterly, adjusted for seasonality

Figure 3 below presents an overview of the employment changes by major industry group, visually capturing the shifts that have occurred since 2019. In total, the number of workers employed in the four pandemic-vulnerable industries examined here shrunk by 5.3 per cent, to roughly 4.5 million, their share of the total employed falling from 24.8 per cent to 22.8 per cent. At the same time, the workforce in growth industries grew by 5.7 per cent, their share of total employment rising by 2.3 percentage points to 22.0 per cent. Likewise, the share of care economy workers increased by 0.8 percentage points to 20.7 per cent. This sizable segment of the Canadian workforce now numbers over four million.

These developments have been taking place against the backdrop of labour market polarization and profound demographic change in Canada. The post-war goods-producing economy, in which most jobs were clustered in and around the middle of the skills distribution, gave way decades ago to a service-based economy characterized by both “low-skilled” jobs in personal services and “high-skilled” jobs in professional, management, and financial services. There remains considerable debate about how to best describe and classify “high-skilled” versus “low-skilled” work. Indeed, the types of jobs considered “low skilled” or “working class” are not confined to manual or routine work, or jobs that technically require lower levels of education.⁴⁵ But there is no question about the increase in job polarization over the past 40 years. A growing proportion of workers are now concentrated at the top and the bottom of the labour market, their rates of pay and working conditions miles apart.⁴⁶ These differences continued to widen during the pandemic as the market incomes of Canada’s elite pulled away from the majority of workers. In

Figure 3 Change in employment by industry, 2019-22

All workers 15+ years



Source: Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0023-01—Labour force characteristics by industry, annual (x1,000)

2021, the top one per cent of tax filers took home an average of \$811,800 after dividends and capital gains were tallied—a 40-year high.⁴⁷

Population aging and record-high levels of immigration are also impacting Canada’s labour market and the course of the economic recovery. The last of the sizable baby boomer generation will turn 65 in 2030. Historically high levels of employment among those aged 55 and older (a drop during the pandemic notwithstanding) have delayed, not offset, the impact of the retirement wave now underway.⁴⁸ In 2022,

THE WIDENING GAP BETWEEN THOSE WITH LOWER LEVELS OF EDUCATION AND POST-SECONDARY GRADUATES

When the pandemic hit, employment among workers aged 25 to 64 years with less than a high school education dropped by 11.5 per cent between 2019 and 2020 (10.6 per cent among men and 13.3 per cent among women).⁵¹ Employment fell again in 2021 by 5.6 per cent before recovering in 2022 by a modest 3.9 per cent. These gains weren't enough to recoup all the pandemic losses: in 2022, there were still 13.2 per cent fewer people in this group engaged in the paid labour market than before the pandemic, 12.7 per cent fewer men and 14.3 per cent fewer women.

High school graduates (aged 25 to 64 years) also sustained large employment losses between 2019 and 2020, down 6.5 per cent, rebounding modestly in 2021 and 2022. While male high school graduates have recovered their employment losses, there were still 127,000 (9.5 per cent) fewer employed female high school grads in 2022 compared to 2019. The pandemic seems to have reinforced a downward trend in employment among all high school graduates as the number of workers with post-secondary credentials has grown and employment opportunities shifted.⁵²

The group that didn't skip a beat during the emergency phases of the pandemic was university graduates, especially among men. This was the only group that did not sustain employment losses (in the aggregate) between 2019 and 2022 and has since enjoyed solid employment gains. There was a drop in the women's rate of employment in 2020 as population growth outpaced job growth. But in 2021 and 2022, the jobs on offer in sectors like professional services and the care economy caught up with the growing numbers of university-educated women, combining to push up their rates of employment to 82.5 per cent in 2022.⁵³ The post-pandemic labour market also boosted the fortunes of university-educated men. Their employment rate reached 88.5 per cent in 2022, its highest level since the mid 1990s.

over 300,000 workers left their job in order to retire, contributing to a surge in vacancies in sectors such as manufacturing, transportation and health care and a "tighter" labour market than before the pandemic, as noted above.⁴⁹ Population aging is an important rationale for aggressive new immigration targets. In 2022, Canada's population grew by over one million people, the highest annual population growth rate (+2.7%) since 1957. Ninety-six per cent of the total was the result of international immigration—including almost 450,000 immigrants and more than 600,000 non-permanent or temporary residents, such as international students on work and study permits.⁵⁰

The pandemic appears to be accelerating the shift away from high-contact, typically low-paid, personal and customer work to better-paid jobs in professional and technical services, and public administration at a time of profound demographic change. Large numbers of older,

Canadian-born workers are leaving the labour market, large numbers of new immigrants and temporary workers are entering it. The question for our project is: how are these changes impacting women workers, and marginalized women workers who are disproportionately represented in low-waged service employment? Who is taking advantage of the new opportunities that have opened, offering better wages and working conditions? Who is being left behind? Are recent labour market developments helping to reduce gender segregation and wage polarization in Canada's labour market or is the divide between "good jobs" vs. "bad jobs", between "secure" or "protected" workers vs. "precarious" workers growing wider?

4. WINNERS AND LOSERS

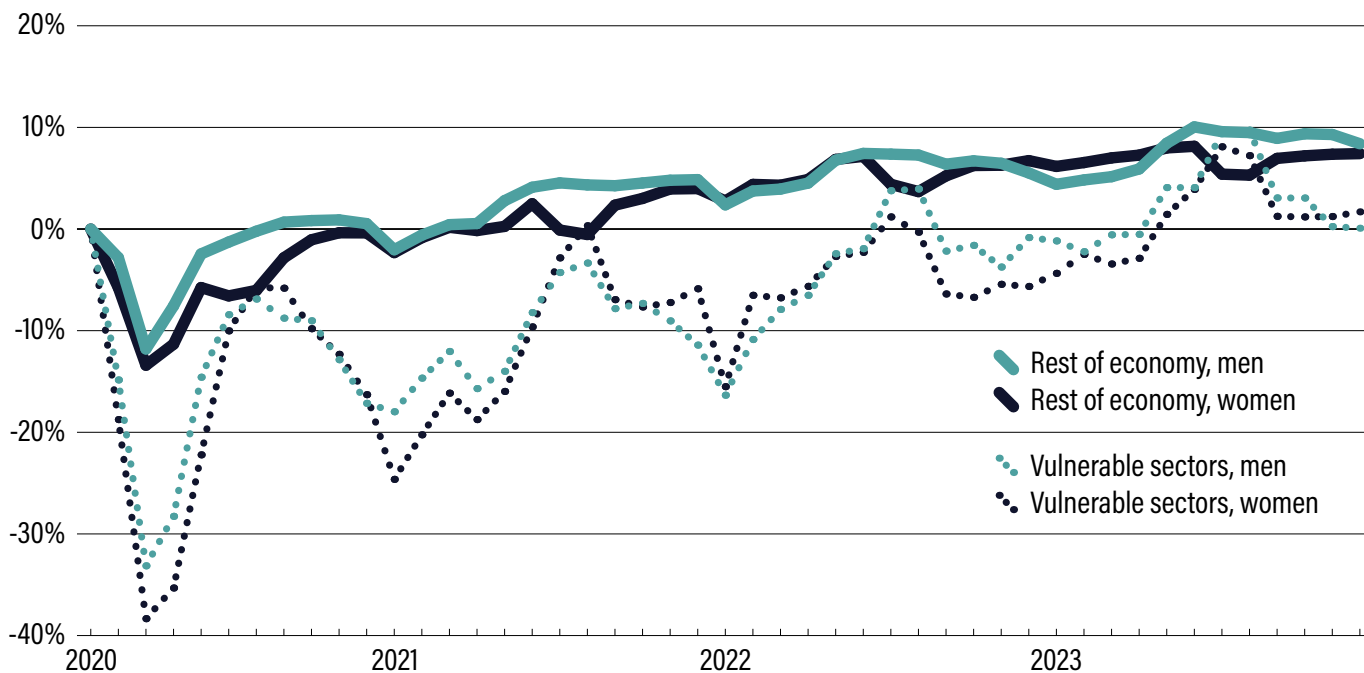
FEMALE EMPLOYMENT IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE PANDEMIC

CANADA'S ECONOMIC REBOUND, AS described above, has proven to be as unequal as the initial downturn—especially for female workers. At every stage, women's employment growth lagged men's, the gendered character of the labour market contributing to women's slower recovery, as shown in Figure 4. In particular, women's over-representation in low-waged personal and customer services contributed to prolonged economic struggle—particularly for workers shouldering significant care responsibilities and simultaneously confronting entrenched employment barriers such as for women with disabilities, racialized women and those with lower-levels of education.⁵⁴ These workers, at one and the same time, faced heightened risk of exposure to COVID-19 and financial hardship and privation with the fewest resources on hand to navigate the public health emergency.⁵⁵

Continuing business turmoil and the precarity of their work situation stands in sharp contrast to more privileged workers—both women and men—who were able to amass savings and pursue new economic opportunities as the economy reopened. Previous research has shown that many aspects of job security, such as the risks attached to automation, are unequally distributed. The experience of the pandemic

Figure 4 Change in level of employment relative to February 2020 by gender and industry group

All workers 15+ years



Note Vulnerable sectors: Accommodation & food services; Information, culture and recreation; Other services; Retail services
Source Statistics Canada. Labour Force Survey. Table 14-10-0022-01. Unadjusted for seasonality.

Table 4 Change in employment by sex and industry group, 2019-22

All workers 15+ years

	Male workers		Female workers	
	2019-20	2019-22	2019-20	2019-22
Rest of economy	-3.4%	4.7%	-2.8%	7.0%
Care economy	-0.3%	11.5%	-2.8%	5.7%
Growth sectors	1.2%	13.7%	2.3%	16.5%
Pandemic vulnerable	-10.7%	-4.1%	-15.5%	-6.4%
Total	-5.0%	2.8%	-6.4%	3.3%

Source Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0023-01—Labour force characteristics by industry, annual (x1,000)

has exponentially expanded the discussion of employment precarity. Workers who had the highest level of security during the pandemic were highly educated professionals in high-wage jobs with robust benefit packages engaged in work that could be done from home.⁵⁶ It was women on the frontlines and other marginalized workers—employed in

jobs directly involved in containing the pandemic while still providing needed care and support—who bore the brunt and have continued to struggle in the pandemic’s aftermath.

The section below describes the economic fallout of the pandemic for women working in pandemic-vulnerable industries, the care economy, and growth industries, identifying key differences by age and immigration status.

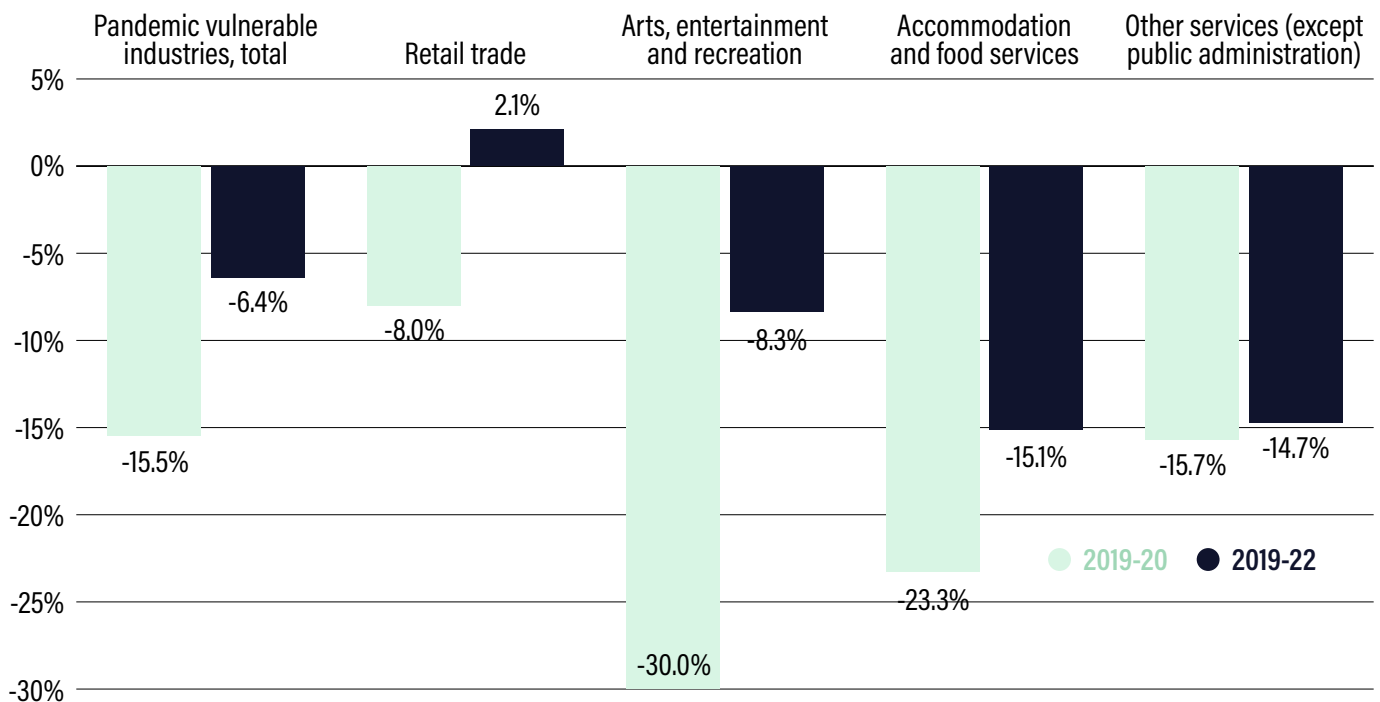
4.1 PANDEMIC-VULNERABLE SERVICE SECTORS STILL STRUGGLING

Pandemic-vulnerable industries have struggled to find their footing over the last three years, initially subject to recurring public health closures, now struggling to navigate the rapid rise in the cost of doing business and sky-high commercial rents. Even as the pent-up demand for services surged, many of the businesses in tourism and hospitality, retail and other personal services scrambled to stock shelves and hire back staff. Service providers offering low wages were poorly placed to compete for skilled staff as other higher-paying businesses and employers beckoned with better job offers.⁵⁷ Government subsidies provided through the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) and the Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy (CERS) and interest-free loans through Canada Emergency Business Account (CEBA) helped to sustain businesses through the worst of the pandemic. But many smaller businesses and the self-employed working as hair stylists, cleaners and store managers closed shop.⁵⁸ Those who have weathered the three years report continuing challenges ahead. A 2023 survey of Restaurant Canada members, for example, found that roughly one-third of all establishments are losing money and are at risk of defaulting on loans.⁵⁹ Recent data also suggests that the rate of new business creation has declined as well.⁶⁰

The ongoing struggles of these sectors remains an important threat to women’s economic security at the moment—and the security of other marginalized groups concentrated here. Together, these industries still employ more than 4.5 million people, representing a smaller share of Canada’s workforce in 2022 than in 2019, but a still significant 23 per cent who are engaged largely in sales and service occupations. They are, as noted earlier, the lowest-paid sectors in the Canadian economy, with some of the highest rates of part-time work and lowest rates of unionization. Together, these workers represent over 60 per cent of all low-wage workers, indeed an even larger share in 2022 than in 2019

Figure 5 Change in employment in pandemic-vulnerable industries among female workers, 2019-20 and 2019-22

All female workers 15+ years



Source: Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0023-01

(63.6 per cent vs. 61.9 per cent). They are least likely to have access to employer-provided health insurance and other benefits, more likely to live in unaffordable housing at great distances from their places of work, and least likely to have reliable access to community services and supports.⁶¹ As the labour market changes, it is critically important to remain focused on the lives and working conditions of the most vulnerable workers.

