



Supporting Women's Economic Recovery

Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society

Alberta 

This report presents key findings from the engagements of the Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society and offers advice on how civil society and government can work together to address challenges faced by women, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Supporting Women's Economic Recovery | Culture and Status of Women

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Executive Summary

The Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society (the "Council") was formally established in February 2020 to provide advice to government on its relationship with civil society organizations that are addressing pressing social issues in Alberta. Civil society includes a diverse and evolving array of organizations and individuals: established non-profit organizations and charities, as well as informal groups or movements pursuing shared interests. It also includes individuals and organizations from the private sector pursuing social good.

In April 2021, the Honourable Rajan Sawhney, former Minister of Community and Social Services, asked the Council to engage civil society organizations and relevant experts, and provide a report that includes advice on how civil society organizations can help address challenges facing women in Alberta in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the Minister's direction, the Council undertook a process between July and October 2021 that included engagement with civil society organizations and experts, individual women with lived experience, and Elders from Indigenous communities. To support engagement efforts, the Council also undertook research on policy issues related to challenges confronting women.

Key Findings

The results of both our engagement process and our research are remarkably consistent in terms of the challenges women experienced as a result of COVID-19, and the opportunities and challenges faced by civil society organizations as they work to support women. These include:

- *Women in Alberta faced greater burdens in relation to caregiving.* Public health restrictions related to COVID-19 resulted in an increase of unpaid domestic labour and caregiving. For some, these increased burdens ultimately became irreconcilable with employment commitments or opportunities.
- *Women were put at increased risk of family, domestic, and sexual violence.* Civil society organizations and law enforcement agencies reported a rise in calls related to violence against women during the pandemic. At the same time, those experiencing violence were constrained in their ability to seek or obtain assistance.
- *There were impacts to women's employment and career tracks.* The economic contraction that accompanied the arrival of COVID-19 led to layoffs in the labour force, disproportionately experienced by women in the early phases. Women also suffered constructive dis-employment as a result of increased burdens in domestic roles.
- *Rising concerns around mental health and addictions.* Women with children under 18 living in the home were more likely to experience depression, anxiousness and loneliness. The rise in mental and emotional health challenges contributed to greater concerns around substance use and addictions – among women, or among their partners and family members.
- *Indigenous, racialized, vulnerable, and disadvantaged women were particularly impacted.* Women in these groups tended to be in more precarious economic circumstances going into the pandemic. They were also particularly impacted due to pre-existing systemic barriers in services, such as a lack of culturally appropriate supports.
- *Women in rural and remote communities were also particularly impacted.* With fewer services and supports available to them, women in these areas did not have much choice in terms of providers. Access to broadband internet is also limited in many rural areas. Women in these areas may also have had less privacy or anonymity compared to those in urban centres, creating additional barriers to obtaining assistance.
- *Challenges were pre-existing, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.* Issues such as the gender gap in pay, overrepresentation in lower-paying sectors, inequitable distribution or poor recognition for domestic labour, gender-based violence, and caregiving burdens are all longstanding issues. COVID-19 often had the effect of amplifying these pre-existing challenges.
- *The challenges experienced by women are interconnected.* Many are inter-related and feed into one another. For instance, the dis-employment of women contributed to more difficult financial circumstances for their families which, for women living with a potential or known abuser, placed them at higher risk of experiencing family violence.

- *Civil society's adaptability and responsiveness are strengths.* Early in the pandemic, many organizations demonstrated an ability to shift their methods of service delivery from in-person to virtual mechanisms. Organizations maintained or even expanded their commitments to helping members of their communities, including women.
- *Collaboration could be enhanced.* Civil society organizations have been forming collaborations amongst themselves, governments, and with private sector organizations to prevent and address challenges to women. In many cases, however, this is done in an ad hoc fashion and capacity challenges limit broader instances of collaboration.
- *There are gaps in capacity and service access.* These include a lack of sustainable and predictable funding, capacity challenges in human resources and administration, and data gathering and analysis gaps. Digital inequities also limit opportunities for civil society to assist women in certain population groups and geographic locations.

Advice to the Minister

There is an urgent and continuing need for the Government of Alberta and civil society to work in lockstep together in addressing these challenges.

Neither Government of Alberta ministries nor civil society organizations can do this work on their own. As in many other areas of public policy, they need to play complementary roles in order to effect positive and lasting change.

Enablers

For any collaborative efforts to succeed, the overall operating environment needs to improve. Recognizing this, there are a number of important enablers that the Government of Alberta should put in place to encourage many positive outcomes:

- *The prevailing policy environment.* The policy direction set by the Government of Alberta has tremendous influence on the success of overall efforts to support women, since civil society organizations often their cues from the overall policy environment. There are opportunities for government to provide policy leadership in a number of areas, such as:
 - Early learning and childcare, and informal caregiving of adults,
 - A coordinated approach to family, gender-based, and sexual violence,
 - Foreign credential recognition, and
 - The development and implementation of an anti-racism strategy.
- *The mechanisms of funding arrangements.* Current funding arrangements also tend to be program- or project-based, and only one year in duration. This makes it hard for organizations to plan or deliver assistance to women durably and effectively. There are opportunities for the government to enhance this for the better, including:
 - Shifting to outcomes-based funding whenever feasible and appropriate,
 - Providing longer-term funding,
 - Incentivizing collaboration amongst civil society organizations,
 - Enhancing human resource capacity in civil society organizations, and
 - Investing in enhancements in organizations' technological capacity.
- *The enhancement of data and systemic planning.* To effectively assist women, both government and civil society organizations must have a clearer picture of the landscape in which they seek to make change. This can be done by:
 - Working collaboratively with organizations to coordinate data gathering,
 - Developing capacity for coordinated data analysis capability, and
 - Facilitating better data sharing amongst ministries and organizations.

Moving Forward Together

With the right enablers in place, many efforts to assist women can be more effective and even happen organically. However, there are particular areas where government and civil society can work together in ways that have meaningful and lasting impacts for women.

CIVIL SOCIETY	GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA
Caregiving	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expanding the range of settings and option for childcare.• Enhancing adult caregiving options.• Delivering caregiving supports that meet the needs of particular populations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Policy direction on caregiving.• Enabling the creation of more support options.• Assisting women from disadvantaged and vulnerable communities to access support.
Safety, Health and Wellness	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Coordinated services to address family, gender-based, and sexual violence.• Social marketing in respect of family, gender-based, and sexual violence.• Provision of culturally appropriate and trauma-informed services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Policy direction on violence against women.• Enabling the creation of coordinated services across the spectrum.• Data support.
Employment and Entrepreneurship	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enhancements to worker flexibility.• Employment training and skills upgrading.• Partnerships to support increased participation of women in STEM fields.• Support for women's entrepreneurship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Foreign credential recognition.• Workplace flexibility.• Support for the creation and coordinated delivery of employment, training and entrepreneurship program and services.• Data support.
Diversity and Inclusion	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensuring inclusive board representation.• Incorporate diversity and inclusion considerations in organizational policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anti-racism strategy.• Support for board development in relation to diversity and inclusion.• Use of a diversity and inclusion lens in policy and funding decisions.
Digital Equity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collaborating with SuperNet sites to expand delivery of virtual services.• Work with the private sector to increase access to digital hardware and support.• Expand virtual service delivery generally.• Share knowledge about virtual service delivery.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expanding broadband access across Alberta.• Support for services that promote digital equity.• Enabling the provision of more virtual service delivery.
Planning and Alignment	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collaborating for greater and lasting impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establishing the architecture for social planning.• Creating the funding conditions for success.• Establishing local Funders' Tables.• Supporting data gathering and analysis.

Message from the Chair

The Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society (the Council) is part of the Government of Alberta's commitment to "harness the power of civil society." It reflects a conviction that the most effective, lasting solutions to pressing social issues often lie with civil society, and that government has a key role in supporting these efforts. The Council's vision is a future where Government and civil society work in partnership to build strong, resilient and caring communities where all Albertans can thrive.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created hardships for all Albertans, but has had disproportionate impacts on women, limiting their participation in their communities and the economy. It has also highlighted or worsened longstanding challenges women face. The former Minister of Community and Social Services, the Honourable Rajan Sawhney, asked the Council to provide advice to government on how civil society can help identify, address and/or prevent challenges faced by women in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also appreciate the support of our current Minister, the Honourable Jason Luan and Premier Jason Kenney.

Women's full participation is necessary for Alberta's full recovery and economic prosperity. To inform our advice, the Council had the privilege of discussing the challenges and potential opportunities with a number of leading civil society organizations and experts, and reviewing the written input of over 60 more (see Appendix A). We also heard directly from women with lived experience receiving supports, and had the privilege of beginning a dialogue with Indigenous leaders on how the challenges facing Indigenous women can best be addressed.

This report reflects the insights and wisdom we heard during this engagement and offers a range of potential areas where government and civil society, working together, can begin the process of making change. Our advice is also informed by our review of available research and initiatives underway in other jurisdictions. A selection of these resources is included as Appendix B.

As many civil society leaders told us during our engagement, the challenges are multiple, interrelated in complex ways, and manifest differently for different women in different communities. As a result, there are no easy fixes, no silver bullets. Addressing the challenges facing women will take time and the ongoing commitment of both civil society and government. We can't let the difficulty or complexity paralyze us, however; we need to use it to inspire our collective action.

This report is neither the first word on this topic nor the last. Further conversations within government and with civil society organizations offering related programs and services will be required to validate and refine the path forward. The Council is prepared to be part of those conversations and eager to see genuine progress.

In closing, I would like to thank the Minister for the opportunity to provide our advice on this important issue, as well as all the organizations and individuals that generously lent the Council their time and insights. Finally, I want to thank my fellow Council members for their ongoing support and commitment to the vital work of civil society in Alberta.



Dr. Joel R. Christie
Chair

Introduction

The Council

The Premier’s Council on Charities and Civil Society (the “Council”) was formally established in February 2020 to provide advice to government on its relationship with civil society organizations that are addressing pressing social issues in Alberta.

Civil society includes established non-profit organizations and charities, as well as informal groups and movements pursuing shared interests. It also includes individuals and organizations from the private sector pursuing social good.

The Council is part of the Government of Alberta’s commitment to harness the power of civil society to help address social challenges. This commitment builds on Alberta’s rich tradition of volunteerism, charitable giving, and communities coming together to solve problems.

Members of the Premier’s Council on Charities and Civil Society

Dr. Joel Christie, Chair

Liz O’Neill, Vice-Chair

MLA Jackie Lovely

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Wayne Chiu

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Joanne Mason

Ashif Mawji

Michele Taylor

Supporting Women’s Economic Recovery

In April 2021, the Honourable Rajan Sawhney, Minister of Community and Social Services, asked the Council to engage civil society organizations and relevant experts and provide a report offering advice on how civil society organizations can help address challenges facing women in Alberta in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In many ways, this request from the Minister built upon our work in 2020, which culminated in our report, *Moving Forward: Charting a Path to Civil Society Recovery*.

Our inquiry last year explored how to help civil society organizations recover from the impacts of COVID-19. This year we explored how to best help women in Alberta recover from the impacts of COVID-19, and the role that civil society organizations can play in doing so. Not surprisingly, many of the issues we identified last year remain relevant today.

In this report, we identify the challenges facing women in Alberta as a result of COVID-19, and offer the Minister advice on how the Government of Alberta can support civil society organizations in addressing these challenges.

Our Process

Based on the Minister’s direction, the Council undertook an engagement process between July and October 2021. This was complemented by research undertaken in parallel.

Civil Society Organizations and Experts

One aspect of this process was a series of structured conversations with civil society organizations and experts. These conversations involved participants having province-wide mandates or broad, system-level perspectives on the issues under consideration. This enabled the Council to gather insight on a pan-Alberta level about how COVID-19 has created challenges for women and how civil society organizations can work to address these challenges. A total of thirteen conversation sessions were held.

The engagement process also made use of a qualitative questionnaire to gather written input from a range of civil society organizations that deliver services and supports to women, or address issues of particular concern to women. The Council received 60 responses to the questionnaire, which sought input on a range of topics including:

- The ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted women;
- The ways in which the challenges related to COVID-19 have been uniquely or particularly challenging for racialized, disadvantaged, or vulnerable women in Alberta;
- The ways in which the challenges related to COVID-19 have affected women in rural and remote communities in our province;
- What civil society is currently doing well in response to these challenges, and what gaps exist in efforts to prevent or address the challenges; and
- How the Government of Alberta could work to support civil society in certain areas.

Women with Lived Experience

A third aspect of our engagement process involved focus group discussions with women having lived experience with some of these challenges. These discussions enabled the Council to hear firsthand accounts from women about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This brought an important human dimension to the challenges identified through the other streams of engagement.

The input gathered from these streams of engagement was illuminating, with a number of recurring themes and concepts emerging from the input. A summary and analysis of the perspectives gained is provided in Appendix A.

“Thank you for including me. I didn’t know I had a voice.”
(Participant, Focus group for women with lived experience)

Indigenous Engagement

The Council also engaged in dialogue with Indigenous Elders. This was done with the support of the United Way Calgary and Area. Our engagement with Indigenous Elders took place through two videoconference sessions.

The main session was held on August 16, 2021. Attendance at the session was determined by the Elders themselves, and the session was co-facilitated by a representative from the United Way Calgary and Area and the Council Chair.

After a smudge and prayer, the session commenced with an opening circle that involved all of the participating Elders. This circle involved a conversation around the importance of oral culture. Elders then broke into two circles, for female and male Elders. In these smaller discussions, participating Elders discussed two key questions:

1. How did the pandemic affect you and your community?
2. What could the Government of Alberta do to help you and your community to heal and go forward?

Following the small circle conversations, all Elders returned to the large circle for a report back. Among other issues, the Elders emphasized the importance of recognizing the oral tradition of Indigenous peoples. They also called for an ongoing, enduring relationship with the Council to help address systemic issues faced by indigenous peoples.

The session closed with a smudge and prayer.

**“We need equal economic opportunities for Indigenous women.”
(Elder Rose Crowshoe)**

A second session was held on October 15, 2021 with two Elders who agreed to participate and capture the key insights.

Opening with a smudge and prayer, the October session aimed to review and highlight the key issues emerging from the August session, and to discuss the path forward.

In recognition of the oral tradition of Indigenous peoples, the October session was recorded with their permission, and is available as an oral record at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rO4pe-tmw

Research

To support stakeholder engagement efforts, the Council also undertook research on policy issues related to challenges confronting women. This research provided additional context as the Council made sense of the engagement input and formulated its advice.

An overview of the key reports and research we reviewed, including sources cited in our report, is provided in Appendix B.

Our Key Findings

Together, the results of the Council's engagement process (Appendix A) and the results of the Council's research (Appendix B) were remarkably consistent in terms of the challenges women experienced as a result of COVID-19. The issues identified and described by participants in our engagement process are not simply anecdotal; they are validated by research and data available from Statistics Canada and other parties.

What emerges is highly compelling and highlights the seriousness of the challenges that confronted, and continue to confront, women in Alberta as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves. Based on the results of engagement and research, the Council offers the following key findings regarding the main challenges and opportunities to support women's recovery.

