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Manitoba's COVID Recovery Must be Feminist

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“Decades of gender equality progress was wiped away in two short months during 2020, the budget must contain meaningful action and funding for universal child care, training and skills-building, and making recent temporary changes to EI permanent”

— CCPA National Senior Economist Katherine Scott
in *Women*, author of *Work and COVID-19: Priorities for supporting women and the economy*, available today at www.policyalternatives.ca

A COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL report released March 8th, 2021 by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), *Work and COVID-19: Priorities for supporting women and the economy*, analyzes the impact COVID-19 has had on women in the labour market and recommends federal policy measures to address the crisis.

International Women’s Day (IWD) began over 100 years ago with demands for bread and roses: fair wages, better working conditions and dignity for women. While some progress has been made, it remains that women, racialized women, women with disabilities, young women and older women’s status are lesser than their male counterparts. In the time of COVID, IWD is a time to put attention on how women have borne the brunt of the economic and social impacts of COVID and how governments should respond.

As the Manitoba office of the CCPA, we prepared the following policy brief on the particular impacts of COVID on women in Manitoba and what is needed from the Province of Manitoba to reverse the disproportionate damage COVID has had on women in our province.

This policy brief describes some of the ways Manitoba women have borne the brunt of COVID and what's needed for a feminist recovery — where women, Two Spirit and gender-diverse people are prioritized and not left behind. It is focused on three areas:

1. Social infrastructure and the care economy
2. Living wage, paid sick leave, EI and CPP reform
3. Help those excluded pre-COVID

The feminist recovery must be intersectional. We must act on the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action and act on ending racism against Black Indigenous and People of Colour. Women with disabilities face enormous barriers and challenges: The Accessibility for Manitobans Act must be fully implemented.

This brief is focused on women, but we acknowledge that the gender binary is limiting. Moreover, based on what we see in other studies, trans and non-binary folks are facing a similar or harder situation, but this reality is rarely reflected in the data, which is in itself an indication of marginalization. The Feminist COVID recovery must be fully inclusive.

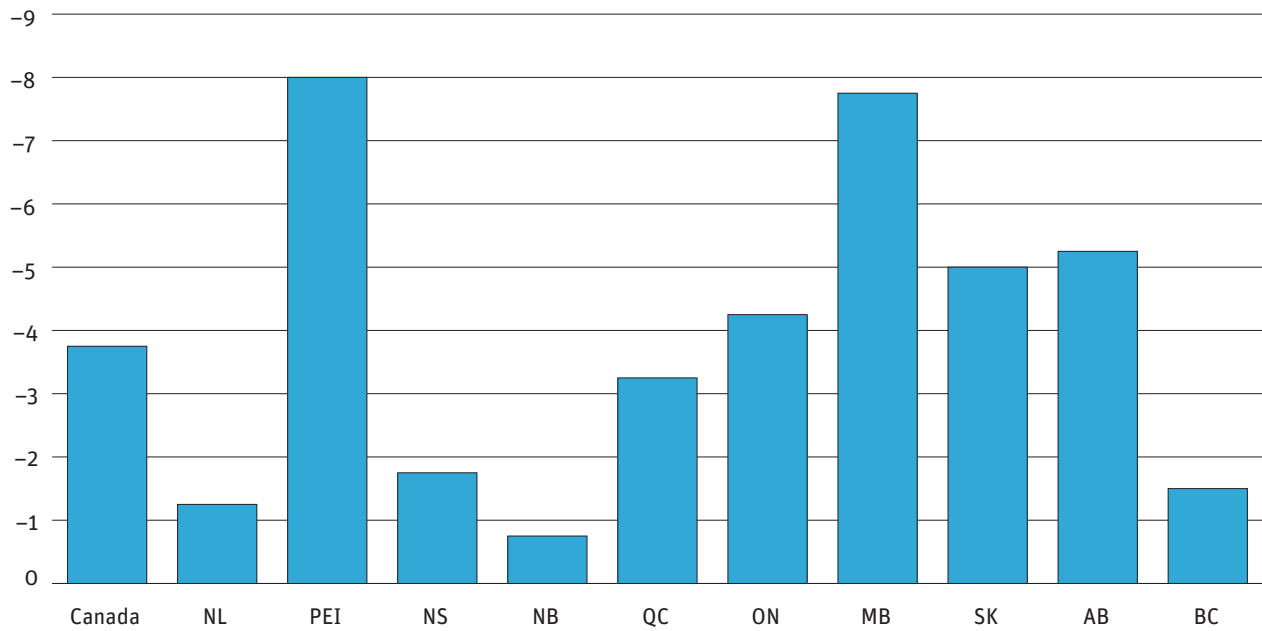
Impacts of COVID on Manitoba Women

The “she-session” during COVID is real — in Manitoba women have lost the second highest percentage of jobs of any province as of December (see *Figure 1*). Manitoba women have been very hard hit by COVID, particularly at two points in time, this past December and in the spring of 2020 with one of highest percentage losses of employment among the provinces.