In 2020, women made up the majority of workers in the four industries that were especially hard hit by pandemic-related closures and, predictably, accounted for the majority of employment losses—both initially in 2020 at the height of the emergency and during the on-again-off-again recovery that followed. By the end of 2022, while the size of the female workforce was almost five percentage points higher than in February 2020, “pandemic-vulnerable” sectors had not yet bounced back, still 125,000 jobs short of pre-pandemic levels despite sizable gains in retail.⁶² Women accounted for 80 per cent of the gap, an even larger share than at the end of 2021.⁶³

The annual data tell the same story. There were over 250,000 fewer jobs in pandemic-vulnerable industries in 2022 compared to 2019,

Table 5 Change in employment (×1,000) by sex and industry, 2019-22

All workers 15+ years, 3 digit NAICS

Women	
Top five	
Professional, scientific and technical services	137.2
Hospitals	101.7
Educational services	86.4
Federal government public administration	53.2
Securities, commodity contracts, and related activities	24.5
Bottom five	
Nursing and residential care facilities	-22.5
Accommodation services	-26.6
Personal and laundry services	-43.0
Administrative and support services	-45.2
Food services and drinking places	-77.5
Total	295.5
Men	
Top five	
Professional, scientific and technical services	114.7
Educational services	54.2
Construction of buildings	49.9
Credit intermediation and related activities	42.8
Federal government public administration	41.8
Bottom five	
Administrative and support services	-16.8
Transit and ground passenger transportation	-19.4
Motor vehicle and parts dealers	-23.0
Truck transportation	-42.2
Food services and drinking places	-49.8
Total	276.3

Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, Custom Data. Employed population by industry, North American Industry Classifications (NAICS) 2017, age and sex, Canada, annual average.

resulting in two-thirds (64.4 per cent) in employment losses among women. In total, the proportion of women working in these sectors fell by 2.6 percentage points, from 28.1 per cent in 2019 to 25.4 per cent in 2022. The respective decline among male workers was 1.5 percentage points, from 21.8 per cent in 2019 to 20.4 per cent in 2022. Women continue

to represent the majority of workers employed in these industries (53.2 per cent), but their share has declined slightly from 2019, falling by 0.6 percentage point.

Table 5 above provides further information about the sub-sectors that have been most impacted, reflecting long-established patterns of gender segregation in the labour market. Over the 2019-22 period, women working in food services and traveller accommodation, administrative and support services, and personal care services sustained the largest employment losses. Male workers in food services were similarly impacted. However, ongoing economic difficulties in the transportation and warehousing sector (notably freight trucking, automobile dealerships and taxi services) were a greater source of employment loss among men.

The current situation of these workers is challenging, to say the least. A study of unionized hotel workers in British Columbia completed for the Beyond Recovery project captures the physical, mental and financial hardships that these women endured.⁶⁴ All women hotel workers engaged in this study spoke of employment and financial loss due to pandemic closures and travel restrictions. Some were terminated from their employment, while others returned to a precarious work environment characterized by a lack of personal protective equipment and the inconsistent implementation of public health guidelines. At the same time, workers reported increased harassment and abuse from customers and a lack of support from managers and employers. Indeed, employers undertook cost-cutting strategies, including through reducing cleaning services, increasing the flexibilization of labour, and understaffing— even as sector revenues fully recovered in 2021 and continued to grow thereafter. Workers paid the price in higher rates of injury and disability. Many were forced to quit jobs of longstanding, unable to carry on.

Workers fought to win back their job and to secure stronger employment protections.⁶⁵ In the summer of 2020, the workers staged a hunger strike on the steps of the B.C. legislature to draw attention to the plight of the 50,000 workers who had lost their jobs and to secure the legal right to return to work.⁶⁶ Some hotels did recall their workers, following labour actions and bargaining, but other workers have been on the picket lines for close to three years. At the same time, in 2022, the federal government, following lobbying by industry actors citing labour shortages, increased the proportion of low-wage workers that accommodation and food services sector employers could hire through the Temporary Foreign Worker program to 30 per cent, undercutting the position of all hospitality workers.⁶⁷ The study participants talked about “the myriad of ways in which they felt disposable, disrespected, and

powerless”, not only due to their occupation but also because of their gender and ethnic background.

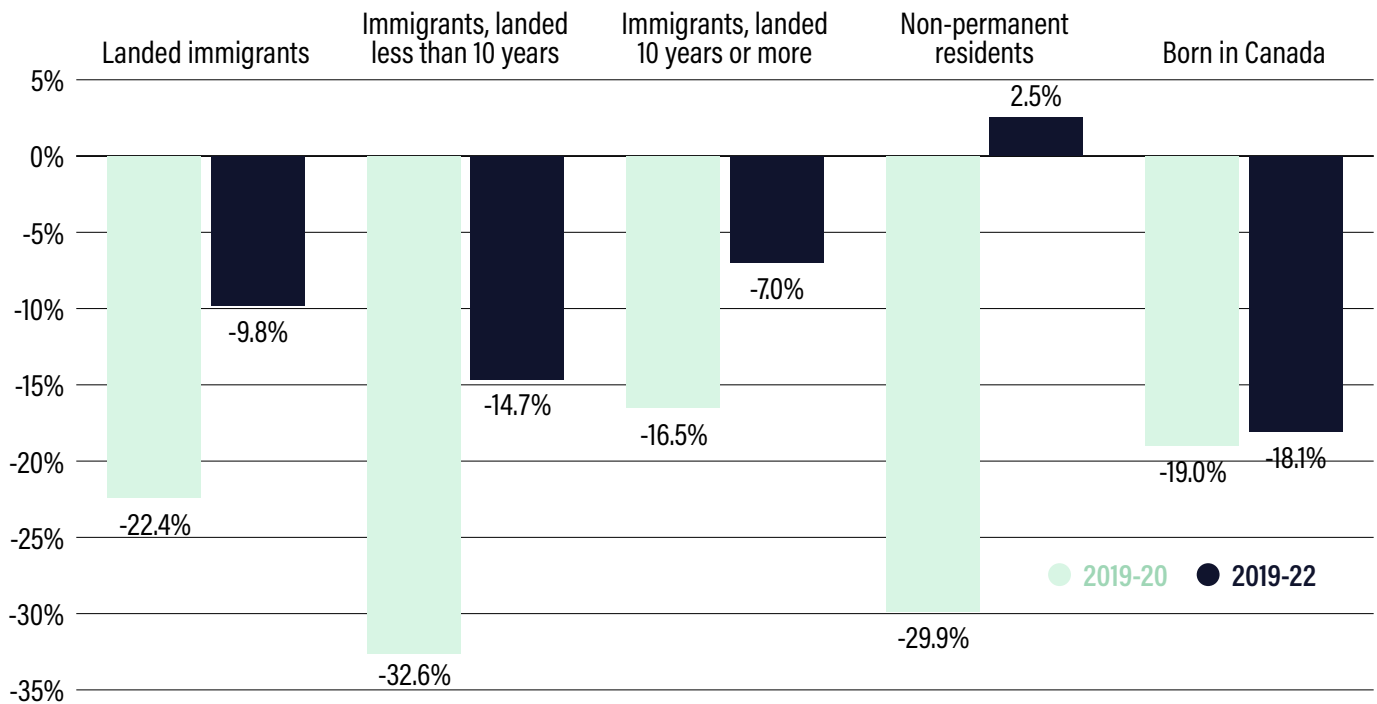
The lived experiences of the workers clearly illustrated how the challenging labour conditions of the pandemic interacted with pre-existing inequities and the very low value attached to care and personal service work to create an untenable situation for workers, which continues to this day.

As this study illustrates, the position of immigrants and non-permanent residents (including temporary foreign workers, international students and asylum claimants) is particularly precarious.⁶⁸ These women, most of whom are racialized, were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic,⁶⁹ positioned in the lowest-paid and most tenuous service sector jobs, especially those who were employed in food and accommodation services and other services. New immigrant and non-permanent female workers reported the highest rate of loss in these two sectors between 2019 and 2020, down by 32.6 per cent and 29.9 per cent, respectively, compared to Canadian-born workers who experienced a 19.0 per cent decline.

With the surge in immigration in 2021 and 2022, however, many newcomers and established immigrants found their way back into these jobs (and other sectors of the economy, as we discuss below).⁷⁰ By 2022, the overall level of employment in these two areas was still more than 240,000 jobs shy of 2019 levels—women accounting for over two-thirds of the gap (68.4 per cent, or 168,500 jobs)—but the comparative declines were now much higher among Canadian-born women, a trend exacerbated by the wave of retirements among baby boomers recorded in 2021. Stated another way, landed immigrants and non-permanent residents—both men and women—now represent a larger share of workers in pandemic-vulnerable industries than before the pandemic—even as the overall size of these industries has declined.

The economic turmoil of the pandemic also exacted a huge toll on young people (aged 15 to 24 years), who make up roughly one in eight workers (13 per cent) but account for almost three in 10 workers in pandemic-vulnerable industries, the majority of whom are young women (54.7 per cent). When the economy shut down in March 2020, overall employment dropped by 35.2 per cent among young workers between February and April, more than twice the overall rate (15.9 per cent). The percentage decrease was predictably the highest among youth working in vulnerable sectors, falling by almost half (45.8 per cent) over these two months.⁷¹

Figure 6 Change in employment among female workers in accommodation and food services and other services by immigration status, 2019-20 and 2019-22



Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, Custom Data. Employed population by industry, North American Industry Classifications (NAICS) 2017, age and sex, Canada, annual average

Employment levels among young people working in these fields has oscillated since then, rising and falling as the recovery proceeded. In 2022, 2.6 million young people were engaged in paid employment, effectively the same number that were employed in 2019. But employment among youth in front-facing, personal service work was still lower than in 2019—reflecting the ongoing struggles of these industries. Of those employed there, a slightly larger proportion were young people—young women in particular (29.1 per cent in 2019 vs 28.7 per cent in 2022).⁷² Again, as we see with immigrant workers, the workforce profile of the now smaller pandemic-vulnerable industries is changing and the gap between these low-waged, precarious sectors and the rest of the economy is widening.

4.2 EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES IN GROWTH INDUSTRIES

The experiences of workers in pandemic-vulnerable industries stand in stark contrast to those of workers in sectors of the economy that

were insulated, to a greater extent, from economic disruption. With the exception of administrative and support services (-9.2 per cent), transportation and warehousing (-4.8 per cent) and agriculture (-12.5 per cent), all other industries had fully recovered in 2022. Employment, in the aggregate, went up by 825,000 jobs (5.7 per cent). Both male and female workers working in “the rest of the economy” experienced strong employment growth in 2021 and 2022. In 2021, women in these sectors collectively had more than recouped pandemic losses. Employment levels were 3.1 per cent higher than in 2019. By 2022, female employment had increased by a total seven per cent between 2019 and 2022. The equivalent figures among male workers working in non-pandemic sectors were 1.4 per cent and 4.7 per cent, respectively.

As a result, women’s representation in the 15 sectors that make up “the rest of the economy” has grown since before the pandemic. Their share of employment increased from 45.4 per cent in 2019 to 46.0 in 2022. Stated another way, the gender gap in employment in this group of industries has narrowed from 16.8 per cent to 14.9 per cent.