Impacts on Women

Increased burden in respect of caregiving and domestic roles

Identified by civil society organizations as one of the top challenges, women in Alberta faced greater burdens in relation to caregiving. Public health restrictions related to COVID-19 had the effect of keeping school-aged children home from school and closing childcare centres. This resulted in an increase of unpaid domestic labour and caregiving, much of which fell to women, who often fulfill these roles in families.

“We have heard that women were more likely to have to quit work to stay home with children, leaving their career, or having to juggle career and multiple family responsibilities.” (United Way of the Alberta Capital Region)

Almost overnight, women had to serve as teachers and early learning providers, on top of the usual functions they were fulfilling in their families. In one study, 64 per cent of women reported that they mostly performed homeschooling or helping children with homework, compared to only 19 per cent of men.¹

In addition, many women were already shouldering informal caregiving duties for elderly parents or relatives going into the pandemic. According to Statistics Canada, in 2018 women accounted for 54 per cent of all Canadian caregivers.²

These circumstances created a complex juggling act in the lives of many women. For some, the increased burdens in respect of caregiving and domestic roles ultimately became irreconcilable with employment commitments. Between March 2020 and March 2021, twelve times as many mothers as fathers left employment to provide caregiving to children.³

Increased risk of family, domestic, and sexual violence

Public health restrictions related to COVID-19 had the effect of keeping people from the same household huddled together. Public health orders constrained the ability of those in a family cohort to interact socially with those in other cohorts. For some people this had pleasant benefits, in the form of being able to spend more time with family.

1 Leclerc, K. (2020). Statistics Canada. Caring for their children: Impacts of COVID-19 on parents. Government of Canada.

2 Arriagada, P. (2020). Statistics Canada. The Experiences and Needs of Older Caregivers in Canada. Government of Canada.

3 Dejsardins, D. and Freestone, C. RBC (2021). COVID Further Clouded the Outlook for Canadian Women at Risk of Disruption. RBC Economics. March 4, 2021.

However, for women who were experiencing or at risk of experiencing gender-based violence, public health restrictions often meant staying in close quarters with an abuser or potential abuser. COVID-19 thus had the effect of placing women at increased risk of family, domestic, gender-based, and sexual violence.

“Isolation has contributed to family violence and we are only beginning to appreciate the impact of it.” (Homeward Trust Edmonton)

Stakeholders reported a rise in calls during the pandemic about incidents of violence against women. Data indicates that law enforcement authorities experienced this as well. Between mid-March and mid-September 2020 – which includes the period Albertans experienced the tightest public health restrictions – RCMP in Alberta recorded an 11.7 per cent increase in calls involving domestic violence, as compared to the same months during previous year.⁴ This same trend occurred in urban areas. The Calgary Police Service reported a 9 per cent increase in responses to domestic violence incidents between January and September 2020;⁵ and the Edmonton Police Service received 13 per cent more domestic violence calls during the first nine months of the pandemic.⁶

At the same time, those experiencing violence were constrained in their ability to seek or obtain assistance. They could not interface with friends, family members or informal support networks in the same ways they usually would, nor could they always find the private space to contact formal channels of assistance. These difficulties are reflected in shelter data. According to the Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters, 1563 women were admitted to emergency shelters during the first six months of 2020, compared with 2878 during the same period in 2019.⁷ This dramatic drop is reflected in data from Alberta Community and Social Services, which reported a 40 per cent reduction in shelter admissions between fiscal years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021.⁸

Impacts to women’s employment and career tracks

The COVID-19 pandemic has had consequences for women’s employment and careers in multiple ways. One well-

“Trying to keep up with endless changes in COVID-19 restrictions while trying to take care of family and running a small business was hard.” (Participant, Focus group for women with lived experience)

known vector is the economic contraction that accompanied the arrival of COVID-19 in Alberta and public health measures enacted to combat its spread. Businesses and organizations across the economy were impacted by less foot traffic, fewer customers, restricted operations, or complete shutdowns. In 2020, the industries hardest hit were in the service sector, accommodation and food service, and retail trade.⁹ These are sectors that primarily employ women.

⁴ St-Onge, J. (2020). “Domestic violence calls to police on rise during pandemic, yet some Alberta shelters have been quiet”. CBC News. October 13, 2020.

⁵ Kost, H. (2020). “Calgary experiencing ‘shadow pandemic’ of domestic violence, experts say”. CBC News. November 2, 2020.

⁶ See note 4.

⁷ Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters. (2020). *2020 Shelter Snapshot*.

⁸ Alberta Community and Social Services. Women’s Shelter Data 2019-2021.

⁹ Statistics Canada (2021). Table 14-10-0291-01. *Labour force characteristics by industry, monthly, seasonally adjusted, last 5 months*. Government of Canada.

In addition, women suffered constructive dis-employment as a result of increased burdens in domestic roles. With children unable to attend schools or childcare centres as they otherwise would, women in the workforce were faced with juggling employment and caregiving demands. When these became irreconcilable, women were forced to cut back their level of employment or leave their jobs altogether. Across Canada, employment among women with toddlers or school aged children dropped seven per cent between February and March 2020.¹⁰ Women who served

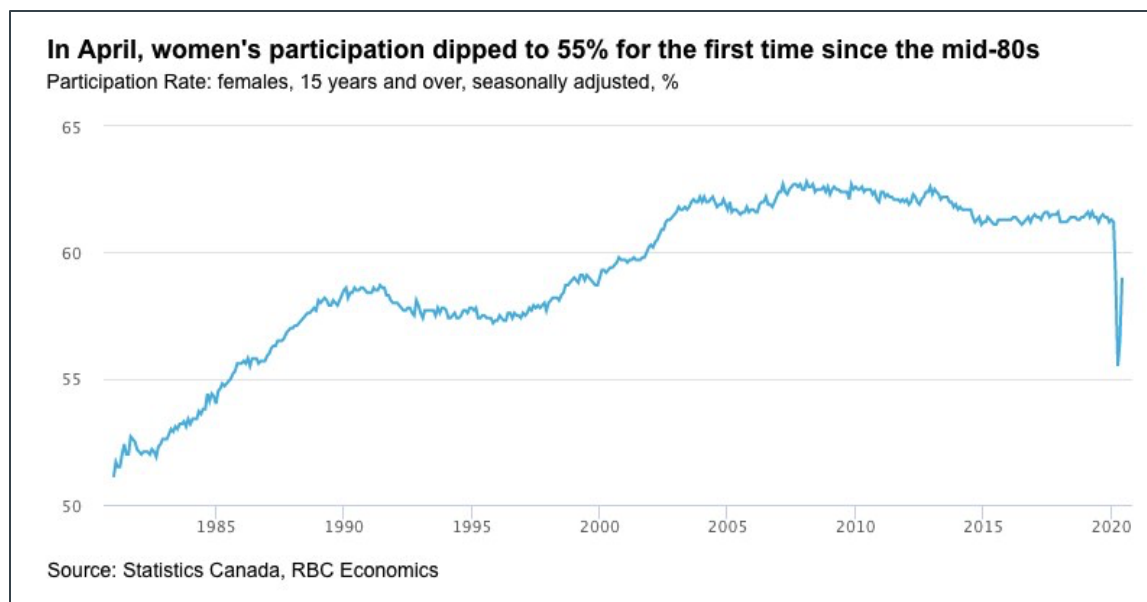
“We’re going to need to provide wraparound services to some women in our society if we want them back in the workforce contributing to the coffers as taxpayers.” (Canada West Foundation)

as informal caregivers to elderly relatives or other adults faced similar, sometimes compounding, dynamics.

As shown in Figure 1, the participation rate of women in the Canadian labour force fell precipitously with the onset of the pandemic. For the first time since the mid-1980s, women’s participation fell to 55 per cent. RBC Economics noted that the COVID-19 pandemic “pushed women’s participation in the labour force down to its lowest level in three decades,

with 1.5 million losing their jobs in the first two months of the recession.”¹¹

Figure 1: Women’s participation rate in labour force, seasonally adjusted¹²



The disproportionate impact on women was sharply felt, particularly early in the pandemic. As shown in Figure 2, the unemployment rate of women across Canada surpassed that of men for the first time in over 30 years. Within Alberta, women under 25 years of age were hit particularly hard by the COVID-related economic contraction, with approximately 34,000 losing their jobs.¹³ Among women over 15, the unemployment rate in Alberta peaked in June 2020 at over 14 per cent.¹⁴

¹⁰ Desjardins, D. et al (2020). *Pandemic Threatens Decades of Women’s Labour Force Gains*. RBC Economics. July 16, 2020.

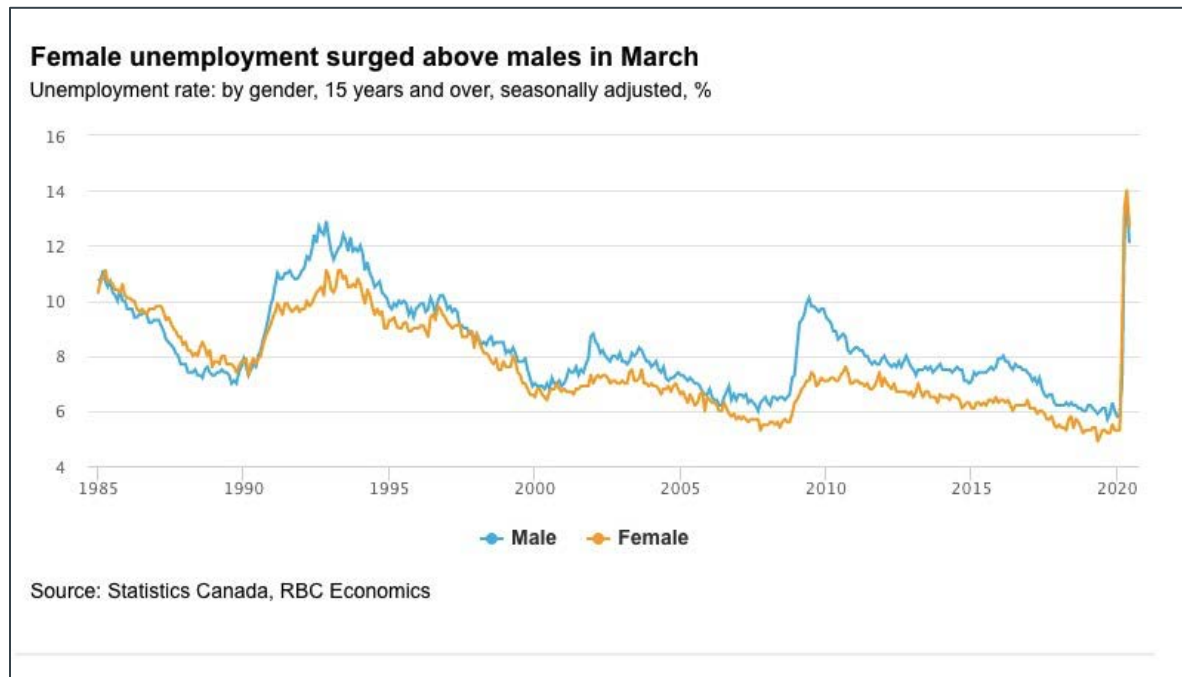
¹¹ See note 9.

¹² See note 9.

¹³ Fletcher. R. (2020). “COVID-19 obliterates 117,000 Albertans’ jobs, hitting young, female service workers hardest”. CBC News. April 9, 2020.

¹⁴ Statistics Canada (2021). *Table 14-10-0287-01, Labour force characteristics, monthly, seasonally adjusted and trend-cycle, last 5 months*. Government of Canada.

Figure 2: Unemployment rates, seasonally adjusted¹⁵



While employment has recovered among both women and men since spring 2020, the disproportionate impact on women may have long term consequences, which points to future opportunities to support women's economic wellbeing and advancement.

**“Moms had to quit their jobs when the schools closed and they didn't have childcare or supports for their children.”
(Participant, Focus group for women with lived experience)**

Compounding the challenge is that women are disproportionately represented in sectors where positions tend to be lower-paid, part-time in nature, have limited supports or benefits, and have limited workplace flexibility. Women employed in such roles had more difficulties in reconciling the demands of employment with the demands of caregiving. They were also more likely to experience underemployment or dis-employment if their spouse or partner was the higher income earner, as families made decisions about how best to look after children while earning a living.

Among women in Canada who earn less than \$800 a week, employment fell by almost 30 per cent.¹⁶ Women earning less than \$500 per week were especially impacted, with employment of this cohort falling by almost 40 per cent between February 2020 and January 2021.¹⁷

¹⁵ See note 9.

¹⁶ See note 3.

¹⁷ See note 16.

Rising concerns around mental health and addictions

The onset of COVID-19 in the province had a profound impact on people’s mental and emotional well-being. According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, women with children under 18 living in the home were more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and loneliness.¹⁸

“We need more access to mental health services and supports in the community beyond a phone number for individuals to call.” (Participant, Focus group for women with lived experience)

Public health restrictions had the effect of amplifying these challenges. The restrictions made it harder to stay connected with family members, friends, and networks. Those separated by geographic distance had to rely on telephone or videoconferencing in lieu of in-person contact. This caused many to experience social isolation. It also prevented people from partaking in structured activities they might usually use to mitigate stress and anxiety. For example, for a time most recreational, personal care, and other non-essential services were cancelled or unavailable.

The rise in mental and emotional health challenges contributed to greater concerns around substance use and addictions – among women, or among their partners and family members. In some cases these caused additional stress for women, on top of the stressors they already faced in respect of domestic burdens, caregiving, and job loss.

Racialized, vulnerable, and disadvantaged women particularly impacted

The COVID-19 pandemic had particular impacts for women from racialized, disadvantaged, and vulnerable communities. This is partly because women in these groups tended to be in more precarious economic circumstances going into the pandemic. It is easy to understand how the challenges of increased domestic burdens, underemployment, and dis-employment had a disproportionately negative impact on them.

Indigenous women, for instance, traditionally fulfill multiple roles in terms of family and community leadership. They are also part of a population that is disproportionately disadvantaged across numerous social and economic indicators. The stressors of COVID-19 compounded the pre-existing, chronic challenges many experienced such as poverty, family dysfunction, trauma, and racism. According to Statistics Canada data from between April 24 and May 11, 2020, 46 per cent of Indigenous women reported increased stress and 48 per cent reported symptoms consistent with moderate or severe generalized anxiety disorder.¹⁹ Rates of job losses among Indigenous peoples across Canada were slightly higher than those of non-Indigenous people.²⁰

“There are two buckets when it comes to COVID-19; the health component and all other challenges compounded by the pandemic – stress, anxiety, financial security, providing care to family...” (Participant, Focus group for women with lived experience)

¹⁸ Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. (2020). *COVID-19 pandemic adversely affecting mental health of women and people with children*. October 14, 2020.

¹⁹ Statistics Canada. (2020). *Impacts on Indigenous Peoples*. Government of Canada.

²⁰ See note 19.