Almost one year after the pandemic hit, women's unemployment rates are higher than men's in Manitoba. Manitoba's women's unemployment rate is 7.1% compared to Manitoba men at 5.1% this past February 2021 (see *Figure 2*). Before the pandemic in January 2020, women's unemployment rate was slightly lower (4.4%) than men's (5.0%). Women's recovery is lagging behind men. Also women's part time employment is severely down over a year ago, from 41,600 women working part time to 36,500 women working part time according to Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey data.

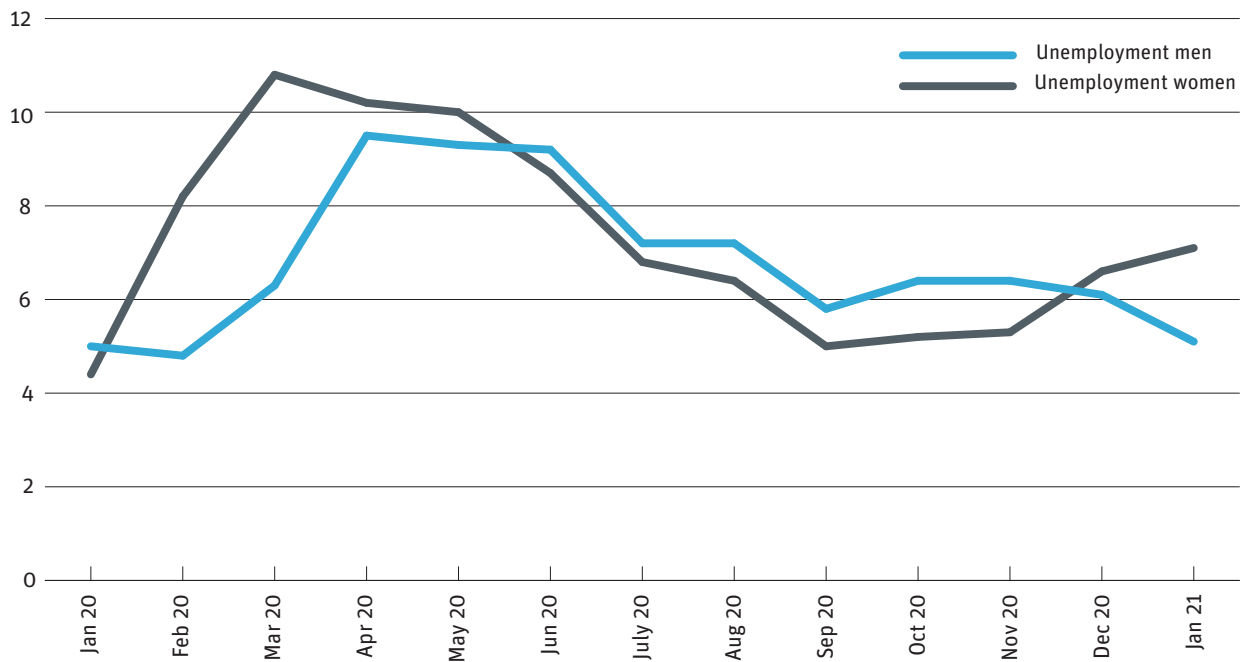
The COVID economic downturn has impacted women working in business services, information, culture and recreation, as well as accommodations and food services along with other service industries for the past year according to the Labour Force Survey (see *Figure 3*). The largest losses for women were in food / accommodation: 24% percent of

FIGURE 1 Employment Change (%) Compared to February Among Women (15+), by Province