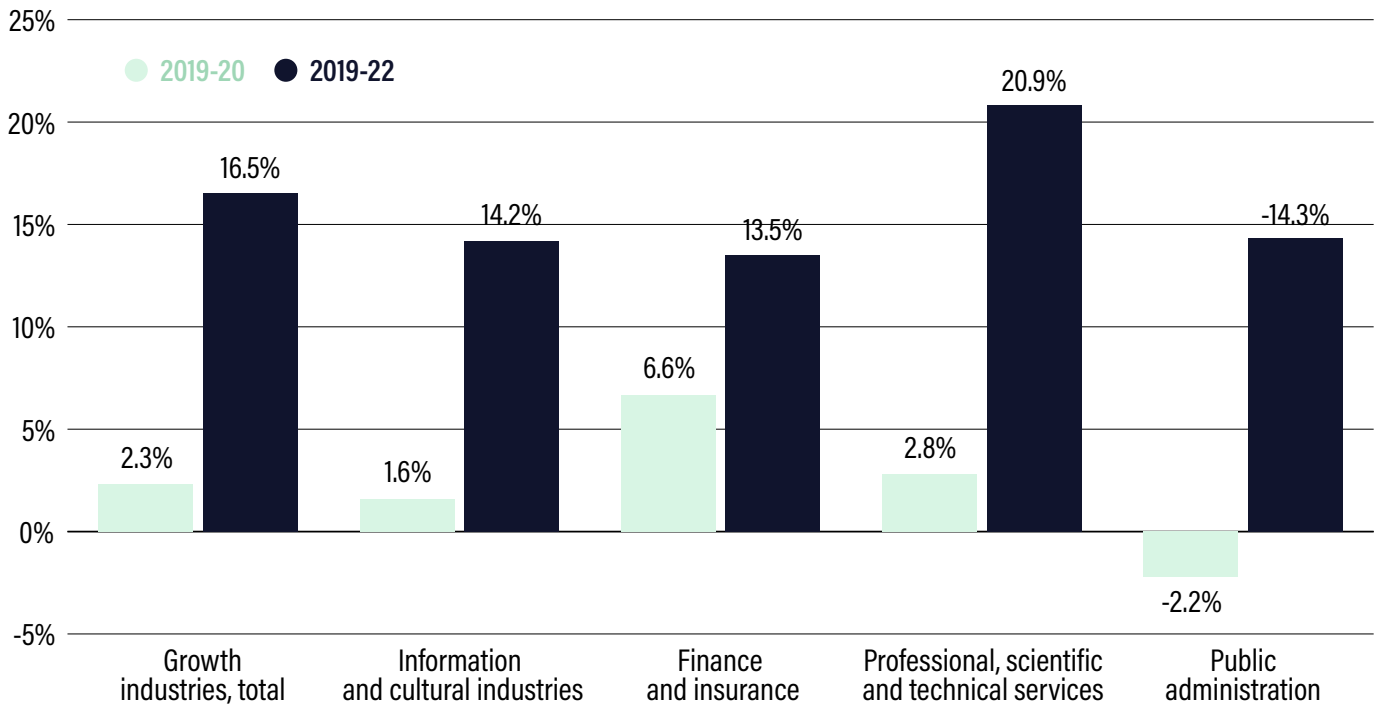
Four “growth” industries led the way, driving aggregate gains in women’s employment. Female workers experienced a surge in professional services employment between 2019 and 2022, which went up by 137,200 jobs (or 20.9 per cent), notably in computer systems design (46,200) and accounting (25,300). Employment in public administration (72,200), information and cultural industries (18,700) and finance and insurance (64,700) all grew by roughly 14 per cent. Among these three, the federal government stood out: thousands of women found employment with the government over this period as it staffed up to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. In total, these four high-paying “growth” industries experienced an increase of 292,800 jobs, or 16.5 per cent, outpacing growth in care economy jobs (167,800 or 5.7 per cent), but not yet knocking health and education out of their position as the largest employers (along with retail) of female labour.

Male workers, likewise, experienced significant growth in these four industries, together increasing by 272,500 jobs (or 13.7 per cent) between 2019 and 2022. Along with construction (66,700 jobs, up 5.2 per cent), these areas drove men’s employment recovery. Whereas the bulk of women’s employment growth was concentrated in professional services and the care economy (see next section), men’s employment growth was distributed more evenly across different areas of the labour market, including in health and education.

In looking at growth industries, it is useful to examine trends within larger industry groupings. Professional services, for one, experienced

Figure 7 Change in employment in growth industries among female workers, 2019-20 and 2019-22

All female workers 15+ years



Source: Statistics Canada, Table 14-10-0023-01

the largest increases among both men and women. The bulk of male employment growth was in computer design services, growing by almost 94,800 to 585,200 jobs in 2022, representing 83 per cent of total male job growth in professional services. In contrast, female job growth was distributed across a few sub-industries, including computer design (46,200), accounting (25,200), legal services (15,100) and other professional and scientific services (19,700)—all female-majority sub-groups. In total, the share of female employment increased in eight of the nine sub-groups under professional services.

Women’s employment growth in the financial sector was also spread around between the banks, investment firms and insurance carriers between 2019 and 2022. Overall, the number of financial sector workers increased by over 60,000 among both men and women, but employment growth among men was slightly higher. As a result, women’s share of total employment in financial services declined by half a percentage point to 53.1 per cent over this period.

Men clearly dominated employment growth in Information and cultural industries, growing by 41,300 jobs, or 21.3 per cent, between

Table 6 Change in employment by industry, 2019-22

All workers 15+ years, 4 digit NAICS

Top five	Change (×1,000)	Women's share loss/gain
Computer systems design and related services	141.0	32.8%
Hospitals all types	137.7	73.9%
Elementary and secondary schools	94.6	69.9%
Federal government public administration except Defence Services	89.1	54.9%
Residential building construction	57.7	20.6%
Bottom five		
Child day-care services	-28.3	68.9%
Nursing and residential care facilities all types	-31.2	72.1%
Traveller accommodation	-33.2	79.5%
Personal care services	-42.9	70.9%
Full-service restaurants and limited-service eating places	-113.5	60.1%
Total	571.8	51.7%

Source Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, Custom Data. Employed population by industry, North American Industry Classifications (NAICS) 2017, age and sex, Canada, annual average.

2019 and 2022, mostly in the motion picture and video industries, telecommunications, and other information services. While women's employment increased by a sizable 14.2 per cent, their share of employment fell from 40.5 per cent to 39.1 per cent as male employment growth again outpaced the rise in the number of women working in these sectors.

Women workers have had greater success in securing government employment during and after the pandemic, some transitioning from low-paying employment in hard-hit industries. As noted, the federal government drove employment growth in public administration, accounting for three-quarters of total increases over our period of study. Of the total gains, women accounted for 57.0 per cent and 67.7 per cent of federal job growth, including defence services. The increases at the provincial and municipal levels were much smaller in order of magnitude, especially at the provincial level, growing by only 7,300 across the country between 2019 and 2022. Roughly the same proportion of men and women work in public administration, a now slightly larger proportion of women in 2022 than in 2019 (at 50.7 per cent).

4.3 CARE WORKERS RUNNING ON EMPTY

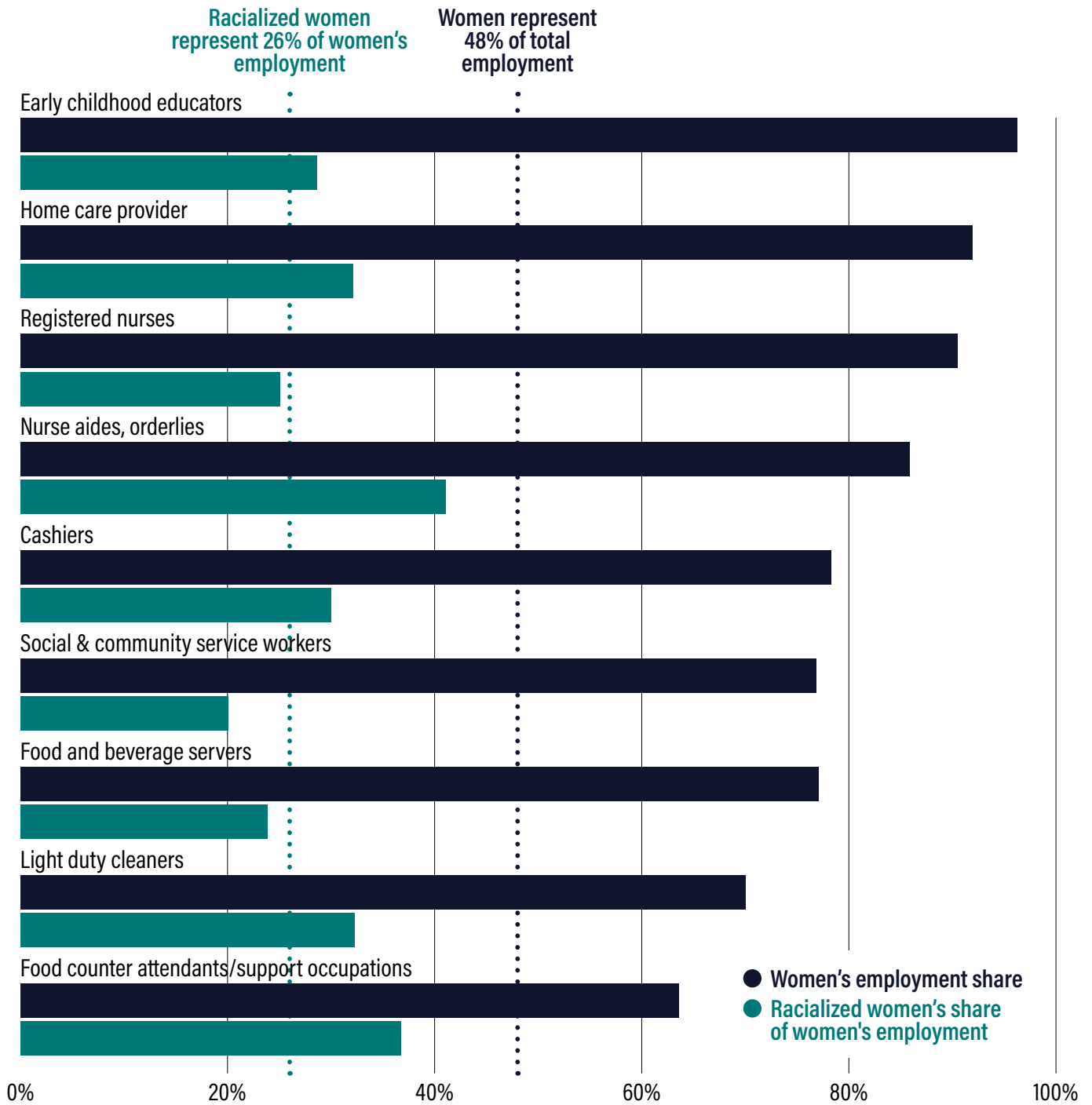
The pandemic appears to have accelerated the growth of professional sector employment, opening opportunities for selected groups of women and recent and established immigrants.⁷³ At the same time, demand for care services and, in turn, care workers, has surged, following pandemic-related delays and closures. Not surprisingly, we are seeing an increase in the number of people working in health care and social assistance, and educational services, rising by seven per cent between 2019 and 2022. Women accounted for almost two-thirds of growth in care sector employment, their numbers growing by 5.7 per cent (or 167,800 jobs) over this period.

The expansion of care economy employment has been smaller than growth in professional services and other growth industries—but no less important. These two sectors remain two of the three top employers of female workers, employing more than 3.1 million women in 2022, one-third of the total female workforce. The variety of services captured here are overwhelmingly comprised of women. As the chart below shows, nine out of 10 nurses are women, as are 91.9 per cent of home care providers and 85.8 per cent of nurse aides and orderlies. Women make up the vast majority of early childhood educators (96.3 per cent) and elementary school teachers (83.7 per cent)—and the majority of secondary teachers (59.4 per cent) too.

Within these occupations, racialized women and recent immigrants play an outsized role, especially Filipino and Black women working in the lowest-paying and most precarious care services. In 2021, one-quarter (26.1 per cent) of female workers in Canada were racialized, yet they made up over 30 per cent of nurses' aides, home support workers and housekeepers, kitchen workers, and light duty cleaners.⁷⁴

What has happened to employment in the care economy since 2019? The most significant growth has been in educational services, up 10.6 percent between 2019 and 2022, twice the rate of the growth in jobs in health care and social assistance (5.1 per cent). Elementary and secondary schools reported the largest absolute increase in the number jobs (94,600 or 11.9 per cent), where women represent seven out of 10 new hires (69.9 per cent). These gains were largely recorded in 2021 as provinces responded to massive pandemic-related disruptions in service in 2020. With the exception of British Columbia, growth in education in the following two years has largely flatlined, even as provinces struggled to fill vacancies and address student learning losses. Understaffing and resources were the core issues in the strikes of Quebec teachers and

Figure 8 Women's and racialized women's share of the work force in caring occupations at frontlines of COVID-19, 2021



Source: Statistics Canada—2021 Census. Catalogue number Table 98-10-0586-01

public sector workers in fall 2023, which, at their peak, involved more than 550,000 workers. Agreements covering teachers and educational staff were reached at the end of December (Quebec’s largest nurses’ union is still in negotiation and has been striking intermittently since November 2023).⁷⁵

There were marked increases in staff at colleges and CEGEPs between 2019 and 2022 (17,600 or 15.8 per cent); men comprised the largest group of new hires (56.8 per cent). The university workforce grew as well—by 11.1 per cent—drawing significantly on new immigrants and non-permanent residents to fill these positions. As in past years, a large proportion of these new positions are part-time or temporary, notably in the college sector, accounting for more than half of the total increase since 2022. Moves by the federal government to temporarily remove the cap on working hours for international students, first introduced in November 2022 and now extended to April 2024, has also swelled the numbers of non-permanent residents working on campus—and the low-wage personal service sector.⁷⁶

The overall scale of employment growth in the post-secondary sector remains modest, despite the growth in student numbers, which is consistent with the precarious funding environment that many institutions are facing. Decades of underfunding and substantive cuts, most recently in Alberta and Ontario, have taken their toll. In the last two decades, institutions have increasingly pursued higher-paying international students and other private sources to help fill the domestic funding gap. While some colleges and universities have prospered, others have not. Laurentian University is the first of likely many institutions to file insolvency proceedings.⁷⁷ The international students themselves have been left wide open to exploitation, victimized by unscrupulous recruiters and inadequate housing and infrastructure to support their needs.⁷⁸ The federal government’s new two-year cap on study permits—designed to reduce the number of international students entering the country—has created even more financial uncertainty and pressure on provincial governments to fill the gap.⁷⁹

On the health care and social assistance side, over 126,000 new positions were created between 2019 and 2022. Female workers accounted for roughly two-thirds (64.2 per cent) of the total. These jobs were overwhelmingly concentrated in hospitals (up by 16.3 per cent), including a boost in the number of nurses and “assisting occupations”, such as personal support workers. By contrast, there was only a modest increase in the number of workers staffing doctors’ offices, labs and related “ambulatory health care services” (1.4 per cent, or 9,400) and a

selected number of social services, such as individual and family services (6.1 per cent, or 15,800) and emergency and relief services (21.5 per cent, or 3,400). What really stands out, however, is the continuing decline in the number of people working in nursing and residential facilities since 2020, down -4.9 per cent, or -21,100 jobs over the period, some undoubtedly taking up better-paying offers from hospitals. Child care services have also experienced a large drop in their workforce. In 2022, employment levels were still more than 20,000 positions shy of pre-pandemic levels. Women account for all these employment losses.