Immigrant women were also disproportionately impacted in the labour force and they continue to lag in the economic recovery. In August 2021, the unemployment rate for immigrant women over 55 years of age was 10.2 per cent and notably higher for younger immigrant women (15 to 24 years old), at 16.0 per cent.²¹ Women who were more recent immigrants to Canada (i.e., arrived with the past five years) had higher unemployment rates than those who arrived in Canada more than 10 years ago, reflecting their more limited access to social capital and professional networks.²²

“Lack of diversity and inclusion considerations are another barrier to accessing services and supports that may be needed. We have heard about the importance of more culturally safe and relevant services being required in communities.” (United Way of the Alberta Capital Region)

In addition, employment impacts were more pronounced for women who are sexual minorities. One study found that 52 per cent of LGBTQ2S+ households were impacted by layoffs and reduced work hours, compared with 43 per cent of overall households in Canada.²³

Disproportionate impacts were compounded for LGBTQ2S+ women who are also women of colour. Among these women, 42 per cent reported that the pandemic had a negative impact on their quality of life. This was five percentage points higher than white LGBTQ2S+ women and 13 percentage points above the national average.²⁴ This serves to illustrate how the challenges experienced by women intersected with each other, and served to amplify pre-existing vulnerabilities and disadvantages.

Racialized, vulnerable, and disadvantaged women were also particularly impacted due to pre-existing systemic barriers in services and supports. Without access to culturally appropriate supports, for example, women in these groups were not always able to access assistance. The days and times that services were available would have also presented logistical challenges. A single mother, for instance, would have found it very challenging in the midst of public health restrictions to serve as breadwinner and caregiver while also finding the personal time and space to access services or supports. Indeed, single women experienced a larger drop in employment (12 per cent) compared to non-single women.²⁵

Women with disabilities, meanwhile, were among those least likely to have financial means to withstand the pandemic and its pressures, yet were challenged to access supports due to systemic barriers such as stigma. Similarly, pre-existing concerns around discrimination and a lack of appropriate supports made it more challenging for LGBTQ2S+ women to access assistance.

Women in rural and remote communities also particularly impacted

Living outside of an urban centre also served to amplify the impacts that women experienced. Many women who reside in rural and remote communities may not have extensive natural supports due to the size of their communities and their geographic separation from extended family.

²¹ Statistics Canada. (2021). *Table 14-10-0084-01, Labour force characteristics of immigrants by sex and age group, three-month moving average, unadjusted for seasonality*. Government of Canada.

²² Ferrer, A. et. al. (2020). “The Startling Impact of COVID-19 on Immigrant Women in the Workforce”. *Policy Options*. Institute for Research on Public Policy.

²³ Egale. (2020). *Impact of COVID-19 on Canada’s LGBTQI2S Community – Second National Report*.

²⁴ See note 23.

²⁵ Howard, J. (2020). “The Difficult Economic Side-Effects of COVID-19 for Women.” Canadian Women’s Foundation. March 24, 2020.

**“Rural women experienced [violence] more during the pandemic and...had fewer places to resort to.”
(Canada West Foundation)**

Moreover, the availability of services and supports in rural and remote communities may be limited. Consequently, women in these areas did not have much choice in terms of providers, making it far more difficult for women of racial or sexual minority communities to access culturally appropriate services or supports. While more diversity of service provision might have been available in the nearest urban area, COVID-related travel restrictions acted as an impediment. Women in rural and remote areas also can be reticent to access local services and supports because the size of their community makes it more difficult for them to have privacy or anonymity.

These challenges were pre-existing, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic

It is important to note that women have been experiencing many of the identified challenges for quite some time. The gender gap in pay, overrepresentation in lower-paying sectors, poor recognition for domestic labour, gender-based violence, and caregiving burdens are all longstanding issues. The COVID-19 pandemic had the effect of amplifying these pre-existing challenges and, in many ways, shining a spotlight on them.

“The pandemic...brought into the public eye issues that have been facing women for a long time... These aren't ‘pandemic-related issues’ that sprang out of nowhere.” (Canada West Foundation)

The challenges experience by women are interconnected

“[T]hese issues are all interrelated, and while we come from the perspective of gender-based violence, the other factors listed are part of the systemic barriers women face due to power imbalances that exist in society.” (Alberta Council of Women’s Shelters)

To complicate the situation, each of the challenges experienced by women do not occur in isolation. Many of them are inter-related and feed into one another. For instance, the underemployment or dis-employment of women contributed to more difficult financial circumstances for their families. This added further stress in the family home during a time when children were home from school and the risks of COVID were omnipresent. For a woman living in a situation with a potential or known abuser, this placed them at higher risk of domestic or sexual violence.

Opportunities for Civil Society

The findings of our process were also remarkably consistent with our 2020 Moving Forward report in relation to the opportunities and challenges faced by civil society organizations as they seek to assist women impacted by COVID-19.

Civil society’s adaptability and responsiveness are strengths.

The adaptability of civil society organizations has been a strength in Alberta. Early in the pandemic, many organizations demonstrated an ability to shift their methods of service delivery from in-person to virtual mechanisms. Organizations maintained their commitments to helping members of their communities, including women.

“Civil society was able to pivot and respond quickly to immediate needs in the community.” (Women in Need Society (WINS))

The responsiveness of civil society is also a hallmark. Civil society organizations are often good at identifying needs and developing responses to meet those needs. Non-profit organizations in civil society are seen by stakeholders as often being more creative, innovative, and cost-effective than governments.

Collaboration could be enhanced

Increasingly, civil society organizations have been forming collaborations amongst themselves to prevent and address challenges to women. Collaborations have also extended to private sector organizations and with governments. The ability to pursue more collaborative work, however, is constrained by capacity limitations. In many cases, the spadework done to form these collaborations is undertaken 'off the side of someone's desk', in an ad hoc fashion. The existing funding mechanisms used by government can also serve as barriers to collaborations taking root, as they are typically structured such that organizations are in competition with each other for funding.

There are gaps in capacity and service access.

“The most significant gap is the overall coordination of government, charitable sector, grassroots entities, and private sector to come together with sustainable, accessible and inclusive recovery solutions that are led by women and girls in their communities.” (The Canadian Red Cross)

Civil society is constrained in its ability to assist women who have experienced challenges, due to various capacity limitations and gaps in services. These include issues such as: a lack of sustainable and predictable funding, a lack of resources for investment in human resources and administration, and the need for technology support. Compounding this challenge is a lack of shared knowledge about what services and supports are available within government and across civil society. People can experience difficulty in navigating this complex web. It can be particularly challenging for women from racialized, vulnerable, and disadvantaged communities.

While the expansion of virtual services by civil society arguably helped to make services more widely accessible, this is not always the case. Women in many rural and remote communities are unable to access services by virtual means because of a lack of sufficient broadband

connectivity in their community. The disparity in internet speed between urban and rural areas has in fact expanded. The Canadian Internet Registration Authority indicates that at the start of the pandemic (March 2020), median download speed in rural areas was about 5.42 Mbps compared with 26.16 Mbps in cities. In March 2021, median speed in cities grew to 51.09 Mbps but only grew to 9.74 Mbps in rural areas.²⁶ Moreover, many women remain unable to access virtual services because of an inability to afford digital devices or connectivity support. Populations that tend to have lower incomes (e.g., immigrant women, Indigenous women, women with disabilities) are among those most likely to experience digital inequity.

“I know a family that had to take out a loan to buy a laptop for their children’s home schooling.” (Participant, Focus group for women with lived experience)

²⁶ Canadian Internet Research Authority. (2021). *Canada's Internet Equity Gap: Rural residents suffer with inferior service during pandemic*. April 13, 2021.

Advice to the Minister

In our report from 2020, *Moving Forward*, the Council examined how the Government of Alberta can support civil society to recover from COVID-19 and build future capacity. Much of the advice we provided in *Moving Forward* remains pertinent in the context of addressing the challenges faced by women.

Simply put, there is an urgent and continuing need for the Government of Alberta and civil society to work in lockstep together.

Neither Government of Alberta ministries nor civil society organizations can do this work all on their own. As in many other areas of public policy, they need to play complementary roles in order to effect positive and lasting change.

One of the major takeaways from the Council's engagement process was that civil society organizations see a crucial need for greater coordination, collaboration, and sustainability – amongst each other, between themselves and governments, and amongst Alberta government ministries. The Government of Alberta has a powerful role to play in this regard, since it can use policy and financial levers at a province-wide level to encourage particular work approaches and outcomes.

Below we identify the major areas in which the Government of Alberta can collaborate with civil society organizations to better address the challenges women have experienced as a result of COVID-19.

Putting the Right Enablers in Place

For any collaborative efforts to succeed, the overall operating environment needs to improve. Because of its authority and 'power of the purse', the Government of Alberta has substantial importance on this front. Through the right combination of choices, the government can enable and encourage many positive outcomes. By contrast, choices that are less than optimal can create barriers and inefficiencies that make it much more difficult for civil society organizations to assist women in Alberta.

Recognizing this, there are a number of important enablers that the Government of Alberta should put in place. These relate to: the prevailing policy environment; the funding approaches and mechanisms; and the enhancement of data and systemic planning.

Policy Environment

While civil society organizations each have their own leadership and can each chart their own paths, they take their cues from overall policy environment. The policy direction set by the Government of Alberta therefore has tremendous influence on the success of overall efforts to support women. Policies are also influential because they often set context for government decisions around programs and funding.

The Council sees opportunities for the Government of Alberta to provide policy leadership in a number of areas, which are identified at various points in this chapter.

Funding and Capacity Building

The mechanisms by which government funds civil society organizations also impact the prospects of success in assisting women.

At present, government funding supports are largely through competitive mechanisms. (The granting process is one such example.) This runs counter to the philosophy that civil society organizations and government ministries need to work more collaboratively to be effective in the face of complex and inter-related challenges.

“Studies have consistently shown that when the economy slows, corporate donations to charities are the first to drop off and are the last to return.” (Muttart Foundation)

Current funding arrangements also tend to be program- or project-based. A typical arrangement involves the government providing funding support to a civil society organization in return for the organization delivering a specific service to a specific clientele. This approach creates silos across civil society. It also introduces rigidity, making it difficult for organizations to adapt to changing needs and conditions in the community and amongst client groups.

In addition, with some exceptions, funding arrangements tend to be only one year in duration. This results in a lack of predictability for organizations, making it difficult for them to plan ahead. Many of the challenges experienced by women are longstanding and systemic. Effectively assisting women therefore requires durable work over years. Without the ability to plan for the longer term, civil society's impact and effectiveness is undermined.

A final concern with existing funding arrangements is that they fail to recognize or reflect that service delivery comes with administrative, operational realities. In the same way that government ministries must manage issues such as human resources and information technology, so too must civil society organizations. To be effective and to innovate, organizations need the capacity to adequately invest in their talent and technology – especially in an era where virtual service delivery has become more common place, and its availability is increasingly a default expectation.

The Council sees opportunities for the Government of Alberta to shift how it provides funding support to civil society organizations. Doing so would strengthen the ability of organizations to address the challenges women experienced in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, and bring about greater coordination by civil society and government towards the achievement of shared objectives.

- **Shift to outcomes-based funding.** Moving away from program- or project-based funding to outcomes-based funding would have the effect changing the focus of civil society. Rather than working to achieve particular input or output expectations, civil society organizations would work to achieve specified outcomes that they are capable of achieving. (For instance, rather than being given money to deliver career counselling to 50 women, the organization would be given funding to improve women's employability.) This would give civil society organizations the flexibility they need to maneuver and adapt their services, while also helping ensure that dollars being invested have a meaningful impact. While this approach may not be feasible or appropriate for all services, there is value in generally moving towards outcomes-based funding wherever possible and practical. There have been some efforts in this area but more can be done.
- **Provide longer-term funding.** Continuing or expanding the shift from one-year funding to longer-term funding arrangements would give civil society the time and predictability needed to plan and execute services so that they make a positive, lasting difference. This approach to funding could also better position organizations for sustainability, enabling them to continue assisting women even in the face of an unexpected externality (such as a pandemic).
- **Move towards collaboration.** Funding arrangements should be reworked to incentivize collaboration amongst civil society organizations. This is a sensible thing to do, particularly with a shift to outcomes-based funding, since it often takes multiple organizations working collaboratively on multiple fronts to achieve an outcome.
- **Assistance in human resource capacity.** Many civil society organizations do not have much ability to invest in basic but necessary functions such as human resources. Over the longer term this can hamper their sustainability and effectiveness. The government could explore ways of enhancing civil society's human resource capacity, including direct support or encouraging creative partnerships between civil society organizations and larger private sector corporations.
- **Investments in technology.** Being able to leverage the internet and deliver more virtual services depends on an organization's ability to invest in technology. Not all civil society organizations have the capacity to do this, even though extending the reach of their services could be very helpful for women in rural and remote communities. By pursuing ways to enhance civil society's technological capacity, the Government of Alberta can bring about a new era of service delivery that is more affordable, modern and effective.

Data and Planning

To effectively assist women, both government and civil society organizations must have a clearer picture of the landscape in which they seek to make change. This includes:

- Understanding the nature and extent of challenges facing women in a community, recognizing that each community is unique;
- Ascertaining the current availability of services and supports available to women in each community, and the gaps in services and supports that exist;
- Determining whether and how services and supports are improving the outcomes of women being assisted.

“There is no standardized data collection to help us understand what is happening on a large scale. We could leverage the data to inform decisions (for service providers and for policymakers).” (Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence, University of Calgary)

This kind of intelligence and planning requires considerable data gathering and data analysis, which is particularly challenging in the social services context. As a sector dealing with people, the data involved is often qualitative and complex in nature. It requires sophisticated skill sets. The Council sees opportunities for the Government of Alberta to collaborate with civil society to address data needs.

- **Develop a pan-Alberta framework for data gathering, sharing and analysis.** Civil society organizations usually do not have the extra time or funding to each undertake data gathering and analysis on their own. Moreover, it would sub-optimal for them to do so without coordination, as it would exacerbate concerns around differing collection methodologies, terminology, and analysis approaches. Developing coordinated data gathering and analysis capability would better position civil society and the government to understand community conditions, determine what services are needed where, and be most effective in delivering services to women and families.

Moving Forward Together to Assist Women

With the right enablers in place, many efforts to assist women can be more effective and even happen organically. However, there are particular policy areas where government and civil society can have meaningful and lasting impacts for women. These areas are directly related to the major challenges that women have historically experienced and which were exacerbated the COVID-19 pandemic.

Caregiving

During the period when the strictest public health restrictions were in place, many women were put in the position of fulfilling both their pre-pandemic roles in their families, while also stepping into the shoes of a schoolteacher or early learning educator. This contributed to other challenges, including underemployment and dis-employment, mental and emotional health impacts, and isolation.

For some, the return of in-person school classes and the gradual re-opening of early learning and childcare centres will have helped alleviate the increased domestic and caregiving burdens that came with the public health restrictions. For others, however, the disproportionate burden of informal caregiving continues – not only in respect of children but also of elderly relatives and other adults. Women have long been disproportionately responsible for caregiving roles, and this has long been related to the gender-related gaps and differences they experience in relation to issues such as wages, employment outcomes, financial independence, and health and safety.