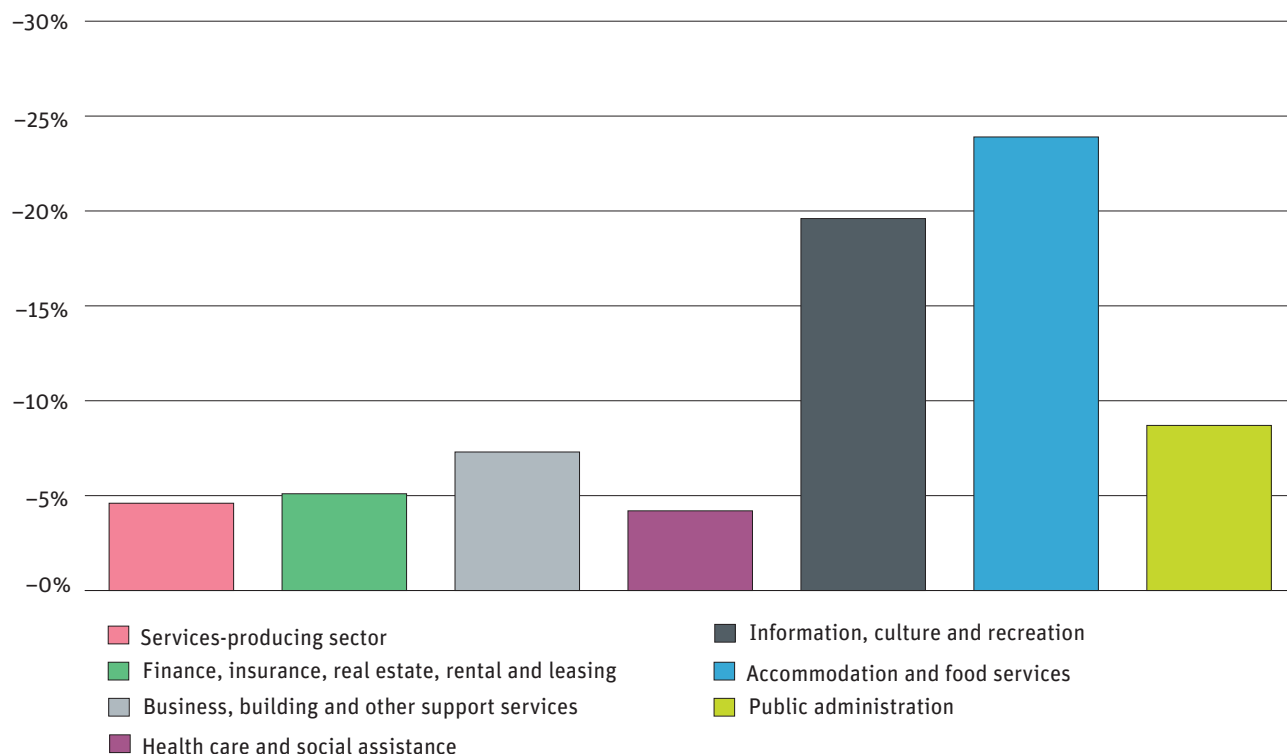
Source: Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0287-03 Labour force characteristics by province, monthly, seasonally adjusted

FIGURE 2 Unemployment in Manitoba by Gender



Source: Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0287-03 Labour force characteristics by province, monthly, seasonally adjusted

FIGURE 3 Labour Force Characteristics by Industry, Females, Manitoba, % Change 2019–2020



Source: Statistics Canada. Table 14-10-0023-01 Labour force characteristics by industry, annual (x 1,000)

women employed in this sector lost jobs since January 2020. In information, culture and recreation 20% of women lost jobs over the past year. Women also lost jobs in health and social assistance with a 4.2% reduction in this sector at a time when the need for health workers and social services support is higher than ever. The Department of Families for example came under criticism with recent news of 444 vacancies in the Department out of the 2,069 positions.

Women of colour, Indigenous women, and women with disabilities are also over-represented in these sectors and doubly or triply affected.

These are predictably working against feminist recovery. Overall, Manitoba is lagging the national benchmarks according to Katherine Scott, CCPA National Senior Economist.

There continue to be job losses among mothers dealing with increased care demands. Single parents, particularly those with children under six are hardest hit. In Manitoba almost two-thirds (63.4%) of children in single parent homes are living in poverty – and 78% of single parent households are women in Manitoba (Campaign 2000, 2020). Single parent child poverty in Manitoba is the highest rate of any province or territory, 173% above the national rate.

What Should the Manitoba Government do to Support a Feminist Recovery to COVID in Manitoba?

1. Social Infrastructure and the Care Economy

A.) Child Care and Long Term Care

COVID has shown the importance of social infrastructure to our economy and society — that is sufficient affordable, accessible child care, home care and Long Term Care (LTC).

Provincial operating funding for the non-profit child care sector, which operates 95% of licensed care, has been frozen since 2016 resulting in low wages, difficulty attracting workers and high demand for child care services — see the child care chapter of the 2020 Alternative Provincial Budget for more information.