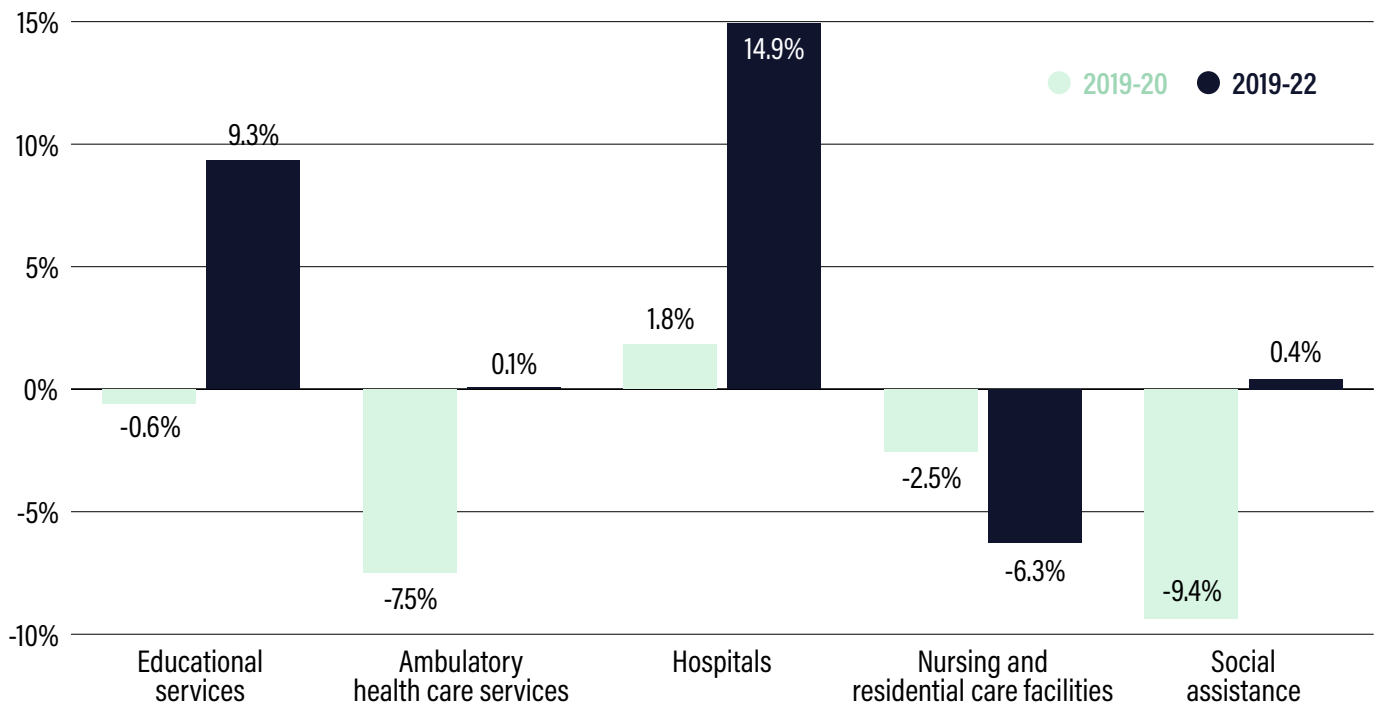
The stark differences in this portrait of care sector workers speaks to the significant loss of capacity that many community-based services—such as child care, home care providers and settlement agencies— experienced in 2020 and the challenges these largely nonprofit providers have faced in rebuilding their services.⁸⁰ Even with the investment of significant new funds in early childhood education, for example, child care centres are not functioning at pre-pandemic capacity levels. Parent fees have declined substantially for many families, but demand for new spaces has exploded. Centres simply can't staff the centres quickly enough or stem the early exit of workers facing low wages and poor working conditions. Some, as in Ontario, are transitioning to higher-paying jobs with school boards, but the majority of those women workers are leaving the field.⁸¹

The churn of care workers is also extremely high in health care services. While the number of nurses, for instance, has increased, so, too, has the proportion of workers signalling their intention to leave the profession as a result of punishing working conditions. As one commentator noted: "The extent of the problem revealed by each new study or poll can't help but astonish."⁸² In an October 2023 survey of Ontario hospital workers, nearly two-thirds (62 per cent) reported dealing with exhaustion and high stress from overwork; 44 per cent reported having trouble sleeping, while 41 per cent dreaded going to work. One-quarter (26 per cent) revealed that they are considering leaving their job and another 17 per cent are "somewhat" considering the option.⁸³ A study of Manitoba long-term care and home care workers completed for the Beyond Recovery project produced similar findings. Indeed, an even larger proportion of workers (over 60 per cent) indicated that they were either very or somewhat likely to leave the profession in the next five years because of increased workplace stress and persistent understaffing.⁸⁴

Recruitment and retention challenges have plagued health and community services for years—the product of "underinvestment, inadequate planning and weakened or fragmented regulation."⁸⁵ But they

Figure 9 Change in employment in the care economy among female workers, 2019-20 and 2019-22

All female workers 15+ years



Source: Statistics Canada, Table 14-10-0023-01

have dramatically worsened in the aftermath of the emergency—driving up vacancies to historic levels.⁸⁶ Staffing shortages emerged almost immediately as care workers fell ill and struggled to balance the care load at work and at home. Workers’ mental and physical health deteriorated as they strove to provide care short-handed, often without needed supplies and personal protective equipment.⁸⁷ The crushing workload⁸⁸ and increasingly hostile working environment,⁸⁹ in turn, resulted in trauma and moral distress among care workers, who were unable to deliver the care patients and residents required and deserved.⁹⁰

These problems aren’t confined to hospitals and long-term care homes. Care workers across all fields are reporting greater stress, fatigue and burnout because of increased workloads and increasing complexity of the work.⁹¹ Their jobs have been made immeasurably worse by negligible wage growth. As we discuss below, the gap between wages and monthly inflation figures has been pronounced in several women-majority care occupations, further entrenching established gender pay disparities. School teachers, hospital workers, family service workers and early childhood educators, for instance, all experienced real wage cuts between

2019 and 2022 as the cost of living surged and public sector wages were capped in several provinces.

Provincial governments are attempting to address staffing shortages by, for example, expanding educational programs for nurses and health care professionals and fast-tracking the intake of foreign-trained workers. The federal government, for its part, earmarked \$1.7 billion over five years in its 2023 budget to support hourly wage increases for personal support workers and related professionals as well as to recruit and retain healthcare workers. But working conditions and wages have not yet appreciably improved. Temporary pandemic top-ups for some care workers have long since concluded and modest wage growth has been consumed by the high cost of living. Indeed, there is little evidence of provincial take-up of federal wage enhancement funds in the new bilateral health care agreements that were negotiated in 2023.⁹²

Many health care workers are considering alternative employment—or early retirement. Others are seeking less stressful employment in private agencies that are offering up to three times the wage rate and greater flexibility over working hours. The workers surveyed in the Manitoba case study noted the growing presence of private agency staff on the floors in long-term care facilities.⁹³ Hospitals are turning to these same agencies to cover shifts—running up staffing costs exponentially to meet the demands of a growing population.⁹⁴

It is important to note the significant role that immigration is playing in the expansion of the care economy, notably in health care. Female immigrants and non-permanent residents accounted for the lion's share of growth in health care and social assistance jobs between 2019 and 2022, representing almost 60 per cent (58.1 per cent) of all new hires—and 90.5 per cent of all new female hires. Of this group, established immigrants (10 or more years) recorded the largest absolute increase between 2019 and 2022 (40,500, or 10.8 per cent); the percentage increase in non-permanent residents was three times higher: 38.2 per cent.

This is not a surprising finding. In 2020, the federal government opened the door to the increased immigration of health care workers and provided new pathways for permanent residency for asylum seekers working in health care.⁹⁵ The provinces and territories have expanded their appeal for foreign-trained workers to help address labour shortages in the care economy. Nova Scotia, for example, has recently approved an unprecedented number of applications from qualified skilled immigrants in the sectors deemed essential—including nursing and personal support workers in hospital and community care settings.⁹⁶ In combination with

Table 7 Change in employment in the care economy by sector and gender, 2019-22

All workers 15+ years

	Change (×1,000) 2019-22		Change (%) 2019-22	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Educational services	54.2	86.4	13.4%	9.3%
Elementary and secondary schools	28.6	66.1	15.0%	11.0%
Community colleges and C.E.G.E.P.s	10.0	7.6	21.8%	11.6%
Universities	12.7	16.3	11.3%	10.9%
Other schools and services	3.3	-4.3	2.9%	-2.2%
Health care and social assistance	45.4	81.4	9.9%	4.0%
Ambulatory health care services	9.1	0.3	5.8%	0.1%
Offices of physicians, other practitioners and services	9.9	17.3	7.0%	4.0%
Medical and diagnostic laboratories	3.5	2.0	87.5%	9.1%
Home health care services	-4.3	-18.9	-38.1%	-28.7%
Hospitals	36.1	101.7	22.2%	14.9%
Nursing and residential care facilities	1.4	-22.5	2.0%	-6.3%
Social assistance	-1.2	1.9	-1.7%	0.4%
Individual and family services	-3.3	19.1	-6.8%	9.0%
Community food, housing, and relief services	0.9	2.5	17.3%	23.6%
Vocational rehabilitation services	2.0	-0.2	36.4%	-1.4%
Child day-care services	-0.9	-19.5	-9.3%	-8.7%

Source Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, Custom Data. Employed population by industry, North American Industry Classifications (NAICS) 2017, age and sex, Canada, annual average.

the retirement of older workers, immigrants and non-permanent workers represent an expanding share of the care workforce. Immigrants also are making up a larger share of the educational workforce, especially in post-secondary institutions, but change is proceeding more slowly.

The post-pandemic turmoil in the care economy described above is not adequately captured in employment statistics. While the number of care workers is increasing in occupations such as nursing, all workers are labouring under much harsher working conditions. The largely female and racialized workforce engaged in lower-paid occupations, such as child care workers and home care providers, like those in pandemic-vulnerable industries, are struggling to make ends meet.⁹⁷ Wage gains have not kept up with inflation, further eroding the value of women's care labour—rooted in deeply gendered, racist and ableist stereotypes. There was a fleeting moment when care workers were held up as heroes. This moment has passed.

5. GENDER SEGREGATION AND WAGE TRENDS

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

THE PANDEMIC GENERATED A great deal of economic upheaval, triggering large job losses and large employment gains in a comparatively short period of time. The gender-segregated character of the workforce was such that women experienced both the largest employment losses and, in turn, the largest employment gains between 2019 and 2022. The differences with male workers were especially sizable in pandemic-vulnerable industries: over this period, job losses among women were almost twice as large (1.8 times) as those posted by men, notably in accommodation and food services. By contrast, in the growth industries studied here, women's absolute and relative gains between 2019 and 2022 were only slightly larger than those of men, 16.5 per cent (+292,800 jobs) vs. 13.7 per cent (+272,500 jobs), respectively. Similarly, a surge in demand for care drove up vacancies and new hires among women and men in the care economy. As the employment recovery peaked in 2022, the percentage of employed women aged 25 to 54 years reached an all-time high of 81.4 per cent; the employment rate of men aged 25 to 54 years hit 88.1 per cent, its highest level since the early 1980s.

These changes have been taking place through a period of profound change in the labour market and are associated with population aging, increased immigration and the impact of new technologies and automation on demand for workers. Over the last 20 years, health care and social assistance, construction, and professional, scientific and technical services have gained in prominence, accounting for more than half of net employment growth since 2001.⁹⁸ However, employment in agriculture and manufacturing has continued to decline—part of a shift away from jobs involving routine, manual tasks such as those associated with male-majority “production, craft, repair and operative” occupations.⁹⁹ The pandemic appears to have accelerated these shifts in the composition of the labour market—and heightened demand for individuals in managerial, professional and technical occupations.¹⁰⁰

5.1 GENDER SEGREGATION BEFORE AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC

We see this in the movement of both men and women out of personal service work in pandemic-vulnerable industries and into the “rest of the economy” over the 2019 to 2022 period. For example, the share of women working in professional services—such as computer systems design, legal services and accounting—increased by 1.7 percentage points between 2019 and 2022, reaching 43.9 per cent of total employed. An increase in the number of women working in public administration pushed women’s share of that industry above the 50 per cent mark. There was also a boost in women’s representation in construction and manufacturing, part of an overall attempt to expand apprenticeship opportunities. But the impact of the increases didn’t significantly shift the gender composition of these male-dominated industries. In 2022, only 12.4 per cent of those who worked in construction were women; and 29.2 per cent of those in manufacturing.