“Investing in...affordable childcare will transform the lives of women in Alberta, making our families, communities and province stronger and healthier.” (Inn from the Cold)

The need for affordable, quality caregiving support is critical for making many other positive outcomes possible for women and for our province.

A major benefit is that caregiving support enables women to more fully participate in the economy, through both employment and entrepreneurship. As noted above, women left the workforce more often than men as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic due to caregiving responsibilities.²⁷

As a result of enabling economic participation, caregiving support serves to strengthen the financial independence of women. This is inherently beneficial for women's equality, equity, and dignity. It also supports their safety and wellness. For instance, having the ability to earn an income can be a key consideration in a woman's ability to leave situations of family, domestic, or sexual violence. The ability to earn an income also contributes to the alleviation of poverty.

Caregiving support also enables women to access other assistance and services. From a logistics standpoint, for instance, women have more flexibility to pursue education, training, or skills upgrading. Mental and emotional wellness services, such as counselling, also become more feasible when women have the time and space available for self-care.

Civil society and government already play roles in the delivery of caregiving supports. For instance, non-profit, and for-profit organizations serve as operators of early learning and childcare centres. There are also organizations that deliver supports such as respite care, to assist informal caregivers of elderly and other adults. Government, meanwhile, provides a number of funding supports for caregiving, both directly to organizations that deliver caregiving services and to families that require financial assistance to access suitable caregiving. The Council sees opportunities to build on this.

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Collaborating to provide more affordable, quality caregiving support for women would see civil society and government moving forward together in the following ways.

Civil Society	Government of Alberta
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expanding the range of settings and options for childcare. Most early learning and childcare options revolve around the standard business day. There is a need to expand the range of options available, recognizing that women need caregiving support at other times as well. An expanded range would include more availability of:<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Childcare on a 'drop-in' basis;– Part-time options;– Services that accommodate women during evenings or weekends;– Childcare that is co-located in settings where women are working, receiving education, or accessing services.• Enhancing adult caregiving options. Similarly, adult caregiving supports can be expanded for a range of needs and timeframes. The expansion of options in rural communities is important, recognizing that caregiving services cannot realistically be delivered or utilized virtually and that many rural communities have higher representations of elderly residents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Policy direction on caregiving. Provincial policies concerning early learning and childcare, and informal caregiving of adults, can help clarify desired outcomes and reduce barriers that civil society faces in providing services in these areas.• Enabling the creation of more support options. The Council is aware that the Minister of Children's Services is examining the provision of more affordable, quality early learning and childcare in Alberta. Placing focus on those and other efforts related to formal and informal caregiving makes a great deal of sense.• Assisting women from disadvantaged and vulnerable communities to access support. Childcare subsidies and other financial assistance mechanisms can be instrumental in enabling women of modest financial means to access caregiving support. Being able to access caregiving support can, in turn, better position women to build skills, seek employment, earn income, and enhance their independence.

²⁷ See note 3.

- **Delivering caregiving supports that meet the needs of particular populations.** Women would benefit from having access to a greater range of caregiving supports that are delivered for their unique circumstances or backgrounds. This includes the availability of culturally appropriate caregiving, caregiving designed for special needs such as memory care or limited mobility, and more settings delivered with high-quality inclusion.

Safety, Health and Wellness

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, women have experienced challenges in relation to their safety, health and wellness. A key concern is their risk of exposure to family, gender-based, and sexual violence. Women have statistically experienced higher rates of this violence than men. The physical, mental, and emotional harm and trauma that result from this violence have far-reaching impacts, including intergenerational trauma.

The mental and emotional health of women also requires attention. Rates of common mental health challenges, such as depression and anxiety, are higher among women. Women are also more likely to experience the risk factors for these challenges, including lower status in society, income inequality, socioeconomic disadvantage, and gender-based violence.²⁸

Civil society organizations and the Government of Alberta both play roles in relation to the safety, health and wellness of women in Alberta. Organizations are quite involved in the direct delivery of services and supports such as women’s emergency shelters, victim services, addictions recovery groups, and counselling and treatment. In addition to providing funding support to these organizations, the government is responsible for the administration of justice services in the province.

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Collaborating to better support the safety, health and wellness of women would see civil society and government moving forward together in the following ways.

Civil Society	Government of Alberta
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinated services to address family, gender-based and sexual violence. Ideally, existing services could be complemented by others so that violence against women is addressed in a more coordinated and comprehensive way. This would see services available across the entire the spectrum – from prevention to intervention and follow-up. • Social marketing in respect of family, gender-based and sexual violence. Increasing public awareness about issues around violence against women be beneficial. With more knowledge about risk factors for various forms of violence against women, how to identify them, and how to seek assistance, Albertans can partake in a coordinated effort. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy direction on violence against women. The creation and implementation of a coordinated government approach to family violence, gender-based violence, and sexual violence would provide valuable guidance. Civil society organizations could ideally take note of this approach and align with it, as they work collaboratively to deliver services to prevent, intervene in, and reduce violence against women. • Enabling the creation of coordinated services across the spectrum. Government funding arrangements could be shifted to encourage the development of coordinated services, from prevention to intervention to follow-up, aligned around shared outcomes. The deployment of funding could also encourage more collaboration amongst civil society organizations while enhancing their capacity and providing multi-year certainty.

²⁸ World Health Organization. Gender and women’s mental health.

- **Provision of culturally appropriate and trauma-informed services.** Services that support the safety, health, and wellness of women should be delivered in ways that recognize and reflect the circumstances of the individuals being assisted. Greater availability and delivery of culturally appropriate services would better reflect the increasing diversity of women in the province. Services that incorporate trauma-informed practice are also needed, recognizing that trauma is often a root issue in relation to mental health and addictions challenges.
- **Data support.** Working with civil society organizations to enhance coordinated data gathering and analysis will better position civil society and government to effectively prevent and address violence against women.

Employment and Entrepreneurship

The underemployment and dis-employment of women during the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates how women's position in the economy are more precarious than those of men. Women tend to be disproportionately impacted during times of economic downturn, which periodically occur even without a global pandemic. Even during periods of economic growth, there are disparities between women and men when it comes to income earning, career development, and representation in higher-earning sectors.

As our province moves past the COVID-19 pandemic, it is an ideal time to take actions that will meaningfully address these longstanding challenges. This will not only strengthen outcomes for women, but also strengthen Alberta's society and economy overall.

Today Alberta has more women entrepreneurs than in the past, but there is still considerable opportunity to enhance their representation. Over two-thirds of women entrepreneurs in Alberta are involved in service-based businesses.²⁹ Moreover, their businesses tend to be represented in sectors that are different than those of men.³⁰ The development of more women-owned and women-led business can thus not only create new jobs, but also serve to diversify the economy.

Similarly, the proportion of women in employment has a lot of room to grow. As of January 2021, employment among women across Canada remained 485,000 (-5.3%) below pre-pandemic levels and women currently account for 56% of the employment deficit.³¹

Improving women's representation in more economic sectors is also important. Traditionally, women are over-represented in sectors that tend to be less stable and tend to offer lower pay, part-time hours, and fewer benefits. By contrast, women's involvement in the goods-producing sector and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) occupations continues to drastically lag that of men. Addressing this disparity will better position women to enjoy more stable employment, earn more income, and enhance their financial and overall independence.

“Government engagement of a diversity of women with lived experience of poverty as leaders in recovery planning will help address and prevent challenges affecting women’s participation in the economy...” (Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families)

²⁹ Hughes, Karen D. (2018). *GEM Canada Report on Women's Entrepreneurship in Alberta*. Prepared for Ministry of Status of Women, Government of Alberta.

³⁰ See note 29.

³¹ Rosenbaum, Z. et al. Labour Market Information Council. (2021). *LMI Insight Report no. 39, Women in Recessions: What Makes COVID-19 Different?* March 2021.

A range of civil society organizations have roles in education, training, and economic development. These include chambers of commerce and non-profit organizations involved in skills laddering, career counselling, and small business capacity-building. Private sector organizations, as members of communities and employers, are positioned to make a difference for women’s participation in the economy. Meanwhile, the Government of Alberta plays a very prominent role in respect of post-secondary education, training and upskilling, and employment assistance through programs such as Alberta Supports. The Council sees opportunities to build on these dynamics.

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Collaborating to better support employment and entrepreneurship for women would see civil society and government moving forward together in the following ways.

Civil Society	Government of Alberta
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancements to worker flexibility. As noted earlier in this report, women play disproportionate, outsized roles when it comes to caregiving in their families. This can create logistical barriers to their participation in the economy. One of the ways these barriers can be reduced or navigated is through employers providing greater flexibility for workers. This can take the form of more family-friendly policies, and expanding the ability of employees to work remotely or work non-standard hours. Having greater flexibility in these ways can enable women to participate in the labour force while also meeting other demands, such as caregiving. • Employment training and skills upgrading. Expanded availability of training and skills upgrading supports would better enable women to enter the workforce or ladder into better paying or more stable positions or careers. This is particularly important for women from racialized and disadvantaged communities, including Indigenous women and immigrant women, who tend to experience higher rates of unemployment and underemployment compared to others. • Partnerships to support increased participation of women in STEM fields. Efforts to enhance the representation of women in STEM fields would strengthen their earning power, employment stability, and financial independence. It would also strengthen Alberta’s level of innovation and competitiveness in scientific and technical fields, as women bring unique insights when it comes to inquiry and problem solving. • Support for women’s entrepreneurship. Services that build and enhance entrepreneurial capacity among racialized and minority women would be especially valuable. This could take the form of startup programs, mentoring, and other supports that enable women to develop businesses, attract capital, build networks, and market products. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foreign credential recognition. This is a longstanding policy issue that demands a more muscular posture by government. Newcomers who received credentials outside of Canada continue to face barriers in leveraging their training. This represents a loss to Alberta and is a contributing factor as to why immigrant women are more likely to earn lower incomes or live in poverty. • Workplace flexibility. A range of policy tools, such as incentives, regulations, or tax policy, can encourage employers across civil society to create conditions that can reduce gender disparities and increase women’s participation in the economy. For example, policies could aim to promote more flexible work arrangements or diversity and inclusion initiatives. • Support for the creation and coordinated delivery of employment, training and entrepreneurship program and services. Government funding arrangements could be shifted to encourage the development of coordinated programs and services that support women’s enhanced participation in employment and entrepreneurship. The deployment of funding could also encourage more collaboration amongst civil society organizations while enhancing their capacity and providing multi-year certainty. • Data support. Working with civil society organizations to enhance coordinated data gathering and analysis will better position civil society and government to effectively enhance women’s participation in the labour force and overall economy.

Diversity and Inclusion

Alberta is an increasingly diverse province, with women of many different backgrounds, cultures, and circumstances. As a consequence, a “one size fits all” approach to service delivery has limited effectiveness. To have impact in this day and age, governments, ministries and organizations need to factor diversity and inclusion considerations into their decisions and work.

They must ask themselves, for instance:

- How can services and supports be provided effectively to a person whose first language is not English?
- Will services and supports be provided in ways that are sensitive to clients who have cultural differences?
- Which population groups stand to benefit most from a service or support, and where will this leave others?

Given the longstanding gender disparities that were highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the incorporation of diversity and inclusion considerations is important for advancing outcomes for all women. But it has even greater significance for addressing challenges experienced by women from racialized, disadvantaged, and vulnerable communities. When government ministries and civil society organizations think, plan, and act with diversity and inclusion in mind, the choices made and the services delivered stand to be much more effective in reaching and lifting women.

“Provide supports that are unique to ethno-cultural communities that support them within a cultural framework that is specific to them.” (Punjabi Community Health Services, Calgary)

Recognizing this, the Council sees opportunities for enhancements.

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Collaborating to better support women from racialized, marginalized, vulnerable, and disadvantaged communities would see civil society and government moving forward together in the following ways.

Civil Society	Government of Alberta
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring inclusive board representation. Organizations should endeavour to have boards that are reflective of the communities and clients they serve. This brings a wide variety of insights, experiences, and perspectives to the board, enabling decision-making that is more comprehensively informed. Decisions that are made by inclusive boards are more likely to result in organizations that are effective in making positive impacts for women, including women from racialized, disadvantaged, and vulnerable communities. • Incorporate diversity and inclusion considerations in organizational policies. Aside from its board, an organization should apply a diversity and inclusion lens to its policies and day-to-day management. This includes areas such as recruitment and retention, other human resource policies, finance and budgeting, and service delivery. Having diversity and inclusion in mind when developing products, programs, and services is also important, as this better positions an organization work in ways that engage and support women. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-racism strategy. The successful development and implementation of a provincial anti-racism strategy would provide the guidance and architecture for collective efforts across society to reduce bias, systemic discrimination, and racism. This would support efforts by civil society to improve outcomes for women from racialized communities. • Support for board development in relation to diversity and inclusion. Some organizations may need assistance in learning how to incorporate diversity and inclusion considerations in their operations and services. Providing appropriate training to these organizations' boards would better position them to work with diversity and inclusion in mind, which in turn would enable them to be more effective in assisting women from racialized and vulnerable communities. • Use of a diversity and inclusion lens in policy and funding decisions. Government decisions on policies, programs, and services should be developed with thought as to how those decisions impact women, including those from racialized and disadvantaged communities. Systematic adoption and use of a diversity and inclusion lens in government decision-making will help ensure policy and funding decisions are actively considering the implications for women of colour, and women from other minority communities.

Digital Equity

If there is any silver lining to the ravages of COVID-19, it is that people and organizations have become extremely familiar with the use of virtual services. When public health orders curtailed the ability of Albertans to connect in person, civil society organizations were among the first to adapt and pivot to virtual service delivery. In doing so, they learned about what can be done by leveraging digital technologies. So too did Albertans at large, such that accessing services over the internet is increasingly mainstream.

This creates opportunities to improve outcomes for women, but only if they have sufficient digital access. Right now there is a huge digital divide between rural and urban communities. Access to adequate broadband speeds is one dimension of this divide. Another dimension is disparities in access to digital devices and technical support. Broadband internet is useless to women who cannot afford the necessary technology for internet connectivity.

There is a need to achieve greater digital equity in our province. Doing so would support women on many fronts. One is economic participation. Remote work has become more commonplace, opening up opportunities for women to join the labour force without as many geographic or logistical barriers. Digital commerce is now very commonplace as well, which opens up opportunities for women to pursue entrepreneurship with greater flexibility.

“As reliance on digital forms of connectivity has increased during the pandemic, the digital divide due to lack of broadband access (cost, digital literacy, or infrastructure) between urban/suburban and rural/remote communities has increased.” (Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families)

Women would also benefit because they would have better access to services and supports. Though it cannot perfectly replace in-person delivery, virtual service delivery can be used for many services and supports. This would be particularly beneficial for women in rural and remote communities. Rather than being limited to local options, they could access a more diverse range of services from a more diverse range of providers while enjoying more privacy and anonymity. There would also be benefits for women from racialized, vulnerable, and disadvantaged communities, who tend to have lower incomes or live in poverty. Accessing services over the internet would enable them to overcome logistic hurdles and transportation costs, and access more specialized or culturally appropriate services.