Funding for Long Term Care in Manitoba has been frozen since 2008 and then was cut back in 2017/18 and 2018/2019 putting severe strain on facilities to pay for utilities, food, and incontinence supplies. Aging facilities require capital repairs estimated at \$6 million dollars at each facility, according to the Manitoba Association of Residential and Community Care Homes for the Elderly (MARCHE). Women are 90% of LTC workers, 61% speak english as a second language and are all low paid. Most cannot get full time hours and work part time at multiple facilities, although governments have made some temporary changes to this due to COVID transmission risks. COVID exposed the problems of privately-run facilities. Two-thirds of Manitobans support making these homes publicly run, with legislated staffing ratios and options for full time work.

Women are overwhelmingly represented in the care economy and as primary caregivers of children and seniors. Underlying this devaluing of our labour is that it is “women’s work.” In both paid and unpaid caregiving, women do the majority of the heavy lifting of personal care and invisible emotional support. This needs to finally be addressed through adequate public support.

B). Manitoba Needs a Plan to Adequately Match and Leverage Federal COVID

Stimulus Dollars on the Table Now

Picking up the Tab: A complete accounting of federal and provincial COVID-19 measures in 2020 by CCPA Senior Economist David Macdonald, published this past January tracks which level of government covered costs for any COVID-19 program announced by Dec. 31, 2020, that will be implemented in the 2019–2020 to 2021–22 fiscal years.

This report finds that, as of the end of 2020, Manitoba left \$289 million dollars of federal COVID money on the table (see also CCPA Manitoba analysis of the federal spending in Manitoba based on the report), particularly in the following areas that employ a disproportionate number of women:

- Long Term Care (LTC)

- K–12 Education
- Post Secondary Education (PSE)
- Child Care
- Housing and homelessness

Manitoba’s priority should be quality, public LTC, PSE, child care and K–12 Education with decent wages and benefits for workers.

The federal government is allocating \$70 – \$100 billion more in stimulus funding for the COVID recovery over the next three years. It is yet to be determined how this will be allocated. Manitoba should have a prioritized plan to access this funding targeted at populations worst hit by the pandemic.

C.) Reverse Cuts to the Public Sector

Cuts to the public sector made before the pandemic are impacting the response now. For example cuts in health care and below rates of inflation, pre-pandemic, means regional health authorities are now desperate for staff to fill roles in contact tracing, vaccination, and long-term care. The Province has axed at least 2,505 civil service jobs since 2016 and cut hundreds of management positions across the public sector, resulting in a huge loss of employees available for redeployment, planning capacity, and institutional knowledge. These are all sectors that are female-dominant.

2. Living Wage, Paid Sick Leave, Employment Insurance (EI) and CPP Reform

A.) Make the Minimum Wage a Living Wage

Women are over-represented among minimum wage and low wage workers. The Living Wage in Winnipeg in 2020 is \$16.10/ hour. The living wage is based on the cost of living for a modest basket of goods. Government policy impacts the cost of living for the living wage – for example through the provision of affordable housing, child care, transportation and more. The living wage is connected to a comprehensive, progressive social policy agenda of an affordable cost of living for working families.

B.) Paid Sick Leave, Improved EI Employment Standards, CPP and Unionization

More than half of all Canadian workers have no access to paid sick leave. In response, the federal government created Canada Recovery Sickness Benefit, which in Manitoba is called the Public Health Emergency Leave program. This is federal EI dollars which covers 55% of wages or \$500/ week available in Manitoba for workers who are sick due to acquiring COVID, in self-isolation, or with underlying conditions. This benefit offered for the duration of the pandemic should be a step toward fully paid sick days for all workers.

Employers are required to provide safe and healthy working conditions for workers. This is impossible to provide when low paid, precarious workers get sick, or have to care for someone who is sick and cannot afford not to work. All provincial labour ministers should prioritize the implementation of universal, permanent and adequate employer-paid sick leave for all workers now, as called for by the Manitoba Federation of Labour.

The Employment Insurance program in Canada has been critiqued for decades for inadequate coverage of precarious workers, low rates, and eligibility. Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was introduced to respond to the gaps in EI. The Manitoba government should call on the federal government to overhaul EI and ensure there are no gaps with provincial social assistance programs.

Manitoba should call on the federal government to make modifications to CPP so that workers (majority women) are not penalized in their pensions as a result of COVID periods of unemployment.