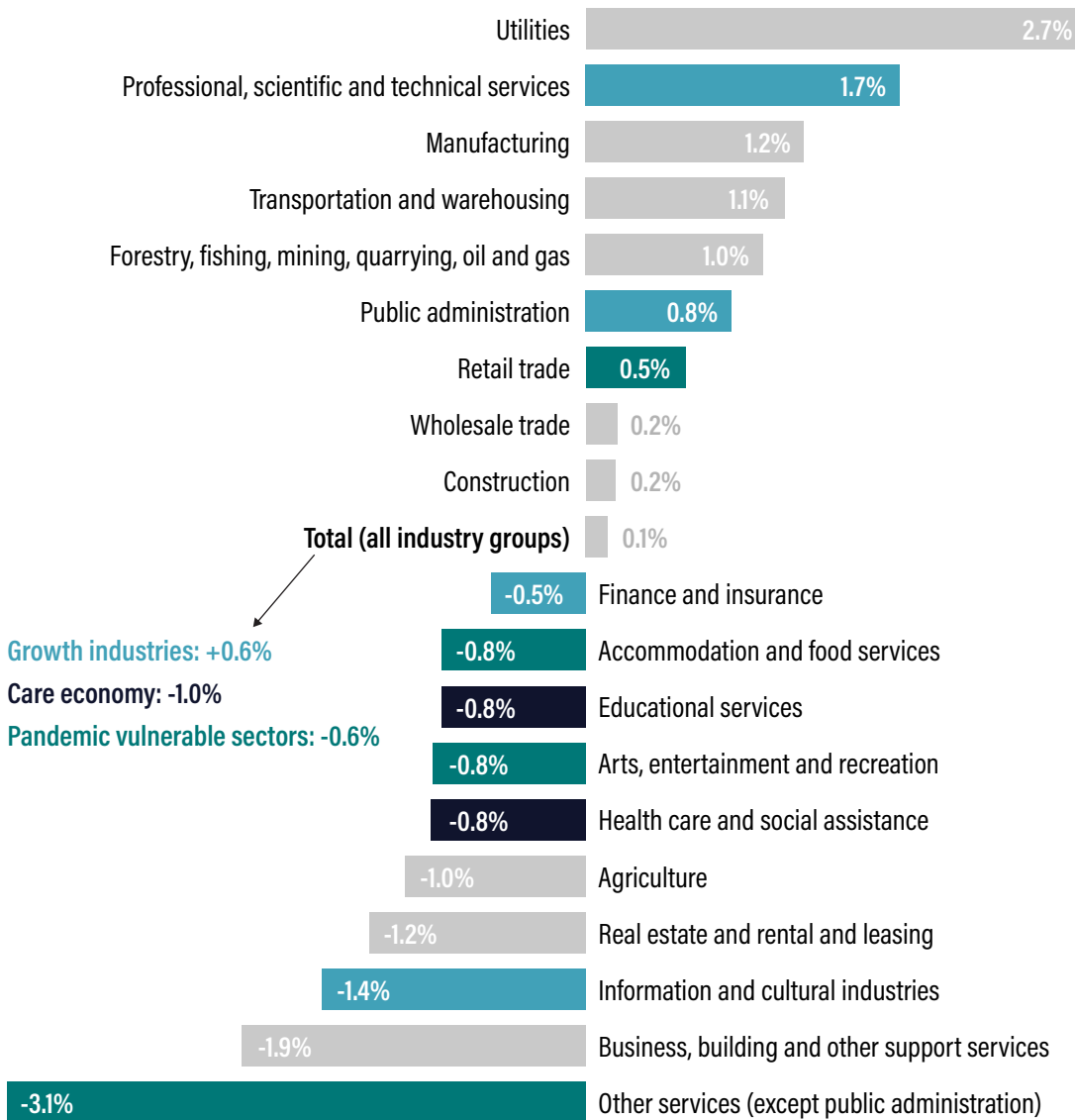
The care economy workforce has expanded too. Hospitals and educational services reported the second and third largest absolute increases in women’s employment between 2019 and 2022—a total of 167,800 jobs. The proportion of women working in health care and social assistance, and educational services is now higher than it was before the pandemic. One in every three female workers (33.2 per cent) works in the care economy. Men, too, have increased their numbers in care economy employment, rising by about 100,000 over this period, from 8.6 per cent of total male employment to 9.3 per cent. With this increase, women’s

representation in the care economy fell modestly, by one percentage point, to 76.3 per cent. More specifically, women's representation in health care and social assistance fell from 81.4 per cent to 80.6 per cent. With the exception of social assistance, women's representation declined in the three health sub-sectors including ambulatory health care services, hospitals, and nursing and residential care facilities. Likewise, in educational services, women's representation declined from 69.6 per cent to 68.8 per cent. Given the glacial pace of change in male-dominated industries, the growing presence of men in female-dominated work is an optimistic sign of a more equitable, less gender-segregated workforce.

The overall shift in employment from pandemic-vulnerable industries into other sectors of the economy has impacted female-majority industries. Seven of the 10 sub-sectors (three-digit NAICS) with the highest concentrations of women workers (defined as those at 70 per cent or above) experienced a decline in female representation between 2019 and 2022. At the same time, the overall proportion of women working in female-majority sub-sectors did not change: 39.3 per cent in 2019 and 39.3 per cent in 2022. This is not surprising. In the search for higher wages and better working conditions, some women have taken up jobs in other industries. But many others have sought better opportunities in their existing fields. For example, in health care, personal support workers have left community-based workplaces for higher-paying hospital work. Looking forward, the demand for care workers is only going to intensify as the population ages. It seems likely that women will continue to find ready employment in the care economy. The question is: on what terms?

It is important to examine the drivers of change in the gender composition of the labour market. In some instances, women's employment gains outpaced men's gains, shifting the gender balance in women's favour. In the male-dominated utilities sector, women's representation increased by 2.7 percentage points to 26.8 per cent, women's employment increasing by 7,400 between 2019 and 2022 (compared to a 6,800 increase among men). Similarly, in professional, scientific and technical services, women's absolute employment gains over this period were larger than men's (137,000 vs. 114,700), increasing their presence in the industry. At the same time, women's gains in transportation and warehousing (up by 1.1 percentage points, to 24.6 per cent) resulted from the much larger employment losses recorded among male workers. These findings speak to the complexity of labour market change within a broader context characterized by job polarization and the ongoing reduction of middle-income, "middle-skilled" jobs,

Figure 10 Change in women's share of each industry group, 2019-22



Note Pandemic vulnerable industries: Retail, Arts, Accommodation & food, Other services. Care economy sectors: Health care and social assistance; Educational services. Growth sectors: Information, Professional services, Finance and insurance, Management, Public administration.
Source Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, Custom Data. Employed population by industry, North American Industry Classifications (NAICS) 2017, age and sex, Canada, annual average

notably in manufacturing and manual occupations. There are different routes to gender equity, not all of which are desirable.

5.2 WAGES TRENDS AND THE GENDER PAY GAP

The study of women's location in the labour market reveals the challenging reality of women's financial security and quality of life. It is

Table 8 Women's share of employment for selected industries, 2019-22

	Women's share of employment		Change (%)	Change (×1,000)
	2019	2022		
Largest increases				
Utilities	24.1%	26.8%	2.7%	7.4
Professional, scientific & technical services	42.2%	43.9%	1.7%	137.2
Manufacturing	28.0%	29.2%	1.2%	30.9
Public administration	49.9%	50.7%	0.8%	72.2
Largest declines				
Other services	55.2%	52.0%	-3.1%	-64.3
Administrative & support services	45.5%	43.6%	-1.9%	-44.7
Information & cultural industries	40.5%	39.1%	-1.4%	18.7
Real estate & rental and leasing	45.2%	44.0%	-1.2%	-3.5
Health care & social assistance	81.4%	80.6%	-0.8%	81.4

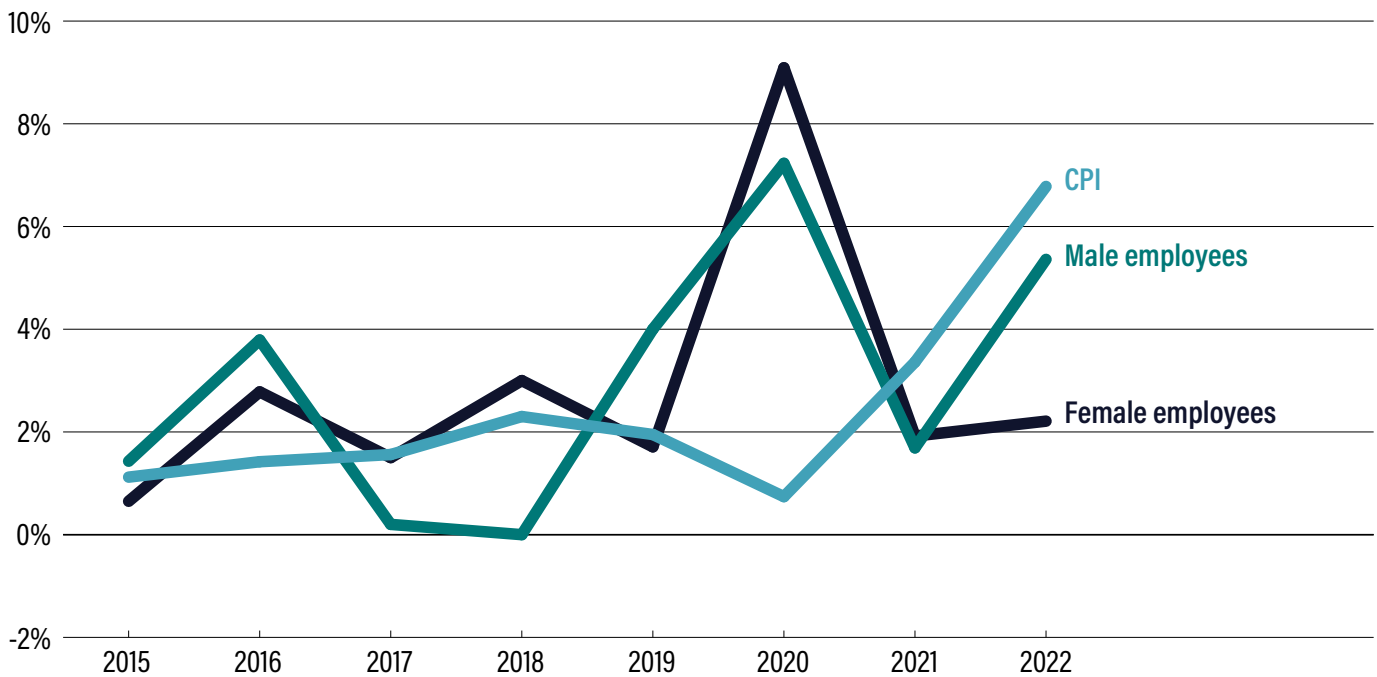
Source Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, Custom Data. Employed population by industry, North American Industry Classifications (NAICS) 2017, age and sex, Canada, annual average.

important, therefore, to ask: what has been the impact, if any, of current employment trends on women's earnings? Have women's employment gains translated into wage gains?

A sizable group of diverse female workers moved up the wage grid in the aftermath of the pandemic, as women took advantage of the surge of job vacancies in higher-paying industries in the tightest labour market in decades. As the proportion of women workers in the lowest earnings brackets declined,¹⁰¹ the median hourly wage among female employees increased, reaching \$25/hour in 2022, a nominal increase of \$3 over 2019. The increase in median hourly wage among male employees was even higher, at \$3.87, surpassing women's gains over this period. As a result, the gender-wage gap widened from 15.4 per cent in 2019 to 16.3 per cent in 2022—a point we return to below.

As nominal wage rates were rising, the same pressures that came together to boost demand for workers in select industries were also pushing up the rate of inflation. Low-wage workers—and even the women who had moved a step up the income ladder—could be forgiven for thinking that their immediate economic circumstances were not improving. After a decline in the rate of inflation between 2019 and 2020, the annual CPI index jumped by 3.4 per cent in 2021 and by another 6.8 per cent in 2022, significantly outpacing earnings growth among both women and men, as shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11 Annual change in median hourly wage among male and female employees and Consumer Price Index (CPI), 2015-22



Source: Statistics Canada, Table 14-10-0066-01 and Table 18-10-0004-01. Hourly wage in current dollars.

Progress in the labour market did not translate into higher income for all women. Rising living costs for shelter and other essentials have been especially devastating for the millions who continue to work in pandemic-vulnerable industries. Restaurant workers and grocery store clerks, for instance, made less, in real terms, in 2022 than in 2019, and the situation among female workers was worse than among their male colleagues. While the wage gap between men and women in low-waged sectors of the economy tends to be relatively narrow (except for in the arts), the wage gap widened in pandemic-vulnerable industries and administrative support services over this time.

What really stands out in the wage data, however, is the scale of the real wage pay cuts in the care economy. Female educators experienced a real decline in wages of -5.7 per cent between 2019 and 2022, while the wages of female workers in health care and social assistance fell by -1.9 per cent—including a decline of -4.4 per cent among women working in hospitals, -1.5 per cent among those working in nursing and residential care facilities, and -0.4 per cent among those working in the community service sector.