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Collaborating to enhance digital equity for the benefit of women would see civil society and government moving forward together in the following ways.

Civil Society	Government of Alberta
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collaborating with SuperNet sites to expand delivery of virtual services. While broadband is not widely available in many rural and remote communities, the Alberta SuperNet delivers broadband capability to certain public institutions. Today it connects over 4,200 schools, hospitals, libraries, government and municipal offices in 429 communities.³² Civil society organizations could explore partnerships with SuperNet sites to expand delivery of virtual services in communities that lack widespread broadband capability. This would enable women in these communities to access a wider range of services and supports without having to travel long distances to urban centres.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expanding broadband access across Alberta. Narrowing the digital divide between rural and urban Alberta is crucial. Bringing adequate broadband speeds to rural and remote communities can make a powerful difference for women on several fronts – including service access, employment, and entrepreneurship. Broadband internet is now as essential a service as telephone, water, and electrical utilities. A push is needed to ensure all of Alberta is connected in the digital age.

³² <https://www.alberta.ca/supernet.aspx>

- **Work with the private sector to increase access to digital hardware and support.** Civil society organizations could pursue creative collaborations with corporate social responsibility initiatives to help disadvantaged women access the hardware and support they need to connect leverage the internet. In communities that already have adequate broadband internet, this would serve as a 'quick win' in terms of supporting women.
- **Expand virtual service delivery generally.** The COVID-19 pandemic already had the effect of pushing organizations into the virtual realm. Continuing efforts along this trajectory will yield further dividends for women.
- **Share knowledge about virtual service delivery.** Civil society's experiences with virtual service delivery to date have enabled organizations to learn about what works well, what does not work well, and what other possibilities for virtual delivery exist. There is value in organizations sharing these lessons with each other, and with those who have yet to step into the digital realm more fully. This knowledge transfer would help more organizations expand their virtual service offerings and, in turn, enable civil society to collectively reach, and support more women.
- **Support for services that promote digital equity.** Government funding arrangements could be shifted to encourage the creation of coordinated programs and services that enhance women's access to digital hardware and support. The deployment of funding could encourage more collaboration amongst civil society organizations while enhancing their capacity and providing multi-year certainty.
- **Enabling the provision of more virtual service delivery.** Greater use of virtual service delivery options can enable more civil society organizations to assist more women in more parts of the province. This requires technological capability and know-how. Enhancing the capacity of organizations to invest in digital infrastructure and training will enable them to pursue work in the digital realm effectively.

Planning and Alignment

In too many cases, civil society organizations feel they are working in silos. They are each doing their best to assist Albertans (including women) in their own lanes, based on their individual mandates. Yet they struggle to understand whether their work, and the work of other organizations, is making a meaningful and lasting difference for individuals and families.

“There is a lot of opportunity to share data and be more effective in our approach.” (United Way of Lethbridge & South Western Alberta)

Some of this is rooted in the way that civil society organizations are funded, which (as we have already noted) can drive behaviours of competitiveness, rather than collaboration and collective impact. Another contributing factor, however, is a lack of system planning at the local or regional scale when it comes to social services.

There are some areas where organizations in a community are working collaboratively to research, analyze and respond to local needs to achieve shared objectives. Efforts to reduce homelessness are such an example, wherein a designated Community Based Organization in each urban centre works with local civil society organizations to undertake system planning. The services that are coordinated and funded are the services that are required to address homelessness in the community, based on evidence and desired outcomes.

A similar level of robust social planning does not exist, for the most part. While there are many instances where several organizations work together on a particular program or service, these collaborations tend to operate in isolation from other another. There are not adequate municipal- or region-wide mechanisms that determines the community's overall social needs and undertakes the system planning required to effectively address these needs.

The Council sees an opportunity for civil society organizations and government to work collaboratively within a social planning framework. This would enable everyone to:

- Better understand the experiences and needs of residents of their community, including the experiences and needs of women;
- Determine how they can best work collectively to have a positive and lasting impact;
- Identify gaps in the local system in terms of programs, services, and supports; and

- Strategically plan and align the delivery of services and supports to address the gaps and work with collective impact in mind.

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Collaborating on the planning and alignment of services and supports for women would see civil society and government moving forward together in the following ways.

Civil Society	Government of Alberta
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborating for greater and lasting impact. The creation of a social planning framework or approaches would better enable civil society organizations to understand community needs and how they can work together (and with government) to meet those needs. This would require a new level of commitment to collaboration and collective impact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing the architecture for social planning. The provincial government's approach homelessness offers one system planning model that could be adapted. Regardless of the model, the Government of Alberta would have a role to play in the establishment of architecture to enable social planning at the municipal or regional level. This should be done in consultation with key stakeholders, including civil society organizations and municipal governments. • Creating the funding conditions for success. Government funding arrangements would need to reflect that each community's needs are unique. This would require a shift to outcomes-based funding arrangements that encourage collaboration amongst many organizations towards shared outcomes. Providing multi-year certainty in funding arrangements would also be crucial, so that organizations could undertake longer term planning and service delivery could have more durable impacts for women. • Establishing or engaging with local Funders' Tables. The use of Funders' Tables in each community would be consistent with the recognition that each community's social needs and priorities are unique. Through this mechanism, along with the right funding conditions (as mentioned above), funding could be better aligned to the services and supports appropriate for each community rather than a 'one size fits all' province-wide approach. Several such Tables have emerged based on civil society's initiative and may offer important lessons going forward. • Supporting data gathering and analysis. Effective systemic social planning requires robust capabilities to gather and analyze data in a coordinated fashion. Government should work with civil society organizations to develop and implement these capabilities.

Concluding Comments

As the COVID-19 pandemic evolves, Albertans are shifting to a place of reflection. They are taking stock of how their lives and communities have been affected by COVID-19, examining what they would like to see changed, and considering how to move forward in a renewed spirit of hope.

In this respect, our Council's work has been timely. There is clearly a strong desire to learn from the COVID-19 pandemic which has shone a much needed spotlight on longstanding challenges faced by women in Alberta. Taking meaningful steps to address these challenges is a goal that is widely shared amongst civil society organizations.

Doing so effectively will require enhanced collaboration between the Government of Alberta and civil society organizations. Working together will reinforce and support active citizenship at the community level, and will better position women in Alberta for bright and prosperous futures.

Appendix A – Technical Engagement Report

Key Findings: Stakeholder Engagement

Executive Summary

Overview

- **Background:** Preliminary evidence suggests the COVID-19 pandemic has had disproportionate impacts on women, socially and economically.
- **What:** The Council conducted targeted stakeholder engagement with civil society organizations.
- **Why:** To inform advice on how civil society can be empowered to address and ultimately help prevent the challenges faced by women.
- **Who:** Sixty (60) responses to a questionnaire, 13 targeted organizational interviews, four written submissions (including published reports), three focus groups with women with lived experience, and discussions with Indigenous Elders.

Key Findings

COVID-19 and Challenges for Women in Alberta

Overall, engagement participants indicated that the pandemic increased or worsened challenges for women in Alberta. This impact may have been disproportionately experienced by some demographic groups. Ways in which participants identified the pandemic affected women included:

- Increased burden of childcare and domestic roles related to school and childcare closures, public health restrictions and isolation;
- Disproportionate impact on sectors predominately staffed by women (e.g., caregiving, direct service delivery, education, hospitality, retail) and impacts of working from home;
- Loss of employment and employment opportunities;
- Increased vulnerability to abuse and exploitation resulting from the pandemic and associated isolation measures;
- Loss of access to supports and services, increased barriers to accessing supports and services due to isolation, lack of access to online services or opportunities (digital divide) and public health measures;
- Heightened challenges related to mental health and addictions; and
- Other heightened vulnerabilities (i.e., housing instability, financial insecurity).

Civil Society is Doing Some Things Well

- Participants across multiple engagement modes identified a few things civil society is doing that could be built upon to address and/or prevent these challenges in the future. This included collaboration and communication between civil society organizations, private sector and governments, and adaptation in the face of COVID-19 (i.e., online services). In addition, focus group and interview participants identified flexibility from funders as an enabling organizations to meet local needs. Questionnaire respondents identified advocacy and social justice work, and local and subject matter expertise as something civil society is doing well.

There are Gaps to be Addressed

Participants shared feedback on the gaps in civil society's current efforts to address these challenges. The first theme related to gaps in service delivery for Albertans. This included the need for more services for Albertans, changes to how services are delivered to Albertans (i.e., culturally appropriate, inclusive, flexible, the times offered), and how Albertans can access those services (i.e., modality, navigation, overcoming systemic barriers to access).

The second theme related to gaps within the civil society sector. Stemming from the interviews and questionnaire responses, elements identified related to: the need to change funding approaches and rigidity of funding agreements; increased support and resources for civil society; the need for more collaboration within the sector, including through addressing funding competition; better collaboration related to data and information, including conversations on reporting requirements.

Role of Civil Society Looking Forward

When asked what civil society could do differently to address and/or prevent these challenges in the future, both the interviews and questionnaires identified themes related to increased collaboration and coordination; data collection and information sharing; access and seamless navigation to supports for Albertans; and inclusive, innovative service delivery approaches. Focus group participants echoed the sentiment that better access and navigation support to services is needed, as well as inclusive and appropriate service delivery.

Role of the Government of Alberta in Supporting Civil Society

Questionnaire and interview respondents provided many suggestions for how the Government of Alberta (GoA) could support civil society to prevent or address challenges and support recovery for women. Some common response themes were: funding opportunities; partnerships, networks and collaboration; data collection and information sharing; focus on diversity and intersectionality; and support for civil society organizations and staff.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

CCVO	Calgary Chamber of Voluntary Organizations
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease of 2019
CSS	Community and Social Services
CUPS	Calgary Urban Project Society
GBA+	Gender Based Analysis Plus
GoA	Government of Alberta
IT	Information and Technology
LGBTQ2S+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Two Spirit, Plus
PCCCS	Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society
PPAC	Provincial Parent Advisory Committee
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
WCB	Worker's Compensation Board
WINS	Women in Need Society
YYC	Calgary Airport Authority code

Engagement Approach

Preliminary evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has had disproportionate impacts on women's participation in the economy and in communities across Alberta. The Premier's Council on Charities and Civil Society (the Council) was asked to provide advice on key strategies for a successful and inclusive recovery. Specifically, the Council was asked to provide advice on how civil society can be empowered to address and help prevent the challenges faced by women.

To inform its advice, the Council developed a qualitative questionnaire, which formed the basis of a targeted stakeholder engagement conducted in July and August 2021. This engagement included four complementary components:

- A series of structured conversations or interviews with key civil society organizations and experts, focusing on those with province-wide mandates or broad, system-level perspectives;
- Invitations to other civil society actors to provide written input using the questionnaire;
- Focus group discussions with women with lived experience; and
- Focus group discussions with elders from Indigenous communities.

Below is a summary of key themes based on the questionnaire provided to respondents.

How to Read this Report

This report is divided into three sections to reflect the structure of the questionnaire:

- Section A: Challenges and Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women
- Section B: Challenges for Diverse Women and Communities
- Section C: Gaps and Opportunities

Each section starts with a summary of insights from all four modes of engagements. Each section focuses primarily on the questionnaire responses, with call outs related to the other data sources.

Throughout the report, responses are presented by theme, with the themes presented in the order of most prevalent (i.e., the most commonly mentioned) to least prevalent.

Section A: Challenges and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women

Section Summary

Across the four modes of engagement, there was a high level of consensus on the challenges Alberta women face to participating fully in the economy and in their communities. A clear theme that emerged was the interrelated and connected nature of the challenges. Multiple participants across the different modes of engagement identified that these challenges may be disproportionately experienced by certain demographic groups or communities. Several participants identified systemic bias and inequities as underlying these challenges.

Questionnaire respondents were asked which of six known challenges were the most important or impactful on women. Unpaid domestic labour and caregiving were most frequently identified in the top three challenges. They were also asked to list any other key challenges. Sixty per cent or more of the respondents identified family/domestic/gender-based violence; overrepresentation in low-paid work; and unemployment or underemployment in their top three challenges.

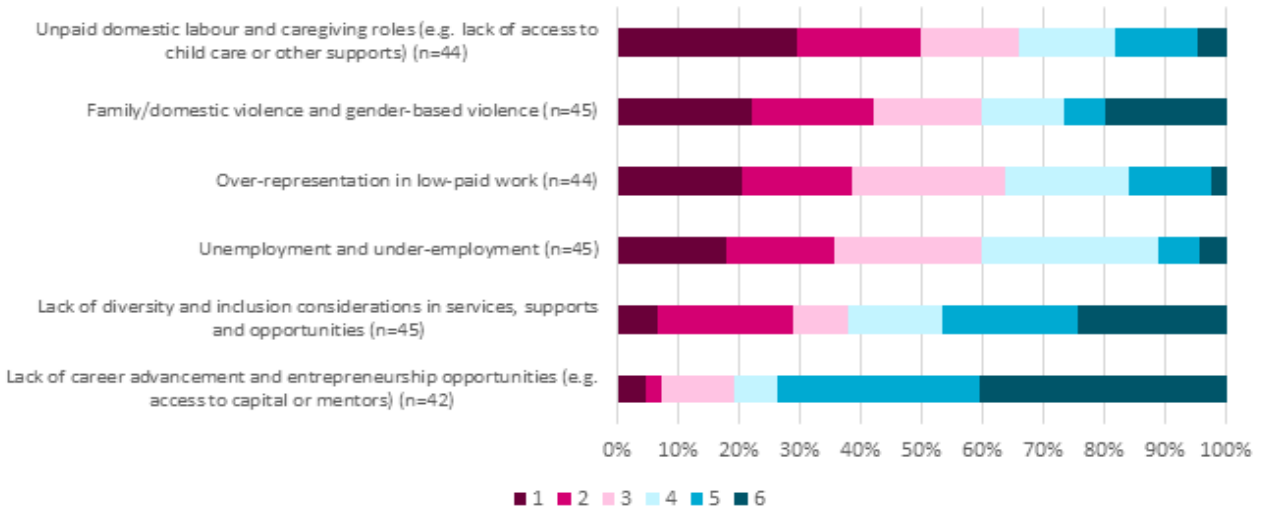
Ways in which participants identified the pandemic affected women included:

- Increased burden of childcare and domestic roles due to school and childcare closures, public health restrictions and isolation;
- Disproportionate impact on sectors predominately staffed by women (i.e., caregiving, direct service delivery, education, hospitality, retail) and impact of working from home;
- Loss of employment and employment opportunities;
- Increased vulnerability to abuse and exploitation resulting from the pandemic and associated isolation measures;
- Increased barriers to or loss of access to supports and services due to isolation, digital divide, lack of safe transportation and public health measures;
- Heightened challenges related to mental health and addictions; and
- Other heightened vulnerabilities (i.e., housing instability, financial insecurity, food security).