The pay gap for unionized women workers is smaller than non-unionized workers as collective bargaining creates a mechanism for equal pay for equal work and improvement of women's wages. The Manitoba government should create enabling legislation and policies to encourage and support unionization in order to reduce the pay gap.

3. Help Those Excluded Pre-COVID

A). Single Parents

The vast majority of single parents are women (78%). Manitoba has the highest rate of poverty for single parents of all the provinces at 63.1%. Extra expenses during COVID, school and child care closures, mental health strain and other factors are challenging for those without extensive social support networks. Support should come in the form of support for the care economy (listed above) and income transfers such as the Manitoba Child Benefit and Rent Assist and the comprehensive responses outlined in this brief.

B.) Women's Social Enterprise and Support for Women to Enter the Trades

In March Manitoba announced a significant increase in year-over-year spending on infrastructure for roads, which is overwhelmingly male-dominated. The province should offer more incentives for women to enter the trades and male-dominated fields to work on traditional infrastructure projects. Green infrastructure in areas such as retrofit buildings and renewable energy will be needed in the transition away from fossil fuels that will require tradespeople.

Social enterprises have a triple bottom line: economic, social and environmental. Manitoba is home to an ecosystem of innovative social enterprises that support people with barriers to employment to find and retain work. Support must be provided for social en-

terprises to employ women and also to support female-dominated social enterprises like The Cutting Edge, which trains and employs newcomer women.

C.) Support Those Fleeing Domestic Violence/ Intimate Partner Violence

Domestic violence and intimate partner violence increased during COVID-19. The State of the Inner City report found a need for more domestic violence counselling over the phone as women were reticent to access domestic violence shelters. Services like Clinic Community Health Care's Crisis line, which is available across the province, should be enhanced and expanded.

D.) Enhancing the Social Safety Net

Make Poverty History Manitoba and the Right to Housing Coalition call on the province to build and support sufficient public, rent geared to income housing with supports, undertake adequate repairs of existing public housing and stop selling off public housing. The recent cold weather in Winnipeg made visible the extreme conditions an increasing number of homeless people are struggling with in Winnipeg.

Current Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) rates are at half of the poverty line — \$800 a month for a single individual and person with disability. This is also less than half of the CERB and Canada Recovery Benefit \$2000 a month made available for those who lost work during COVID. Due to confusing messaging about CERB, some Manitobans on EIA applied for CERB, were cut off from EIA, had to reapply for EIA and are now clawed back for years for the amount required to repay CERB. People should not be penalized for confusing information from both the federal and provincial governments about their eligibility to CERB. Make Poverty History Manitoba calls for a Liveable Basic Needs Benefit set at 75% of the poverty line with a modest claw back rate to the poverty line to tear down the welfare wall between those on assistance and paid work. This along with a living wage and no-cost education and training would support more people on assistance to secure paid work.

E.) Accessible Post-Secondary Education and Training

In order for women to improve our economic standards, it is important to support women's education and training. The Manitoba government has cut funding to Post Secondary Education and allowed for tuition increases of up to 5% per year and removed the cap on ancillary fees. Research published by CCPA Manitoba shows that the cost of tuition is a barrier to low and moderate income students, who will not take loans to cover tuition due to risks of repayment. The cost of tuition should not be a barrier to education and training.

F.) Support Community-Based Organizations

COVID-19, the Changing State of the Inner City report found Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) pivoted quickly to providing services to comply with public health ordinances to the populations they serve. They did this without additional funding or resources from the provincial government. Many staff report stress and burn-out from responding to complex community needs without adequate provincial funding. The province actually cut funding during this time to certain groups. A majority of staff and many clients at CBOs are women. Special funding should be provided to enable these organizations to continue to support populations made vulnerable by the pandemic in the recovery.

How Do We Pay for This?

The Manitoba Government needs to step up to the plate. Manitoba gets \$1 billion more in equalization payments than it did in 2016 and our per capita allocation is \$3,477, well above the national average of \$2,181. The federal government is responsible for 89% of COVID spending in Manitoba according to a recent report by CCPA National. Manitoba has fiscal room to do more – and it should.

Other Sources

Campaign 2000 (2021). *Manitoba: Poverty Central: Manitoba Report Card Update – December 2020*. <https://campaign2000.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Manitoba-Poverty-Central-2020-Report-Update-1.pdf>

CCPA. 2021. *Picking up the Tab: A complete accounting of federal and provincial COVID-19 measures in 2020*

Hyperlinked sources also through the text, available in the online version at www.policyalternatives.ca/manitoba



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