Care workers battled the pandemic under terrible and demoralizing working conditions, forced to work double shifts and forego vacations, with little by way of support to navigate these intensely stressful times. Some low-waged essential workers were recognized with time-limited wage top ups; others were effectively ignored. Public sector workers in Ontario, for example, were subject to wage restraint throughout the pandemic crisis period and beyond, legislation that has only been recently repealed after the affected unions successfully challenged the provincial government in court. This untenable situation has directly contributed to the huge, wholly predictable, staffing crisis now unfolding in the care economy, which is compromising standards of care and undermining new initiatives, including the creation of a national child care system.

The wage growth posted between 2019 and 2022—and in 2023—has been almost exclusively driven by gains among selected groups of workers, such as those in real estate, information and cultural industries, and manufacturing. In 2022, women working in these fields posted wage gains of 8.1 per cent, 6.4 per cent and 2.8 per cent, respectively, over 2019 levels. Women also posted wage gains in professional services and finance and insurance, but these raises were much more modest, at 0.5 per cent and 0.4 per cent—substantially below the gains recorded by men working in these areas. The gender wage gap, already comparatively large in professional services (74.7 per cent) and finance and insurance (75.6 per cent), widened further by an additional 3.0 and 2.1 percentage points over the 2019-22 period.

These data speak to the size of the challenge in the pursuit of gender justice. Within these and other industrial sectors, women tend to fill the lowest-paid occupations—typically in finance, human resources or various administrative support occupations. According to the 2021 census, women represented 43.9 per cent of all workers in professional services. Of this group, two-thirds (65.3 per cent) were concentrated in business, finance and administration occupations—a larger share than in 2016. While the proportion of women working in higher-paid occupations, such as accounting, has been steadily increasing, so, too, has the number of women working in lower-paid administrative support and logistics occupations, taking the place of clerical workers that once sustained private business and government services a generation ago.

This issue is of particular importance to immigrant women and non-permanent residents who experienced a large increase in professional service employment between 2019 and 2022, accounting for over half (55.6 per cent) of total growth, notably in computer design and accounting services. As a result, their share of female employment in

Table 9 Change in median hourly wage by gender and industry group and the gender wage gap, 2019-22

All workers 15+ years

	Change 2019-22			
	Male workers	Female workers	Gender gap 2022	Change 2019-22
Growth sectors				
Professional, scientific & technical services	4.5%	0.5%	74.7%	-3.0%
Finance & insurance	3.1%	0.4%	75.6%	-2.1%
Public administration	-4.6%	-3.7%	85.8%	0.8%
Information & cultural industries	3.6%	6.4%	85.5%	2.3%
Care economy				
Educational services	-0.7%	-5.7%	81.7%	-4.3%
Health care & social assistance	-3.1%	-1.9%	93.5%	1.2%
Pandemic vulnerable				
Other services	1.7%	-1.1%	81.3%	-2.3%
Administrative & support services	6.3%	0.2%	93.0%	-5.7%
Arts, entertainment & recreation	-0.1%	2.8%	100.0%	2.8%
Retail trade	2.0%	1.9%	89.5%	-0.1%
Accommodation & food services	-1.1%	-4.1%	97.0%	-3.0%
Total, all industries	3.3%	2.2%	83.7%	-0.9%

Source Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, Custom Data. Employed population by industry, North American Industry Classifications (NAICS) 2017, age and sex, Canada, annual average.

professional services increased by 4.4 percentage points over this period, to 34.6 per cent, which is above their population share of the total female workforce (29.8 per cent). Professional services, along with information and cultural industries, are two areas where immigrant women earn, on average, more than Canadian-born women. It is interesting to note that the gender-wage gap between Canadian-born and immigrant women is narrower in these expanding sectors of the economy compared to others. It may be that the growing presence of highly educated immigrant women in professional services and other growth areas will help to reduce their historically large gender-pay gaps over time.¹⁰²

6. CONCLUSION

A DECADE AGO, RESEARCHERS AND advocates were discussing whether the “gender revolution” had stalled and what was needed to reinvigorate the push for substantive change.¹⁰³ This question has taken on even greater urgency in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis period—against a backdrop of significant population growth, population aging, job polarization and the reorganization of work. The pandemic triggered a shake up of the labour market. It opened the door to change for many women workers, as our study finds, but it did not disrupt nor dislodge the deeply gendered division of labour between men and women.

What the pandemic did do was to expose the fundamental interconnections between all of the institutions—state, market, nonprofit sector, and family/household—that shape the dynamics of women’s work and the organization of essential care labour. The pandemic also collided with and exacerbated the inequities built into our market economy that are designed to exploit the labour of working class, racialized, im/migrant and disabled women—at tremendous personal cost to workers and collective cost to us all. Our most poorly paid and vulnerable workers stood between us and catastrophic illness and economic depression. We asked personal support workers to provide essential home care services and shelter workers to respond to the massive surge in gender-based violence without proper training, supports or safety equipment. We asked grocery store cashiers and hotel cleaners to travel on crowded transit every day to provide basic services in abusive and unsafe workplaces. We asked these same women to go home to start their double shift, providing care and support for their families, with the worry that they were bringing the virus, and possibly death, home with them.

Governments rallied to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on communities and the economy. Now, to varying degrees, they are attempting to contain the “crisis of care” unfolding in our hospitals, in our child care centres, and in the low-waged service sector. Investments in education and credential recognition, as well as the planned expansion of affordable child care, for example, will be hugely consequential for the future of women’s work and economic equality. New public sector wage settlements are finally starting to push up wages in the care economy after concerted labour action on the part of workers across the country.¹⁰⁴ The B.C. government has just introduced legislation to recognize gig workers as “employees” under the *Employment Standards Act* (ESA) and the *Workers Compensation Act*, making available a partial set of benefits and protections. The shift to remote and hybrid work models is opening doors and transforming work for people with disabilities and reducing the stress and expense involved in long commutes for workers juggling multiple care and related responsibilities.¹⁰⁵

These are positive developments for many women workers—including those from historically marginalized groups—particularly as economic growth has been slowing this past year.¹⁰⁶ Relative to the 2015-19 period, labour demand in the care economy and public administration remains elevated, notwithstanding a near 40 per cent decline in overall job vacancies from 2022 peak levels. However, employment growth in the other “growth industries” studied here has declined. Vacancy levels are now near pre-pandemic norms and the overall rate of unemployment has started to climb. Wage growth among female workers was boosted by new public sector settlements in 2023, but it now is trending down. Not so the cost of living, as rents reach new highs and the number of people accessing food banks balloons. The financial pressures on households—and the anxiety to find better-paid work¹⁰⁷—have never been higher.

Government efforts to date, however, have failed to bridge the chasm that exists between workers in low-waged and high-waged industries. They have also failed to get at the roots of the ongoing crisis in the care economy. While there are stories of businesses enhancing working conditions, introducing benefit packages and improving wages for staff, other businesses, as our case study of hotels in B.C. illustrates, used the disruption in labour markets to introduce new strategies to “flexibilize” their workforce and successfully lobbied to expand their access to low-wage temporary foreign workers to fill existing positions.¹⁰⁸ According to figures from Employment and Skills Development Canada (ESDC), employers were approved to fill more than 220,000 positions through the Temporary Foreign Worker program in 2022, an increase of 68 per cent

over 2021.¹⁰⁹ The huge increase in the number of international students has similarly swelled the low-wage labour market, where they are no longer subject to a cap on their hours of paid employment. They are filling positions in accommodation and food services,¹¹⁰ retail trade, and administrative and support services.¹¹¹ ESDC estimates that more than 80 per cent of international students are now working more than 20 hours a week.¹¹²

Demand for foreign workers is a critical dimension of the current labour market discussion—particularly as it pertains to the changing dynamics of women’s employment and low-wage work. Immigration policy continues to shape Canada’s labour market, as it has in the past, influencing employment polarization in recent years as the government has increasingly turned to sources of temporary labour to meet growing labour demand from agriculture and manufacturing to essential care work in hospitals and the community.^{113,114} The large number of international students seems to have taken policy-makers by surprise, if recent headlines are accurate, but it was no surprise to the universities and colleges, which have been actively recruiting—and exploiting—these students to help fill the yawning gap in budgets starved of public funds for years. It was also no surprise to low-wage employers, who are keen to recruit temporary workers, knowing they are desperate for paid work, creating the conditions for exploitation and abuse. Temporary workers are now wrongly being vilified as the cause of Canada’s housing and health care woes.¹¹⁵ Federal and provincial policy choices have created this “reserve army” of precarious labour by design.

There are well-established hierarchies within the labour market, characterized by gender disparities as well as by race and immigration status. The employment equity regime, for example, has helped to reduce occupational and sectoral segregation in federally regulated industries since 1986. But the gains of some groups, such as white women, have been more pronounced than for other groups, including Indigenous women, racialized women, and women with disabilities, effectively serving to widen disparities among female workers.¹¹⁶ These same dynamics are evident in the broader labour market, where we see Canadian-born women, for example, being replaced by immigrant, and often racialized, women in the most devalued care and personal service work, such as custodial and food service roles.¹¹⁷ Evidence from this study suggests that these processes are accelerating in the post-pandemic period because of expanded access to low-wage temporary workers in fields including hospitality, construction and hospitals¹¹⁸ and ongoing retirements among Canadian-born baby boomers.

A question now hangs over the future of pandemic-vulnerable industries, which account for over one-quarter of total female employment. While the retail sector has fully recovered, we don't yet know whether accommodation and food services, personal services, transportation and warehousing, and business and administrative services will follow suit, or when. The Conference Board of Canada estimates that it may take years before industries like air travel, hotels, non-residential construction, arts and entertainment, and personal services recover.¹¹⁹ Some types of brick-and-mortar retail and agricultural work may never come back as consumer spending patterns shift and the impact of automation transforms production processes. These industries are important sources of entry-level employment that typically require less formal education. Will the relative size of these industries be smaller in future? Will low-wage women workers again benefit from opportunities to move up the wage ladder as they did through the employment recovery of 2021-22? Or has the door slammed shut? And what of wage levels and working conditions for the millions who continue to work in these and other industries, such as manufacturing and agriculture?

The pandemic highlighted the crucial labour that low-wage workers perform in sustaining our collective well-being and the substantial challenges these same workers face. Yet, change does not appear imminent. The deep-seated divide between low-waged, precarious jobs and high-waged, permanent jobs persists as vulnerable temporary foreign workers swell the ranks of the low-waged workforce. Temporary improvements brought in during the pandemic have expired.¹²⁰ On key issues, such as paid sick leave, the federal government established a new benchmark of 10 days, but provinces continue to be resistant to amend necessary labour standards to facilitate access for all workers.¹²¹ While the B.C. government took steps to bring gig workers under the *Employment Standards Act*, the government Ontario has just brought in legislation establishing a separate package of labour protections for gig workers developed by the digital platform companies themselves. In many provinces, there remains little appetite or will to improve compensation levels, or to strengthen the legal rights and protections of precarious low-wage workers, including enforcement. The impact of the newly announced "soft cap" on permits for temporary residents and cuts in the number of new international student visas remains to be seen.¹²²

Likewise, the crisis in the care economy impacts millions of women workers and it has certainly not been resolved. The legacy of chronic underfunding, persistent devaluation, and offloading of responsibility for care onto private households—and the women within them—remains.

Some women workers continue to find well-paid care-sector jobs as doctors or tenured professors, while many others struggle on modest or low wages, piecing together work where they can, working under crushing conditions, every shift understaffed. It is not surprising that highly skilled workers are turning to private agencies that offer sometimes six times the wage rate and control over their working hours.¹²³ There are no benefits, sick leave or pensions; no protection from harassment or unjust discipline; no voice for safe and healthy working conditions, nor opportunities for training and professional development. But care workers going private aren't worrying about pensions because they don't envisage a long career in nursing or the like.¹²⁴

In 2023, the Quebec government passed new legislation to phase out the use of private agencies and subcontractors in the health and social services sector over the next three years.¹²⁵ These efforts will come to naught without doing the hard work involved in improving the conditions of work for public and private sector care workers—up and down the earnings ladder. Low wages aren't the only marker of precarious or bad jobs in Canada's labour market. Characteristics of work, control over working time, participation in workplace decision-making: these are also important indicators of job quality and the conditions of care. These same struggles over wages, working conditions and recognition are taking place in care services beyond health care, most visibly in child care, as noted above. Failure to address dismally low wages will halt the development of a pan-Canadian child care system in its tracks. Addressing the low wages and poor working conditions of care workers is central to any plausible or just strategy for addressing Canada's care deficit and reducing the penalty attached to industrial and occupational segregation for women and other marginalized groups.

The women workers who have moved up the earnings ladder into higher paid professions outside of women's traditional bastion, the care economy, face their own challenges. These moves haven't yet translated into significantly higher rates of pay, given their concentration in lower-paying occupations and the very high costs of living. Moreover, women's wage gains in industries such as professional services and finance have been outpaced by men's. The issue of gender segregation between and within industrial and occupation groups demands further attention—with a view to understanding the varied experiences of different groups of women and the mechanisms that continue to reproduce economic disadvantage for women. This includes the negative wage penalty attached to motherhood and other workers with care responsibilities; gendered norms, biases and stereotypes around competence, leadership

and likeability; lack of access to attendant care, accessible transportation or other accommodations; and the inequitable treatment of foreign credentials and related work experience.