Question 1: Preliminary evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has had disproportionate impacts on women’s participation in our economy and communities across Alberta. Please rank the following key challenges facing women in order of their importance, with “1” being the most important or impactful.

Unpaid domestic labour and caregiving roles was most frequently identified in the top three challenges by questionnaire respondents. Sixty per cent or more of the respondents identified family/domestic or gender-based violence; overrepresentation in low-paid work; and unemployment or under-employment in their top three challenges. Lack of diversity and inclusion considerations and lack of career advancement and entrepreneurship opportunities were least frequently identified in the top three challenges.

Chart 1: Respondent Ranked Challenges Facing Women, In Order of Importance



All Challenges are Interconnected: Questionnaire respondents were invited to elaborate on their ranking. Several respondents indicated that all challenges are interconnected, and experienced differently depending on individual circumstances. Respondents shared that it is difficult to rank the challenges or to address one in isolation. A few respondents identified poverty and financial insecurity as key underlying factors which influence all of the challenges. Some respondents identified that these challenges are grounded in systemic issues of inequality which need to be addressed (oppression, discrimination and devaluation of women).

Diversity and Intersectionality: The challenges identified may impact different women in different ways. In particular, respondents noted specific or intensified challenges for women experiencing low-income, Indigenous women, mothers (particularly of young children or children with disabilities), women of particular ages (youth and middle-aged women), racialized or marginalized women, women with disabilities, and those identifying as LGBTQ2S+.

Unpaid Domestic Labour and Caregiving Roles: Many respondents identified women's unpaid domestic labour and caregiving roles as challenges to participating in employment or other opportunities. In particular, lack of access to affordable, quality childcare was mentioned as a barrier by many respondents, leading women to exit the labour market or reduce their participation. Focus group participants and survey respondents noted that the challenge could be even greater for women of children with disabilities.

Some respondents identified that women are more likely to assume the burden of caring for the household and family, which was exacerbated by the pandemic. Due to school and daycare closures, women with children were faced with the choice between work and family obligations. Initiatives to increase access to affordable, flexible and quality childcare were identified as potentially beneficial interventions by a few respondents.

Family/Domestic Violence and Gender-based Violence: Many respondents identified challenges related to women's safety through family, domestic, and gender-based violence. A few respondents noted increases in violence towards women during the pandemic. The disproportionate impact of these types of violence on women were noted, especially for some demographic groups (e.g., Indigenous women, women in northern and rural Alberta, women with disabilities and racialized or marginalized women). Lack of access to supports, changing relationship dynamics and vulnerabilities as a result of the pandemic were identified as aggravating this issue.

Some respondents identified that work from home, isolation, loss of income and public health measures increased vulnerability to abuse and limited opportunities to access supports. A few respondents noted that women's financial insecurity reduced their ability to leave situations of violence. Agencies supporting women to leave situations of violence faced funding shortfalls due to disrupted fundraising activities.

Overrepresentation in Low-paid Work: Respondents noted that women are overrepresented in sectors and industries characterized by low wages, part time work, and limited benefits and protections. Women may be underemployed or work more than one job. During COVID-19, occupational health and safety concerns increased for women in retail, service, hospitality and caregiving professions. COVID-19 disproportionately affected sectors which are female-dominated, and in which female entrepreneurs operate. Due to the pandemic, women experienced greater susceptibility to layoffs and downsizing.

One respondent noted that female entrepreneurs and women-led businesses have trouble accessing venture capital and are overrepresented in the number of businesses that fail within the first five years. The non-profit and charitable sector itself is disproportionately female, and faces challenges with providing stable, well-compensated employment opportunities. This is due in part to funding limitations on grant agreements (e.g., not permitting funds to be used for staff benefits).

Unemployment and Underemployment: Many respondents identified challenges in obtaining, maintaining or improving their employment. As described above, lack of access to affordable, quality childcare was a key barrier. Lack of workplace flexibility and supports for women with caregiving roles can disrupt already fragile connections to the workforce. Lack of relevant training and work experience is another challenge, as well as lack of transportation. The pandemic affected job opportunities and related supports available to women. These issues may be aggravated for women with disabilities, mothers of young children, young women, and racialized or marginalized women.

Financial Security: Low wages, underemployment, unemployment and precarious employment can contribute to women's financial insecurity. This can impact women's ability to access supports and services and leave situations of violence and abuse. Poverty, one respondent noted, is a factor in numerous other social issues including food insecurity, homelessness, lack of educational opportunities, mental health and addictions, and child and family services involvement.

Lack of Diversity and Inclusion in Supports, Services and Opportunities: Women's lack of access to supports and services was also identified by some respondents. Challenges to access included: how services were provided (limit to in-person services during the pandemic); lack of awareness of what is available; appropriateness of supports offered (culturally safe, diverse and inclusive); and lack of availability.

Question 2: What key challenges are missing from the list (if any)?

Respondents were invited to identify any challenges missing from the list provided in question one. New issues or challenges emerged, such as mental health and addictions, lack of resources, and systemic bias and inequity.

New	Mental Health and Addictions Mental health and addiction was a key issue in Indigenous communities was identified engagements with Elders, in focus groups and interviews. Stress, anxiety, depression, burnout, isolation, trauma and compassion fatigue related to the pandemic were noted. A lack of consistent and comprehensive mental health supports (both generally and for mothers of children with disabilities) was also identified as an issue, along with stigma which may prevent women from seeking supports. Burnout among support workers and agencies providing care and services is another problem identified.
New	Lack of Resources Some respondents identified a lack resources as a key challenge for women. In particular, lack of access to information about career path and training opportunities, technology and financial resources; food insecurity; digital literacy; and affordable housing.
New	Systemic Bias and Inequity Several respondents identified systemic bias and inequities as challenges. Examples of comments included the need to address: gender norms and roles; women's economic status and contributions (devaluation of women's work); shifting power dynamics; intersectionality; wage gaps, and bias in policy decisions (e.g., favoring recovery for male-dominated sectors for COVID-19 recovery, privatization).

Question 3: How has COVID-19 increased or worsened these challenges for women in Alberta?

Overall, respondents agreed that COVID-19 pandemic increased or worsened challenges for women in Alberta. Some respondents identified particular groups for whom the challenges were disproportionately worse (e.g., incarcerated women at the end of their sentences; racialized or marginalized women; women with disabilities; immigrants and women in rural communities). Key areas identified by respondents included: employment and businesses; caregiving roles; increased vulnerability, abuse and exploitation; isolation; mental health resiliency; and other topics (food insecurity, housing insecurity, financial insecurity, and transportation).

Overrepresentation in Low Paid Work: Respondents noted that disproportionately female industries were most impacted by COVID-19 (e.g., retail, hospitality). A few respondents identified that challenges may have been heightened for racialized, marginalized, Indigenous, and immigrant women who are overrepresented in low wage or caregiving sectors (e.g., long term care facilities, schools, healthcare, and frontline service provision). Wage freezes or cuts in these female-dominated sectors was identified by another respondent as primarily affecting female-dominated professions (e.g., education, nursing, non-profit sector). The loss of small businesses was noted by a few respondents.

Unemployment and Under-employment: Respondents noted that many women were laid off, left the workforce, or limited their hours or career advancement to provide childcare during the pandemic. A few respondents identified that mothers who were able to stay in the workforce may have needed to juggle their career and multiple family responsibilities. This challenge could be intensified for mothers of children with disabilities who may have unmet support needs during the pandemic. One respondent noted that early-childhood educators, if unable to afford childcare rates for their own children, left the workforce. One respondent identified women with disabilities as having additional challenges during the pandemic to obtain and retain employment. One respondent noted time frames on unemployment supports as a challenge.

Unpaid Domestic Labour and Caregiving Roles: Many respondents identified that challenges related to caregiving roles were heightened during the pandemic. Specifically, the effects of school and early childhood center closures on mothers were identified. A few respondents noted challenges related to public health measures disproportionately impacted children with disabilities (due to loss of routine, lack of certainty, inability to prepare for changes) with the loss of school, daycare and day program supports. Women with caregiving roles were more isolated due to public health measures, especially in rural communities. Increased household roles and burdens were noted by a few respondents.

Family/Domestic Violence and Gender-based Violence: Many respondents identified that as a result of the pandemic, women were more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Increases in violence towards women were noted by several respondents (gender-based, race-based, elder, sexual, family, and domestic). Due to fear of contracting COVID-19 and public health measures, women may have faced additional barriers to access help, including a lack of privacy to access virtual services from the home. Isolation was identified by a few respondents as increasing the risk for violence. One respondent identified that once help was received, the pandemic also affected supports available to women who had experienced violence such as delayed court dates, and a loss of natural supports.

Isolation: Several respondents identified that isolation, restrictions and limited access to supports and services as a result of the pandemic heightened challenges for women in Alberta. Isolation and quarantine measures meant the loss of natural, formal and informal supports. As noted in the preceding section, isolation was also associated by a few respondents with increased risk for violence and abuse.

Mental Health and Addictions: Focus group participants identified the adverse impact of the pandemic on mental health and wellness. Isolation, fear of contracting COVID-19 as a barrier to accessing supports, grief, loss of natural supports, and increased stress were seen as challenging mental health for women. This is congruent with the findings from the questionnaire.

Several questionnaire respondents identified that COVID-19 exacerbated women's mental health issues and substance use. Most of the respondents who discussed this theme talked about heightened stress, grief, inability to plan and focus, increased emotional burden, and feeling tired and overwhelmed. Two respondents identified changes in substance use and addictions as an issue caused by the pandemic. One respondent noted the not-for-profit workforce has been exposed to secondary trauma related to the pandemic.

Section B: Challenges for diverse women and communities

Section Summary

Challenges for Diverse Women and Communities

Across all the modes of engagement, participants indicated that women from diverse backgrounds were more negatively impacted by the challenges identified. Systemic bias and discrimination were identified as an additional challenge by participants across all modes of engagement. Elders described the challenges Indigenous women face with income and job loss resulting in an increase in mental health problems and addictions. The need for specialized, appropriate and community-based supports for these populations was identified.

Women from rural and remote communities and racialized women were identified as being disproportionately impacted by the challenges identified, as well as facing unique challenges based on their setting. Participants in focus groups shared that critical services are sometimes available at the same time most individuals who need them are at work and unable to access.

In the interviews, there was discussion on the need for increased awareness of career options, training and supports for immigrant women and the need to accelerate work on recognition of foreign credentials.

Question 4: How do these identified challenges affect women from diverse backgrounds and experiences – including youth, seniors, racialized or marginalized women, Indigenous women, single mothers, immigrant women, women with disabilities, or women experiencing low-income?

Respondents identified a number of populations that were disproportionately impacted by the challenges identified (see table below). A number of respondents identified intersectionality between demographic groups as a factor which affected women's experience. Increased economic precariousness for some demographics was identified by a few respondents. A few respondents also identified that women from diverse backgrounds may have a higher level of risk for things like poverty or violence.

Historic and systemic issues and barriers experienced by women from diverse backgrounds such as racism, ableism, ageism, historical trauma and colonization, discrimination, bias (conscious or unconscious) were noted by some respondents. This included where bias was embedded in legal, political and cultural structures. The impact of systemic inequities was identified by some respondents for several of the populations listed below (e.g., overrepresentation in poverty, low wage jobs, limited access to resources, etc.).

Specialized, equitable and inclusive supports were identified as important to meeting the diverse needs of women. Challenges with accessing online and digital services and supports was noted as a result of lack of access to technology or internet access, or challenges with digital literacy. Types of supports identified as needed by respondents included: food; mental health; housing; language; employment; addictions; childcare; domestic violence; financial; transportation; technology; and training.

Respondents indicated a need for policy change in order to best address the challenges faced by women from diverse backgrounds. These included: affordable childcare; anti-racism strategy; investing in healthcare; investing in the knowledge economy; government hiring practices; and creating awareness of systemic discrimination.

Population	Specific Notes or Challenges
Age (youth, seniors, Elders)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seniors and Elders experienced isolation, loss and economic vulnerability Heightened impact of closures and public health restrictions (youth, seniors) Impact of COVID-19 on youth will follow them throughout their lifetime Young women had slower economic recovery than other age groups
Racialized or marginalized women (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC))	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased service usage Lack of access to culturally appropriate supports Overrepresentation in low paying jobs Civil society staff who identify as a racialized or marginalized group often asked to lead response of all things race-based Least likely to have financial means to withstand the effects of the pandemic Higher levels of job loss, reduced hours and risk of exposure to COVID-19
Indigenous women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple roles of family and community leadership; pandemic increased burden and stress of these roles Increased mental health and addiction issues COVID-19 measures reduced available supports (including addiction supports) Increased risk for inadequate housing (limits ability to maintain social distance) Slower employment recovery rate from COVID-19 Overrepresentation in low paying jobs Higher levels of job loss, reduced hours and risk of exposure to COVID-19 Intergenerational trauma
Single mothers, mothers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disproportionate pandemic effect on mothers of children with disabilities Lack of access to affordable, quality childcare affects women's ability to be employed and economically secure Increase in workload resulting from COVID-19 Work schedules (e.g. shift work) may be incompatible with childcare options
Immigrant women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language barriers affect access to services for themselves and their families Challenges related to multiple roles of family and community leadership, isolation Challenges with access to online, virtual and digital programming (access to technology, digital literacy) Overrepresentation in low paying jobs Higher levels of job loss, reduced hours and risk of exposure to COVID-19
Women with disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stigma in some communities about disabilities, reluctance to access supports (including for children with disabilities)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility of resources and supports for employers of persons with disabilities through the pandemic (small businesses) • Loss of supports through the pandemic (mental health, employment supports, technology access barriers) • Least likely to have financial means to withstand the effects of the pandemic • Employment challenges, low priority for hiring/re-entry
Women experiencing low income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women in low-income employment hardest hit by business closures • Struggle to catch up and benefit from early recovery • Lack of access to stable, appropriate, affordable housing (limits ability to maintain social distancing) • Overrepresentation of other demographics in this group (immigrant, racialized, Indigenous women) • Lack of access to transportation • Lack of access to credit cards • Competition for jobs that were previously accessible • Food insecurity/reliance on foodbanks • Least likely to have financial means to withstand the effects of the pandemic
Women in rural communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher rates of suicide, motor vehicle deaths, youth/child deaths • Different challenges with service provision/access

Question 5: How do these identified challenges affect women from rural and remote communities?

Specific, unique barriers to women from rural and remote communities were identified, such as issues with access and availability of supports and services; lack of resources, especially technology and internet; different contexts from urban counterparts; isolation; and other challenges (policy barriers and types of supports offered in rural and remote contexts). Higher rates of domestic violence in rural and remote communities were noted by a few respondents.

Access and Availability of Supports and Services: A majority of respondents identified that women from rural and remote communities lack access to supports and services which may be available in urban centers. This can be due to a lack of appropriate technology and internet, distance, lack of safe and reliable transportation (e.g., to shelters, domestic violence help, disability supports, childcare, training/education, financial supports, health care services, and employment supports). Women in rural communities may have lacked access to natural supports, especially during the pandemic. Two respondents noted that access to services in rural communities may have increased for some women during the pandemic because of the shift to virtual services.

Lack of Resources: Lack of access to technology and reliable, high-speed internet were identified as limitations for women in rural and remote communities. While two organizations identified that opening up virtual service delivery increased access to services for some women, several other organizations identified that cessation of in-person services may have had adverse impacts for women who did not have the technology to access them. Virtual service delivery for violence and abuse related supports may also have raised privacy and safety concerns for women’s ability to access them.

Different Context from Urban Counterparts: Several respondents identified key differences between urban and rural settings which affect these challenges. These include lack of anonymity in small communities, stigma with accessing supports, higher food costs, male dominated industries, different types of opportunities (e.g., employment, retail), differences in educational attainment, farm and animal husbandry obligations; and slower social change.

Isolation: Several respondents identified isolation as a factor in how challenges are experienced by women in rural and remote communities. Comments included both isolation generally, and as a result of COVID-19. Isolation was linked by a few respondents to challenges like mental health and addictions, lack of natural support networks, and lack of networking affecting career opportunities and personal resilience.

Other: Other responses received indicated a need for more data collection for rural and remote communities, policy barriers (e.g., to access housing supports), how civil society organizations have adapted to provide supports in rural communities, and the need to engage communities in designing solutions.

Section C: Gaps and Opportunities

Section Summary

Civil Society is Doing Some Things Well

Participants identified a few things civil society is doing well in response to these challenges that could be built upon to address or prevent these challenges in the future. Across multiple modes of engagement, participants identified the delivery of services to Albertans; collaboration and communication between organizations, private sector and governments; and flexibility and adaptation in the face of COVID-19 (i.e., online services). In addition, focus group and interview participants identified flexibility from funders as an enabler to meet local needs. Questionnaire respondents also identified advocacy and social justice work, and local and subject matter expertise as something civil society is doing well.

There are Gaps and Challenges to be Addressed

Participants indicated two key themes or gaps. The first, was gaps in service delivery. This included the need for more services, changes to how services are delivered (i.e., culturally appropriate, inclusive, flexible), and how Albertans can access those services (i.e., modality, navigation, overcoming systemic barriers to access).

The second theme related to gaps within the civil society sector. Stemming from the interviews and questionnaire responses, elements identified related to: the need to change funding approaches and rigidity of (current) funding agreements; increased support and resources for civil society; the need for more collaboration within the sector and addressing funding competition; and better collaboration related to data and information, including conversations on reporting requirements.

Women with Lived Experience

Participants in the focus groups were asked what they need to recover and move ahead. There was agreement on a need for:

- Affordable and flexible, 24/7 childcare – parents should not have to choose between going to work and taking care of their children.
- Access to consistent, inclusive wraparound services/supports including financial assistance, wellness, mental health and addiction services.
- More inclusive social programs in neighborhoods instead of families coming to a centre.
- Public awareness of and navigation to resources and supports available in the community
- Good jobs with flexible schedules – many families used up savings and maxed out credit cards.
- Consistent leadership, communication, direction and supports around coping with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Role of Civil Society Looking Forward

When asked what civil society could do differently, both the interviews and questionnaires identified themes related to increased collaboration and coordination; data collection and information sharing; access and seamless navigation to supports and training for Albertans; and inclusive, innovative service delivery approaches. Focus group participants echoed the sentiment that better access and navigation support to services is needed, as well as inclusive and appropriate service delivery.

Role of the GoA in Supporting Civil Society

Survey and interview respondents provided many suggestions for how the GoA could support civil society to prevent or address challenges and support recovery for women. Some common response themes were: leveraging funding to drive partnerships, networks and collaboration; data collection and information sharing; providing leadership on diversity, inclusion and intersectionality; and support for civil society innovation, transformation and staff.

Summary of themes for advice to government identified through the different engagements included:

Theme	Advice
Childcare and family caregiving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in quality, flexible and affordable childcare to enable women to join the workforce and increase economic security and wellness for their family. Implement flexible work arrangements, including working from home to enable women to join the workforce and provide care to family.
Service delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand access to coordinated, comprehensive addiction and mental health services tailored to individual needs and circumstances. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is also a need for inclusive, culturally appropriate, wraparound and community-based services, especially in rural and Indigenous communities. These services may be co-designed by the communities, prioritize strengthening natural supports, and be delivered with peers. This may increase access and improve outcomes for individuals and lower costs of care. Review approach to managing addiction and mental health; the most appropriate resource may not always be medical care. This may increase access to support, lower costs of care and improve outcomes for individuals Increase awareness for and navigation to available services/supports in the community to supplement online delivery. Support public awareness and action on domestic, family and gender based violence. See also “Digital Divide” below for potential ripple effects on service delivery.
Jobs and entrepreneurship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accelerate work on recognition of foreign credentials to increase participation of immigrants in the economy and access to better paying jobs. Increase awareness of career options and supports (mentorship, access to apprentices and job readiness training to help women re-tool or ladder into their next role). Invest in entrepreneurship capacity for racialized and minority women to develop/share skills, networks, attract capital and access private sector mentors, markets for their products and create jobs. Support existing networks such as the Black Canadian Women in Action. Support increased participation in STEM for women, Indigenous youth and other racialized populations.

Diversity and intersectionality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide leadership in addressing historic and systemic discrimination by making policy, political and structural reforms. Advance policies and strategies, such as the provincial anti-racism strategy, to create awareness of systemic discrimination and ensure inclusion and full participation of racialized and minority populations. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ This might include ongoing cross-ministry coordination on GoA roles in supporting women’s economic recovery, including areas where civil society has a role. ○ Encourage employers to continue efforts to diversify their workforce, and embrace specific strategies to support the hiring, retention and advancement of women (link to jobs and entrepreneurship). • Accelerate investment in bridging the digital divide. This includes community technology access facilities, shared technology access models and rural connectivity projects in underserved, rural areas and Indigenous communities. Such initiatives may also increase digital literacy, and enable individuals to access online services and economic opportunities. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ This might also enable remote work for women or support new entrepreneurial efforts of women-led businesses. • Deliver meaningful and systematic engagement built on honest, enduring relationships with communities. Work with communities/affected individuals to create solutions to pressing social challenges (root causes of poverty, discrimination etc.) within safe, ethical and respectful spaces. Produce oral reports to acknowledge Indigenous oral traditions.
Civil society capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in quality data about and for civil society, increasing the capacity to co-design community-based research; collect, analyze and share information to communicate impact and support decision-making. Lead in defining data standards. • Increase information sharing between government departments and civil society entities. • Support financial resilience and sustainability of civil society with flexible outcome-based funding models. Allow increased spending on overheads, human resource development and technology; incentivize charitable giving (such as matching programs); and expand access to social finance and social enterprise supports leveraging the private sector. • Leverage funding to increase civil society capacity and interest to collaborate, coordinate and develop meaningful partnerships; co-deliver services, share data; share space/resources; and work together to address systemic issues.

Question 6: What is civil society doing now in response to these challenges that is working well that we could build on to address and/or prevent these challenges?

Questionnaire respondents, identified the following themes:

Service Delivery: Some respondents discussed how many organizations within civil society are effectively delivering supports to Albertans. Comments included the provision of culturally appropriate and tailored supports; supporting innovation; disability supports; networking and connections; food security; safe and supportive spaces; access to technology; employment and entrepreneurship supports; housing supports; crisis supports; financial supports; childcare; domestic violence and abuse supports; and education and training supports. A few comments discussed outcomes of specific organizations (e.g., reduction in re-offense rates, cost-savings through reduced service use).

Collaboration and Communication: Some respondents shared how civil society formed successful collaborations and inter-organization communication to address and prevent challenges for women (including with the private sector and government). The need to continue or build these efforts was also noted by a few respondents. One respondent identified that resources are needed to support collaborative efforts, rather than having them occur “off the side of the desk”.

Flexibility, Adaptation and COVID-19: Several respondents identified civil society’s ability to adapt to changing circumstances (like COVID-19) as something that worked well. This allowed organizations to continue to meet the needs of their communities. Creativity and innovation were identified by a few respondents. A few respondents also identified shifts to virtual service delivery during the pandemic as examples of adaptation to meet community needs. Greater flexibility by funders was identified by one respondent as a positive outcome of COVID-19, allowing agencies to meet areas of greatest need in their sectors.

Advocacy and Social Justice: Several respondents identified civil society’s role in advocacy and social justice as things that are being done now in response to these challenges. Respondents noted that individuals look to these organizations for advocacy and to provide a voice for them. A few respondents provided examples of how organizations are modeling the changes needed societally with diversity and inclusion, anti-racism and anti-oppression policies.

Local and Subject Matter Expertise: A few respondents identified that civil society has local and subject matter expertise which is beneficial when determining how best to meet community needs and leverage existing networks.

Question 7: What gaps exist in civil society’s current efforts to address and/or prevent those challenges?

Funding, Support, Resources and Capacity for Civil Society: Some respondents identified the need for funding, supports and capacity building for civil society. Several respondents identified the need for flexibility in funding and an increase in dollars allowed for organizational overhead in grants funding. This would help improve collaboration, employee recruitment and retention, staff training, mental health supports within the sector, administration, marketing, technology and data.

Sustainable funding was identified as a gap by a few respondents. Funding for specific work (e.g., specific ethnocultural groups, victim services, rural and remote communities, and financial supports) was also identified by a few respondents.

Support Gaps: Some respondents identified gaps in the services and supports that are available. Gaps identified by respondents were:

- **Service Delivery Gaps:** lack of human-centered service delivery for racialized, marginalized and remote populations; lack of in-person services; lack of follow-up services; inaccessibility of programs;
- **Policy and Eligibility Gaps:** family income eligibility to access supports for children with disabilities; age-based eligibility restrictions/client transitions (aging out of supports); a need to refocus disability supports on the impact of the disability, rather than diagnosis;
- **Need Gaps:** rural and remote communities; childcare; appropriate specialized care for children with disabilities and indigenous children; transportation; food security; mental health; domestic violence; suicide; addiction/overdose; women’s empowerment; income support program/finances; information about programs and services; supports for women with disabilities; shelters and housing; training; and entrepreneurial supports; and

- **Coordination Gaps:** gaps between government, civil society and private sector to address systemic needs; gaps between courts (criminal and family).

Systemic Barriers: Several respondents identified challenges with systemic barriers. These included bias, stigma of addiction and mental health, sexism, racism, colonialism, etc.

Collaboration: A few respondents identified challenges with collaboration. This included competitive funding environments which discourage collaboration and coordination between service providers.

Education: A few respondents identified education as a gap. Respondents referenced education within court systems of family and domestic violence, children on healthy relationships, financial education, and supporting education both in schools and workplaces.

Data and Information: A few respondents identified the need for data and information as a gap. This included information about clients, standardization of data collection, better data on collective impact, and issues with complex and inflexible reporting requirements by funders.

Question 8: Looking forward, what could civil society do differently to address and/or prevent these challenges?

When asked what civil society could do differently to address and/or prevent these challenges in the future, the most common themes of responses were increased collaboration, coordination and sharing, and access to supports and training:

- **Increased collaboration, coordination and sharing:** Survey respondents focused on enhancing coordination and building collaborative approaches for services, data collection and sharing and addressing larger systemic issues.
- **Access to supports and training:** Some respondents asked for increases in services, awareness of services available, and service navigation supports. This included: childcare; technology; internet connectivity; information on career options, job skills training/retraining/education; prevention-focused supports; and basic needs. Other related comments included ensuring the right people receive supports when needed, recognizing/addressing inequity of access for diverse groups, reduced red tape for access to services and building on existing successful programs.
- **Other** response themes that emerged among a few respondents included:
 - Enhancing data collection and use (e.g., data informed policy and practice), including using disaggregated data and understanding intersectionality (e.g., employing a GBA+ lens);
 - Increasing the representation of women in engagement, the recovery response, leadership positions as well as on the Council (PCCCS) itself;
 - Increasing innovation within the sector;
 - Implementing equity and diversity policies within civil society organizations;
 - Developing policy frameworks to guide the work of organizations; and
 - More clearly defining the role of the social economy (one respondent).

A few respondents identified barriers to addressing challenges in the future, including lack of resources (such as challenges related to fundraising). Some organizations try to prevent the worst consequences with inadequate resources, resulting in temporary “stop gap” or “Band-Aid” solutions, rather than truly addressing larger problems.

Question 9: How could the Government of Alberta (GoA) support civil society to address and/or prevent these challenges and ensure an effective and sustainable recovery for women in the following areas?

- a) **Build capacity and expand coordination and collaboration**
- b) **Advance research, data collection and data sharing**
- c) **Improve the sustainability and financial resilience of civil society organizations (e.g., foster charitable giving; advance social enterprises and strengthen social finance ecosystem)**
- d) **Other Government of Alberta actions or policy changes.**

Common Themes

Respondents provided many suggestions for how the GoA could support civil society to prevent or address challenges and support recovery for women through the four areas (above). While suggestions varied across the four areas, there was agreement on the following themes:

A. Funding opportunities was the most common theme of responses in each area. Comments focused on (from most common to least common):

- Providing funding specifically for this area of focus (e.g., collaboration, coordination across organizations/sectors, capacity-building, research/data collection/data sharing, staff training re: data and research, infrastructure, IT, marketing, staffing, operations/overhead), and increasing the flexibility of funding;
- Providing multi-year funding, especially to support organizational sustainability;
- Encouraging charitable giving through government matching or other incentive programs;
- Increasing funding for women-led organizations and/or organizations with a particular focus (e.g. ethno-cultural, vulnerable women, advancing gender equality);
- Funding initiatives that work on the systems level; and
- Reducing red tape for funding opportunities.

B. Supporting partnerships, networks, collaboration and sharing was another common theme of responses in each area of inquiry for how the GOA could support civil society organizations and women's recovery. Comments from respondents focused on the following:

- Leveraging funding to drive collaboration and service integration
- Supporting engagement and consultation with the public, civil society organizations, women with diverse background and experiences, universities and multiple levels of government;
- Supporting shared spaces and opportunities for collaboration and networking, such as conferences;
- Supporting collective efforts and systemic responses;
- Working with existing networks and collaborative relationships; and
- Supporting shared platforms for information sharing, data sharing, etc.

C. Some respondents commented on the importance of focusing on diversity, intersectionality and, data disaggregation as a way government could address challenges and support women's recovery. Comments from respondents focused on the following:

- Disaggregating data to understand the impact of diversity and intersectionality on women;
- Ensuring the use of gender-based and diversity data in analysis, policy development and decision-making (e.g., Gender-Based Analysis+);
- Improving data collection (better data, more metrics);

- Addressing inequities through policies/legislation; and
- Supporting education and awareness of diversity.

D. Respondents identified the need for government to better support the charitable/voluntary sector and its staff to address challenges. Comments from respondents focused on supporting the sector through opportunities such as:

- Access to a pension plan;
- Equitable wages (e.g., investing in pay equity for female-dominated fields);
- Insurance/health plan/mental health benefits;
- Tax credit(s); and
- Reducing or eliminating Workers Compensation Board (WCB) premiums for sector organizations.