Women's post-pandemic labour market experiences confirm the importance of labour market reforms that level the playing field and remove institutional barriers to decent jobs and a living wage. To this end, the federal government has introduced several important reforms to labour standards related to hours of work and predictive scheduling, flexible work arrangements and leaves of absence (including up to 10 days of family violence leave). Legislation has passed guaranteeing 10 paid sick days and protections for health care workers to ensure that they can work without fear or intimidation and that people can safely access health care services. The new, proactive pay equity regime and pay transparency regulations are finally in force. And the *Report of the Employment Equity Act Review Task Force* is being circulated for comment, a key step in reforming the 1986 act. It recommends a new framework to make "equitable workforce participation a reality for all" through the proactive removal of barriers to employment, meaningful engagement with impacted communities, and strong regulatory oversight to uphold employment rights.¹²⁶

These initiatives have their shortcomings. The new proactive pay equity act, as written, does not deliver robust, comprehensive and effective protection for women's economic equality rights. The purpose of the act "to achieve pay equity through proactive means" is subject to a qualifying phrase "while taking into account the diverse needs of employers"—a clause that is unprecedented in any other Canadian human rights legislation and actively subverts the legislation's stated intent. Moreover, only modest resourcing is available to support the Pay Equity Commissioner's (or Accessibility Commissioner's) work—necessarily limiting its scope and impact.¹²⁷ This is a feature of other federal initiatives as well: Modest programs are spun as bold, progressive policy choices. That said, federal initiatives are helping to set a higher bar for other provincial-territorial governments that bear the responsibility for upholding and protecting the health and well-being of the large majority of workers in Canada.

As the pandemic experience has shown, improving the quality of essential frontline work is paramount for addressing gendered disparities in the labour market. Both levels of government should be working to modernize and strengthen existing social protections for workers, such as Employment Insurance, to reflect current and future labour realities,

building in the right to recall provisions, for example, and adopting a more expansive approach to providing income support to parents and caregivers. During the pandemic, providing ready access to income replacement in the face of recurrent shutdowns of child care and public education via CERB and its successor programs made a huge difference, boosting women's economic security and assisting with the gendered increase in unpaid care work. Now is the time to take stock and consider systemic reform of the benefits on offer and related employment standards to better support caregiving across the life course.^{128,129}

All governments must continue to annually improve minimum wages, bringing wage rates into alignment with the actual cost of living, and expanding access to labour protections for non-standard, precarious and temporary workers (including part-time, part-year, contract, and temporary agency workers, or those who are employed through third-party intermediaries or digital platform companies). To level the playing field for all workers, all employers should be providing equal pay and benefits for equal work, regardless of whether the employee works part-time, on contract or through a temporary agency, and guaranteeing minimum hours per week, eliminating the economic incentives that prop up and sustain the exploitation of female workers (and others) in the low-wage labour market.¹³⁰ These steps are particularly important to limit the growth of non-standard forms of employment that are designed to distance employees from the firms that profit from their labour and the protections afforded by labour law.

More generally, governments should be working to facilitate and uphold the rights of all workers to safe workplaces, to unionize, and to seek redress where their rights are not upheld. For the federal government, this means abandoning temporary foreign worker schemes outside of the regular immigration system that have created the conditions for servitude and exploitation. All workers who come to Canada should have access to industry-wide permits, equal access to health care, social supports, training, and employment protections including unionization, and a pathway to permanent residency. The extension of formal rights to social services, support, and residency does resolve, partially but in important ways, the dependency and vulnerability experienced by temporary migrants and foreign workers—and places the onus squarely on governments and employers to create decent work for all.

The COVID-19 crisis illustrated both the shortcomings of existing policies and institutions and what's possible with strong public leadership. The imperative now is to apply the lessons of COVID-19 in

service of a more resilient and inclusive labour market and gender-just future. Institutional reforms and greater awareness of the damaging impacts of gender disparities may yet create opportunities for systemic change.

NOTES

- 1 This research report uses an inclusive definition of women that embraces women, queer women, trans women and gender-diverse people.
- 2 Estimate for workers aged 15 years and older. Statistics Canada, *Canadian Income Survey*, Table 11-10-0239-01.
- 3 Statistics Canada, *Labour Force Survey*, Table 14-10-0417-01. The respective figures for workers aged 25 to 54 years were 19.1 per cent (1997), 14.3 per cent (2009) and 12.5 per cent (2019).
- 4 See: David Macdonald (2024), [How the public sector is fighting income inequality \(And why it's still not good enough\)](#), Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives; Nicole Fortin (2019), "Increasing earnings inequality and the gender pay gap in Canada: Prospects for convergence," *Canadian Journal of Economics*, 52: 407-440; Rachele Pelletier, Martha Patterson and Melissa Moyser (2019), [The gender wage gap in Canada: 1998 to 2018](#), Statistics Canada, Labour Statistics: Research Papers, Catalogue no. 75-004-M—2019004.
- 5 See: Sheila Block and Grace Edward Galabuzi (2022), [One Step Forward: Assessing the labour market impacts of Ontario's 2018 minimum wage increase](#), Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.
- 6 See: Marie Drolet and Mandana Mardare Amini (2023), [Intersectional perspective on the Canadian gender wage gap](#), Studies on Gender and Intersecting Identities, Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 45200002; Sheila Block and Grace Edward Galabuzi (2023), [A rising tide does not lift all boats: Ontario's colour-coded labour market recovery](#), Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives; Tammy Schirle and Moyosoreoluwa Sogaolu (2020), [A work in progress: Measuring wage gaps for women and minorities in the Canadian labour market](#), The C.D. Howe Institute.
- 7 These figures refer to annual employment income for all people aged 15 years and older, as recorded in the 2021 census. Only those claiming employment income are included. While the 2021 census reports on 2020 income, an atypical income year, this calculation provides a rough estimate of the scale of the aggregate pay gap. The pay gap for Indigenous women compared to non-Indigenous male workers was 63.3 per cent in 2020 (Statistics Canada, Table 98-10-0426-01). The comparable figure among racialized women was 60.4 per cent (Statistics Canada, Table 98-10-0399-01).
- 8 Canada placed 31st out of 36 member countries in 2019 (18.6 per cent), behind all European countries. In 2022, among the 14 countries posting data, Canada placed 12th (17.1 per cent). OECD (2020), [Gender wage gap](#) (indicator).
- 9 See: Francine Blau and Lawrence Kahn (2017), "The gender wage gap: Extent, trends, & explanations," *Journal of Economic Literature*, 55 (3): 789-865.

- 10** See: Emma Quinn, et al. (2020), "Men and women at work in Canada, 1991-2016," *Labour & Industry*, 30(4): 401-412; Asaf Levanon and David Grusky (2016), "The persistence of extreme gender segregation in the twenty-first century," *American Journal of Sociology*, 122(2): 573-619; Michelle Budig, Melissa Hodges, and Paula England (2019), "Wages of nurturant and reproductive care workers: Individual and job characteristics, occupational closure, and wage-equalizing institutions," *Social Problems*, 66 (2): 294–319.
- 11** See: Fortin 2019.
- 12** See: David Macdonald (2019), [The double-pane glass ceiling: The gender pay gap at the top of corporate Canada](#), Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.
- 13** Statistics Canada, *2021 Census of Population*, Table 98-10-0412-01. Top female occupations (NOC 2021) are defined as those with the largest concentration of female workers.
- 14** See: Asaf Levanon, Paula England and Paul Allison (2009), "Occupational feminization and pay: Assessing causal dynamics using 1950-2000 U.S. census data," *Social Forces*, 88(2): 865-891.
- 15** See: Melissa Hodges, Melissa (2020), "Intersections on the Class Escalator: Gender, Race, and Occupational Segregation in Paid Care Work," *Social Forum*, 35: 24-49; Kjersti Misje Østbakken, Julia Orupabo and Marjan Nadim (2023), "The Hierarchy of Care Work: How Immigrants Influence the Gender-Segregated Labor Market," *Social Politics*, 30(3): 818-843.
- 16** Statistics Canada, *2021 Census of Population*, Table 98-10-0586-01.
- 17** These figures are based on calculations by Melissa Moyser (2017), updated with the 2021 *Census of Population*. Population aged 25 to 54 years. Melissa Moyser (2017), "[Women and Paid Work](#)," *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Report*, Statistics Canada, Catalogue No. 89-503-X.
- 18** See: Megan Moskos (2020), "Why is the gender revolution uneven and stalled? Gender essentialism and men's movement into 'women's work,'" *Gender, Work & Organization*, 27(4): 527-44.
- 19** See: Lisa Kaida and Monica Boyd (2022), "Revisiting gender occupational segregation trends in Canada: 1991-2016," *Canadian Review of Sociology*, 59(S1): 4-25.
- 20** See: Quinn et al. 2020.
- 21** Drolet and Amini (2023, 22,) estimate that the combined effect of industry and occupation accounted for 36.6 per cent of the gender wage gap in 2022, and an even larger share among Indigenous women (42.8 per cent). The variables included in their statistical model accounted for 13.0 per cent of the gender wage gap for all groups, a smaller share than in 2007.
- 22** Pelletier, Patterson and Moyser's (2019) study of wage gaps found that the industrial distribution of men and women—and, in particular, the larger share of men working in construction, manufacturing and mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction—explained the largest portion of the gender wage gap in 2018, accounting for 39.7 per cent. Altogether, the variables included in their statistical model explained over one-third (36.6 per cent) of the gender wage gap in 2018. The remainder was attributed to unexplained factors, consistent with previous research.
- 23** See Bryan Evans, et al. (2023), *From Consent to Coercion: The continuing assault on labour*, 4th edition. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- 24** See: Rachel Dwyer and Erik Olin Wright (2019), "[Low-Wage Job Growth, Polarization, and the Limits and Opportunities of the Service Economy](#)," *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, Volume 5, Number 4, September 2019.
- 25** North American Industry Classification System.
- 26** David Macdonald (2020), "[Canada's job losses reach Great Depression levels](#)," *Behind the Numbers*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

27 Katherine Scott, et.al. (2020), [Resetting normal: Women, decent work and Canada's fractured care economy](#). For those in the top earnings group, with wages of more than \$48 an hour, only one per cent lost employment or a majority of hours and, by the end of the summer, they had more than fully recovered. Among the top 10 per cent of earners, seven per cent of women lost employment and while employment for men in this top income group actually increased by two per cent.

28 In 2019, women aged 15 years and over accounted for 56.4 per cent of workers in accommodation and food services, 51.4 per cent in arts, entertainment and recreation, 55.2 per cent in other services and 52.3 per cent in retail. Together, they account for 28.1 per cent of the female labour force in 2019. Statistics Canada, Table: 14-10-0023-01, *Labour force characteristics by industry, annual*.

29 In 2019, median gross hourly wages ranged from \$15/hour in accommodation and food services to \$20/hour in other services. Statistics Canada, Labour force survey, custom data order.

30 Since 2014, study permit holders enrolled in postsecondary programs have been allowed to work off campus without a work permit up to 20 hours per week during regular school terms or semesters and work full time during scheduled breaks in the school year. Since this change, their number working in the AFS industry has surged year over year and they are now the largest source of foreign workers in the AFS industry. See Jianwei Zhong, et al. (2024), ["Temporary foreign workers with lower-skill occupations in the accommodation and food services industry: Transition to permanent residency and industrial retention after transition,"](#) Statistics Canada, *Economic and Social Reports*, Catalogue no. 36-28-0001.

31 Statistics Canada, Table: 14-10-0022-01—*Labour force characteristics by industry, monthly, unadjusted for seasonality*.

32 In 2019, women represented 80.9 per cent of health care and social assistance workers and 70.4 per cent of workers in educational services. For a discussion of the definition and measurement of the care economy, see Dana Wray, et al. (2023), ["Canada's Care Economy: A Conceptual Framework,"](#) *Spotlight on Canadians: Results from General Social Survey*, Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-652-X2023002.

33 Statistics Canada, Table: 14-10-0022-01.

34 See House of Commons Standing Committee on Health (2023), [Addressing Canada's Health Workforce Crisis](#); House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities (2023), [Labour Shortages, Working Conditions and the Care Economy](#).

35 Statistics Canada (2023), [Nurses: Working harder, more hours amid increased labour shortage](#), StatsCan Plus, July 24, 2023.

36 In 2019, men represented 88.7 per cent of construction workers and 72.2 per cent of manufacturing sector workers. These two sectors accounted for 29.6 per cent of male employment losses between February 2020 and April 2020.

37 Statistics Canada, Table: 14-10-0022-01.

38 *Ibid.*

39 Jim Stanford (2020), ["Encouraging Job Numbers, but a Long Way to Recovery,"](#) Centre for Future Work.

40 Statistics Canada, Table 14-10-0220-01—*Employment and average weekly earnings (including overtime) for all employees by industry, monthly, seasonally adjusted, Canada*. These data do not include the self employed and are presented for detailed industrial categories.

41 *Ibid.*

42 The management of companies, industrial group, is a comparatively small sector, reporting 113,600 employees at the start of the pandemic. A gender breakdown of employment is not available in publicly available data sources.