Additional Themes by Area of Focus

In addition to themes common across the four areas, questionnaire respondents also identified themes related to how government could address challenges and support women’s recovery in each area.

<p>Build capacity and expand coordination and collaboration</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Access to support</u> – A few respondents identified the need for consistent, inclusive and more sustainable access to supports for women (e.g., prevention and intervention for gender-based violence, wraparound services, treatment centres, sustainable funding for families of children with disabilities). There is a need to create awareness of services available. • <u>Entrepreneurship supports</u> – A few respondents asked for improved supports for women entrepreneurs, a workforce strategy that fosters inclusion and diversity, support for skills acquisition and retraining for women, particularly for sectors with high job loss. • <u>Bridge Digital Divide</u> – Some respondents asked for improved access to technology and internet connectivity especially for rural communities, low-income individuals and small organizations.
<p>Advance research, data collection and data sharing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Data collection and sharing</u> – Some respondents asked for support for consistent data collection and sharing across civil society organizations and government departments. The GoA needs to support work on defining data standards and reporting requirements (addressing concerns for red tape). • <u>Public awareness of available data</u> – A few respondents indicated a need for better communication with organizations and Albertans about the data that the GOA has, including increasing awareness of open data and promoting its use. • <u>Data strategy and integration</u> – Several respondents noted that government should support data integration. There was a call for data strategy for the sector, a central reporting system, and better data coordination, access and data sharing mechanisms.

<p>Improve the sustainability and financial resilience of civil society organizations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social finance and social enterprise – Some respondents asked for support for social enterprise. Specific ideas included increasing financial resources to promote social innovation, providing incentives for social enterprise organizations, enhancing opportunities for social entrepreneurship, strengthening the social finance ecosystem and reducing red tape for social finance tools (e.g., Social Impact Bonds or Community Investment Bonds) and social enterprise.
<p>Other Government of Alberta actions or policy changes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable childcare – A number of respondents asked for investments in flexible, affordable childcare allowing parents to join the labour workforce and contribute to their communities. • Structural barriers – A number of respondents asked for action to address structural barriers affecting marginalized populations such as poverty, discrimination, inequity etc. • Inclusive coordinated supports – Respondents frequently asked for integrated, inclusive and coordinated services in the community that prioritize prevention and activation of natural supports.

Question 10: In closing, what is your single most important piece of advice to government to help civil society address or prevent challenges affecting women’s full participation in our economy and communities?

Survey respondents most frequently identified support for **coordination, integration and collaboration** as the most important action government can take to help civil society address. Several respondents highlighted the importance of continued engagement between civil society organizations and government, and a few indicated leveraging existing networks rather than creating new ones.

The next most commonly identified themes of advice for government from survey respondents included:

<p>Increasing access to supports</p>	<p>The most common support referenced by survey respondents was affordable/accessible childcare. Other types of supports mentioned included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting basic needs (housing, food, clothing); • Increased access to jobs (through education, employment readiness training, supporting female-dominated sectors); • Support for mothers and early childhood.
<p>Addressing larger systemic issues</p>	<p>Several respondents shared that the pandemic exacerbated existing issues and that structural disadvantages for women need to be addressed through systemic change, including addressing inequity and root causes of poverty. Such change requires collaboration, innovative approaches, government policy change that recognizes the impacts of diversity and intersectionality on women’s experiences.</p>

Survey Method

A select group of civil society organizations were invited by email to participate in an online survey as part of this engagement activity (n=120). The survey was sent to participants on July 20, 2020 and remained open for responses until August 27, 2020. During that time, two reminders were sent to participants.

The survey was clicked into a total of 100 times. 38 complete responses were submitted through the survey in addition to three written responses received through email (n=41 complete responses). An additional 19 incomplete responses were deemed to have met the minimum data required to include the survey response in the analysis (for a total of n=60 valid responses), for a total response rate of 50%.

Surveys which did not meet the minimum data required for analysis were:

- The survey had been opened, but no data had been entered; or
- The respondent indicated they were only reviewing the survey or were from within the Government of Alberta.

Duplicate survey responses (n=18) were removed. Where duplicates existed, the most recent, most complete survey response was kept. In most instances, duplicate survey responses were largely blank.

Questionnaire responses were analyzed thematically by survey question in NVivo, a qualitative analysis software. The total number of responses varied by question, as expected, as respondents were able to skip any questions they felt did not apply to them, or that they were unable to answer. The following table summarizes the response rate by question.

1. Preliminary evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has had disproportionate impacts on women's participation in our economy and communities across Alberta. Please rank the following key challenges facing women in order of their importance, with "1" being the most important or impactful.	(n=42 - 46)
2. Which key challenges are missing from the list (if any)?	(n=38)
3. How has COVID-19 increased or worsened these challenges for women in Alberta?	(n=47)
4. How do these identified challenges affect women from diverse backgrounds and experiences – including youth, seniors, racialized or marginalized women, Indigenous women, single mothers, immigrant women, women with disabilities, or women experiencing low-income?	(n=43)
5. How do these identified challenges affect women from rural and remote communities?	(n=41)
6. What is civil society doing now in response to these challenges that is working well that we could build on to address and/or prevent these challenges?	(n=39)
7. What gaps exist in civil society's current efforts to address and/or prevent those challenges?	(n=38)
8. Looking forward, what could civil society do differently to address and/or prevent these challenges?	(n=36)
9. How could the Government of Alberta support civil society to address and/or prevent these challenges and ensure an effective and sustainable recovery for women in the following areas (A – D)?	(n=30 - 37)

10. In closing, what is your single most important piece of advice to government to help civil society address or prevent challenges affecting women's full participation in our economy and communities?

(n=39)

Engagement Participants

Note: The list below reflects participating organizations. In addition, five individuals completed the questionnaire as individuals (n=3) or anonymously (n=2). The responses of individuals are not represented in the organization table below (survey or written response)³³.

Organization Name	Survey Response	Interview Response	Written Response	Focus Groups
1. Alberta Council of Women's Shelters	X	X		
2. Alberta Entrepreneur Network		X		
3. Alberta Nonprofit Network	X	X	X	
4. Alcove Addiction Recovery for Women	X			
5. Ask Her YYC	X			
6. Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services		X		
7. Aventa Center of Excellence for Women with Addictions	X			
8. Awotaan Healing Lodge Society	X			
9. Buffalo Sage Wellness House	X			
10. Business Council of Alberta	X			
11. Calgary Seniors' Resource Society	X			
12. Canada West Foundation		X	X	
13. Canadian Mental Health Association – Alberta		X		
14. CCVO	X			
15. Centre for Sexuality	X			
16. City of Grande Prairie	X			
17. City of Lethbridge	X			
18. Cold Lake Victim Services	X			
19. Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families	X			
20. Creative Calgary	X			
21. CUPS Calgary Society	X			
22. Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues	X			
23. Edmonton John Howard Society	X			
24. Elizabeth Fry Society of Calgary	X			
25. Federation of Calgary Communities	X			

³³ Note, written responses included submission of published reports.

26. First Nations Women's Council on Economic Security		X		
27. HelpSeeker Technologies	X			
28. HIV Network of Edmonton Society (HIV Edmonton)	X			
29. HomeFront Society for the Prevention of Domestic Violence	X		X	
30. Homeward Trust Edmonton	X			
31. IFSSA - IslamicFamily.ca	X			
32. IMPACT – Sagesse Domestic Violence Prevention Society		X		
33. Inclusion Foothills	X			
34. Inn from the Cold	X			
35. Jewish Family Services	X			
36. Lac La Biche Society Victim Services	X			
37. Lana Wells	X			
38. Metis Women's Council on Economic Security		X		
39. Movement51	X			
40. Muslim Council of Calgary	X			
41. Muttart Foundation / Funder's Table Network	X	X		
42. Office of the Advocate for Persons with Disabilities	X			
43. Pace Community Support Sexual Assault & Trauma Centre	X			
44. Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities	X			
45. Provincial Parent Advisory Committee (PPAC)	X			
46. Punjabi Community Health Services Calgary	X			
47. Red Deer RCMP - Victim Services	X			
48. Rural Development Network	X			
49. Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton	X			
50. Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence	X			
51. The Brenda Strafford Society For The Prevention Of Domestic Violence	X			
52. The Canadian Red Cross	X			
53. United Way Central Alberta	X			
54. United Way Fort McMurray and Wood Buffalo	X			
55. United Way Network		X		
56. United Way of Calgary and Area	X			
57. United Way of Calgary and Area	X			
58. United Way of Lethbridge & South Western Alberta	X			
59. United Way of South Eastern Alberta	X			
60. United Way of the Alberta Capital Region	X			
61. University of Calgary	X			
62. Wetaskiwin and District Victim Services	X			
63. WINS	X			
64. Women Building Futures		X		

65.	Women's Centre of Calgary	X			
66.	Wood Buffalo Community Foundation	X			
67.	Women with lived experiences at Boys and Girls McCauley Club, Edmonton				X
68.	Women with lived experiences at Medicine Hat				X
69.	Women with lived experiences at Boys and Girls Edmonton at West Club, Edmonton				X

Appendix B – Research Overview

The Council's mandate requires that its advice to government is informed by evidence and reflects current trends and research. Accordingly, the Council considered over 200 sources and documents including academic journals, publications by civil society organizations, and relevant government data and reports. The Council also conducted a targeted scan of key trends and initiatives in other jurisdictions, focusing on British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Ontario, the Government of Canada, as well as Sweden, Australia, Germany and the United Kingdom. This research helped the Council better understand the key challenges facing women in Alberta and make sense of the input from the Council's targeted engagement process.

Much of the work on the impact of COVID-19 on women is still underway and further research and reports will be completed on this topic in the coming months and years. The Council focused its research and scanning efforts on English language sources publically available at this time. News articles, unpublished reports, academic research and resources accessible only through paid subscription were not included.

The following is a selected list of resources considered by the Council, organized by issue.

Women's economic recovery

British Columbia Federation of Labour. "Rebuilding with Equity: [Economic Recovery through an Intersectional Gender Lens.](#)" 5 June 2020.

Canada West Foundation. Policy Webinar. "[The Pandemic, Women and Jobs.](#)" April 27, 2021. Panel includes Minister Sawhney.

Foreign Commonwealth Development Office. "[FCDO's Work and Opportunities for Women Programme.](#)" Government of United Kingdom. March 21, 2018.

Hale, Thomas, et al. "[A Global Panel Database of Pandemic Policies \(Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker\).](#)" Nature Human Behaviour. March 8, 2021.

House of Commons Canada. "[Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women.](#)" Report of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women. 43rd Parliament, 2nd Session. March 2021.

Newson, Nicola. UK Parliament. "[COVID-19: Empowering Women in the Recovery from the Impact of the Pandemic.](#)" House of Lords Library. March 8, 2021.

OECD. "[Sweden: Invest in Skills and the Digital Economy to Bolster the Recovery from COVID-19.](#)" July 16, 2021.

Sultana, A. & Ravanera, C. "[A Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for Canada: Making the Economy Work for Everyone.](#)" The Institute for Gender and the Economy (GATE) and YWCA Canada. July 28, 2020.

Burden of care

Alberta Policy Coalition for Chronic Disease Prevention. "[Quality, Affordable and Healthy Child Care in Alberta.](#)" Issue Brief. July 2020.

Arriagada, Paula. Statistics Canada. Insights on Canadian Society. "[The Experiences and Needs of Older Caregivers in Canada.](#)" November 24, 2020.

Calgary Chamber of Commerce. "[Childcare in Alberta during and after COVID-19: An Economic Necessity.](#)"

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Craig, Lyn. "[Coronavirus, Domestic Labour and Care: Gendered Roles Locked Down.](#)" SAGE Australian Journals. Sociological Association. Journal of Sociology, vol. 56, Issue 4, July 24, 2020.

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Hupkau, Claudia, and Petrongolo, Barbara. "[Work, Care and Gender during the COVID-19 Crisis.](#)" Fiscal Studies, the Journal of Applied Public Economics. Vol. 41. Issue 3. September 2020. Institute for Fiscal Studies. Wiley Online Library.

Klapdor Michael. "[COVID-19 Economic Response – free child care.](#)" Parliament of Australia. April 6, 2020.

Leclerc, Karine. Statistics Canada. "[Caring for their Children: Impacts of COVID-19 on Parents.](#)" December 14, 2020.

Spinks, Sara, et al. The Vanier Institute of the Family. "[Report: COVID-19 and Parenting in Canada.](#)" September 3, 2020.

Labour and unemployment

Baker, John, et al. "[Gender Disparities in the Labour Market? Examining the COVID-19 Pandemic in Alberta.](#)" SSRN Electronic Journal, 2021.

Business Council of Alberta. "[The Surprising Picture of Women's Economic Recovery—it's not what you think.](#)" August 14, 2020.

Canadian Women's Foundation. "[The Difficult Economic Side-Effects of COVID-19 for Women.](#)" March 24, 2020.

Chung, Heejung, et al. "[COVID-19, Flexible Working, and Implications for Gender Equality in the United Kingdom.](#)" SAGE Journals. Gender & Society. vol. 35, no. 2, March 19, 2021.

Desjardins, Dawn, and Freestone, Carrie. RBC Economics. "[COVID and the Outlook for Canadian Women at Risk of Disruption.](#)" RBC Thought Leadership. March 4, 2021.

Desjardins, Dawn, and Freestone, Carrie. RBC Economics. "[COVID Further Clouded the Outlook for Canadian Women at Risk of Disruption.](#)" RBC Thought Leadership. March 4, 2021.

Desjardins, Dawn, et al. RBC Economics. "[Pandemic Threatens Decades of Women's Labour Force Gains.](#)" July 16, 2020.

Dessanti, Claudia. Ontario Chamber of Commerce "[The She-covey project: Confronting the Gendered Economic Impacts of COVID-19 in Ontario.](#)" Childcare Resource and Research Unit. September 9, 2020.

Ferrer, Ana, et al. Policy Options. "[The Startling Impact of COVID-19 on Immigrant Women in the Workforce.](#)" October 21, 2020.

Hughes, Karen D. (2018). "[GEM Canada Report on Women's Entrepreneurship in Alberta.](#)" Prepared for Ministry of Status of Women, Government of Alberta.

Rosenbaum, Zoe, et al. Labour Market Information Council. "[Women in Recessions: What Makes COVID-19 Different?](#)" LMI Insight Report No. 39. March 2021.

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Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Hub. "[Women Entrepreneurs Are Vital to Saskatchewan's Economic Recovery.](#)" Women Entrepreneurship Knowledge Saskatchewan. May 28, 2020.

Domestic and family violence

Alberta Council of Women's Shelters. "[2020 Shelter Snapshot.](#)" December 2020.

Carrington, Kerry, et al. "[The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Australian Domestic and Family Violence Services and Their Clients.](#)" Australian Journal of Social Issues. Wiley Online Library. September 8, 2021.

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