- 43 Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0400-01—*Job vacancies, payroll employees, and job vacancy rate by industry sector, quarterly, adjusted for seasonality*.
- 44 Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0328-01—*Job vacancies, proportion of job vacancies and average offered hourly wage by selected characteristics, quarterly, unadjusted for seasonality*.
- 45 See: Sean Speer, et al. (2022), [Canada's New Working Class](#), Cardus.
- 46 See new research from Iglia Ivanova and Kendra Strass reporting on their study of precarious workers in B.C. Ivanova and Strauss (2023), [But is it a good job? Understanding employment precarity in BC](#), Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives—BC Office.
- 47 Katherine Scott (2023), "[The rich 'won' the pandemic: Income inequality skyrocketed in 2021](#)," *The Monitor*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.
- 48 Statistics Canada (2022), "[In the midst of high job vacancies and historically low unemployment, Canada faces record retirements from an aging labour force: number of seniors aged 65 and older grows six times faster than children 0-14](#)," *The Daily*, April 27, 2022.
- 49 Statistics Canada (2022), "[Labour Force Survey, August 2022](#)," *The Daily*, September 9, 2022.
- 50 Statistics Canada (2023), "[Canada's population estimates: Record-high population growth in 2022](#)," *The Daily*, March 22, 2023.
- 51 The employment rate of women without a diploma or degree has been effectively flat for 20 years, at a very low 45 per cent among women aged 25 to 64 years, 20 percentage points less than their male peers.
- 52 In 2022, 72.3 per cent of those with a high school education were engaged in paid employment, down from 75.0 per cent in 2000.
- 53 University-educated women have always reported the higher levels of employment compared to other women in the labour market. Roughly eight in 10 aged 25 to 64 years have been engaged in the paid employment since 1990—the earliest year available in the Labour Force Survey. What has changed over the last three decades is the relative number of women with post-secondary degrees in the labour market. In 1990, 15.6 per cent of female workers (25-64 years) had a university degree. In 2022, it was 43.3 per cent. (The respective figures among male workers in this age group are 17.6 per cent and 35.2 per cent.)
- 54 Leah Vosko (2005), *Precarious employment: Understanding Labour Market Insecurity in Canada*, 1st ed. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- 55 See: Alice Mūrage and Julia Smith (2023), "[Multifaceted precarity: Pandemic experiences of recent immigrant women in the accommodation and food services sector](#)," *BMC Public Health* 23, No. 2497 for a discussion of the importance of applying an intersectional lens to employment precarity.
- 56 Marc Frenette and René Morissette (2021), "[Job security in the age of artificial intelligence and potential pandemics](#)," *Social and Economic Reports*, Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 36-28-0001.
- 57 Qatalyst Research Group (2023), [Snapshot of the Tourism Sector Labour Market: National Report](#). Report prepared for Tourism HR Canada.
- 58 In 2022, levels of self-employment among women were still below those in 2019, representing a deficit of roughly 66,000 of this group of business owners and freelancers. The gap between the number of self-employed men in 2019 and in 2022 was even larger at 115,000. This appears to be part of a larger, perhaps permanent, shift away from self-employment toward working with other private sector, non-profit, or public employers.
- 59 Chris Hannay (2023), "[One-third of Canadian restaurants operating at a loss as costs rise](#)," *The Globe and Mail*, October 23, 2023.
- 60 Trevor Tombe (2024), "[Business bankruptcies have soared. The bad news is many aren't being replaced](#)," January 25, 2023.
- 61 Sean Speer, et al. (2022), [Canada's New Working Class](#), Cardus.

- 62** The retail sector was the second largest growth sector for women numerically, and third largest overall as the industry rebounded between 2020 and 2022, women accounting for more than 70 per cent of growth over this period.
- 63** Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0022-01. Women's employment recovery also lagged among administrative workers in business support services—another area that has not fully recovered from its pandemic losses.
- 64** Alice Mürage, Stefanie Machado, Alexandra Selinger, Michelle Travis, and Julia Smith (2024), [A Paradox in COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery: Increased precarity of women hotel workers in British Columbia](#), Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. This summary is taken from their report.
- 65** UNITE HERE Local 40, 2021, [Unequal women](#).
- 66** Stephanie Fung and Naden Albenes, 2020, "[Naden Albenes: I'm fasting in front of the B.C. legislature for my job and my future](#)," *Vancouver Sun*, August 20, 2020.
- 67** Employment and Social Development Canada, 2022, [Government of Canada announces Workforce Solutions Road Map](#); Rosa Saba, 2023, "[Temporary foreign workers need more paths to immigration](#)," *CBC News*, June 16, 2023.
- 68** Alice Mürage and Julia Smith, 2023, [Multifaced precarity: pandemic experiences of recent immigrant women in the accommodation and food services sector](#), BMC Public Health.
- 69** Almost half of recent immigrant women (-43.2 per cent) who were employed in February 2020 lost their job or the majority of their hours by the end of April 2020, 13 percentage points above the losses posted by Canadian-born women (-32.3 per cent). In total, recent immigrants accounted for roughly one-tenth (10.5 per cent) of all employment losses experienced by female workers over this period. Katherine Scott, et.al. (2020), [Resetting normal: Women, decent work and Canada's fractured care economy](#), Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.
- 70** The employment rate among women aged 15 to 64 years who immigrated to Canada in the last 10 years significantly improved between 2019 and 2022, increasing by over five percentage points, to 67.5 per cent. Higher rates of employment among this group pushed up the rate of employment among all immigrant women in this age group to 70.5 per cent, narrowing the gap with Canadian-born women (72.9 per cent).
- 71** Young women accounted for 60.2 per cent of employment losses reported by youth aged 15 to 24 years between February and April 2020.
- 72** While young women experienced larger employment losses than young men in vulnerable sectors between 2019 and 2020 (-16.7 per cent vs -14.1 per cent), they also experienced a larger rebound. In 2022, the employment rate was 60.2 per cent among young women compared to 57.3 per cent among young men, a slightly wider gap than in 2019.
- 73** See Marc Frenette for a discussion about change in the nature of work between 2019 and 2022. Frenette (2023), "[The changing nature of work since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic](#)," *Economic and Social Reports*, Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 36-28-0001. See also: Feng Hou (2024), "[The improvement in the labour market outcomes of recent immigrants since the mid-2010s](#)," *Economic and Social Reports*, Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 36-28-0001.
- 74** This is also true for Indigenous women as well, who make up 4.2 per cent of women workers and are over-represented in low-wage service occupations.
- 75** CBC news (2024), "[Common front teachers to eventually earn 23.5% more in new Quebec deal](#)," January 15, 2024.
- 76** See: Jianwei Zhong, Yuqian Lu, Youjin Choi and Jue Zhang (2024), "[Temporary foreign workers with lower-skill occupations in the accommodation and food services industry: Transition to permanent residency and industrial retention after transition](#)," Statistics Canada, *Economic and Social Reports*, Catalogue no. 36-28-0001.
- 77** Higher Education Strategy Associates (2023), [The State of Postsecondary Education in Canada, 2023](#).

- 78** Zak Vescera (2024), "[Cash Cows and Cheap Labour: The Plight of International Students](#)," *The Tyee*, January 15, 2024.
- 79** Joe Friesen (2024), "[Ottawa's international student cap will create financial risks, university and college leaders say](#)," *The Globe and Mail*, January 22, 2024.
- 80** Ontario Nonprofit Network (2023), [2023 State of the Sector: At a Tipping Point](#).
- 81** There is a growing body of literature tracking the Canada's new early learning and child care system. See: Financial Accountability Office of Ontario (2022), [Ministry of Education: Spending Plan Review](#); Brad Seward, Elizabeth Dhuey and Annie Pan (2023), "[The big short: Expansion of early childhood education in post-pandemic Canada](#)," *Canadian Public Policy*, September 2023; David Macdonald and Martha Friendly (2023), [Not Done Yet \\$10-a-day child care requires addressing Canada's child care deserts](#), Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.
- 82** Adam King (2024), "[Ontario's hospital labour force is at a breaking point](#)," *The Maple*, January 8, 2024.
- 83** Ontario Council of Hospital Unions (October 2023), "[Over two in five union members are considering or somewhat considering leaving their current position in the next year](#)," Summary. Survey conducted by Nanos.
- 84** Niall Harney (2023), [Revitalizing the Conditions of Care in Manitoba: Supporting Long-Term Care and Home Care Workers in the Recovery from COVID-19](#), Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.
- 85** Linda Silas (2022), [A pan-Canadian framework for quality care](#), Brief to The House of Commons Standing Committee on Health, Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions.
- 86** As economy-wide job vacancies reached their peak in the second quarter of 2022, shortages in health care and social assistance also worsened. In the third quarter of 2022, health care and social assistance job vacancies reached a record high of 150,100 nationally. At that time, vacancies among registered nurses and registered psychiatric nurses, nurse aides, orderlies and patient service associates, and licensed practical nurses accounted for 69.2 per cent of all health job vacancies. According to the most recent data — covering quarter three of 2023 — vacancies in health care still lead most other occupations, despite overall declines in vacant positions.
- 87** See: BC's Women's Health Foundation, [Invisible no more: Inequities faced by women healthcare workers, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and recommendations for actions](#).
- 88** Nurses and personal support workers experienced an increase in overtime and extra hours worked. One third of nurses (31.7 per cent) and one in five personal support workers (18.2 per cent) worked overtime in 2022. See: Anthony Blackwell, 2023, "[Quality of employment and labour market dynamics of health care workers during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)," *Insights on Canadian Society*, Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 75-006-X.
- 89** Adam Miller (2021), "[Under attack': Canadian health-care workers call for more protection from harassment and threats](#)," *CBC News*, November 13, 2021.
- 90** For example, see: Kristin Reynolds, et al. (2022), "[Moral Injury Among Frontline Long-Term Care Staff and Management During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)," *Frontiers in Health Services*. Vol. 2: 841244.
- 91** Canadian Press (2023), "[Burnout, despair facing workers on front lines of poverty and homelessness in Canada](#)," *The Globe and Mail*, October 10, 2023; Kyrs Maki (2022), "[Workers supporting survivors of gender-based violence are demanding change](#)," *The Conversation*, December 6, 2022.
- 92** As of February 2024, seven "Working Together to Improve Health Care in Canada" bilateral agreements following the announcement of the 10-year Health Accord in February 2023. Another three jurisdictions have signed "Aging with Dignity" bilateral agreements with respect to funding allocated for home care in the 2017 budget and improvements to long term care announced in budget 2021. See: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/corporate/transparency/health-agreements/shared-health-priorities/aging-dignity-bilateral-agreements.html>.

93 CIHI's health workforce report also documents the decline of RNs and LPNs in long-term care facilities and community health agencies and the related rise in the numbers of staff working for private nursing agencies or occupational health centres over the same period. Canadian Institute for Health Information (2023), [Health workforce in Canada: In focus \(including nurses and physicians\)](#).

94 "The amount of money Ontario hospitals pay private nursing agencies has more than quadrupled since the first year of the pandemic, with agencies charging an average of \$140 an hour for a registered nurse." Kelly Grant (2023), "[Ontario spending on private nursing agencies quadrupled since COVID-19, data show](#)," *The Globe and Mail*, July 24, 2023.

95 Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2020, [Guardian Angel Program](#); See also: Employment and Social Development Canada (2022), "[Government of Canada launches call for proposals to help internationally educated professionals work in Canadian healthcare: News release](#)," December 5, 2022.

96 Catherine Bryan et al. (2024), [Cooking, cleaning, and caring: COVID-19, essential labour, and the experiences of immigrant and migrant women in Nova Scotia](#), Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives—Nova Scotia Office.

97 *Ibid.*

98 "Other relatively large industries that each contributed more than 10% of net employment gains in Canada from 2001 to 2021 include educational services, retail trade, and public administration." Statistics Canada (2022), "[Jobs in Canada: Navigating changing local labour markets](#)," *The Daily*, November 11, 2022.

99 Kristen Frank, Zhe Yang and Marc Frenette (2021), "[The changing nature of work in Canada amid recent advances in automation technology](#)," Statistics Canada, *Economic and Social Reports*, Economic and Social Reports, Catalogue no. 36-28-0001, Vol. 1, No. 1.

100 Marc Frenette (2023), "[The changing nature of work since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic](#)," Statistics Canada, *Economic and Social Reports*, Catalogue no. 36-28-0001, Vol. 3, no.7, p. 1.

101 The proportion of female employees earning wages above \$1,200 per week increased by 7.2 percentage points between 2019 and 2022, Statistics Canada, Table 14-10-0110-01.

102 The narrowing wage gap between new immigrants and Canadian-born workers pre-dates the pandemic. A new study from the Parliamentary Budget Officer found that the median total income of newly arrived immigrants (one year after acquiring permanent residency) increased from 55 per cent of the median total income of all tax-filers, to 78 per cent between 2014 and 2018—linked primarily to the increase in the number of immigrants in professional occupations over this period. See Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer (2024), [Income dynamics of new immigrants to Canada](#), January 12, 2024.

103 See: England, Paula (2010), "The Gender Revolution Uneven and Stalled," *Gender & Society*, 24(2): 149-166; Neil Guppy and Nicole Luongo (2015), "The rise and stall of Canada's gender-equity revolution," *Canadian Review of Sociology*, 52(3): 241-65.

104 Matthew Lapierre (2024), "[Quebec public sector workers to weigh 17.4% salary increase over 5 years](#)," *CBC News*, January 3, 2024.

105 Carmina Ravanera, Kim de Laat and Sarah Kaplan (2022), [The Future of Work: Will Remote Work Help or Hinder the Pursuit of Equality?](#) Institute for Gender and the Economy, University of Toronto.

106 Marc Ercolao (2024), "[Canadian Labour Market Outlook: Denting the Armour](#)," *TD Economics*.

107 From January 2022 to January 2024, the share of low-wage employees planning to leave their current job in the next 12 months grew by 2.3 percentage points. Statistics Canada (2024), "[Labour Force Survey, January 2024](#)," *The Daily*, February 9, 2024.

108 As a result of changes introduced in 2022, employers in seven industries, including accommodation and food services, hospitals, and nursing and residential facilities, are now allowed to engage up to 30 per cent of their workforce through the low-wage stream of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program. This is a temporary cap. It has been extended twice and is now set to expire on August 30, 2024, at which time these industries will be subject to the standard cap of 20 per cent (a threshold that was raised in 2022 from 10 per cent).

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