

International Women's Day more important than ever before

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It's a global day that celebrates the achievements of women, recognizes the state of gender equality, and calls on action for women's rights.

This year, International Women's Day (March 8), is more important than ever says Andrea Gunraj, Vice President of Public Engagement for the Canadian Women's Foundation (CWF).

While March marks Women History Month, it also marks the one-year anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic hitting Canada and the first lockdown. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic early last year, Canada has seen decades of work and progress in gender equality set back, creating what Gunraj called a gendered pandemic.

"This virus impacts everybody, it's one of these things that we are all touched by in our lives whether directly or indirectly, so in that case it is a universal experience," said Gunraj. "In another sense, it is not a universal experience, we've seen that women have experienced many profound losses in the pandemic that have to do with gender."

The lockdowns in particular have caused greater harms for women who are victims of domestic violence, according to Family Transition Place executive director, Norah Kennedy.

"Many of the measures put in place to keep us all safe during the pandemic have had an inadvertent negative impact on those who are living with a violent or abusive partner or family member," she explained.

"While the messaging to 'stay home' effectively prevented most of us from contracting or spreading the Coronavirus, it made it impossible for some to escape or avoid abusive situations. In many cases, it made it significantly worse, and made reaching out for help even harder."

There's been an increase in the number of crisis calls to emergency shelters throughout Canada, while their capacity has declined due to physical distancing requirements.

"This means that fewer women who need safe space are able to access it," Kennedy noted.

Requests for counselling have risen significantly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. These counselling appointments to support individuals experiencing trauma by their abuser have had to be conducted virtually or by phone, which is creating obstacles as well, according to Kennedy.

"Family Transition Place has not been able to offer the in-person appointment option for many months, depriving both client and counsellor of the comfort of human contact and the counsellor from potentially picking up on the nuances that may have given them a clearer understanding of the emotional and mental state of their client," she said.

The Canada Women's Foundation has narrowed down four areas of impact that have been gendered about the pandemic which includes gender-based violence, economic stress and instability, increased burden of caregiving and house work, and reduced access to support services.

"They're not the only, but they're really big because they have huge impact on people's quality of life day-to-day, safety and wellbeing day-to-day, and their ability to be able to weather the storm to get out of the pandemic in a stronger position, is really

impacted," explains Gunraj.

Women's participation in the labour force has seen at a historical loss during the pandemic, with the number of women in the workforce the lowest it's been in 30 years.

According to a report from Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), in April of 2020 more than 30 per cent of Canadian workers had been laid off or had their hours reduced.

"Immediate employment impacts were most severe in female dominated industries such as food services, tourism, culture, recreation and retail. Schools and child care centres close, challenging education workers and parents alike," read the CUPE report. "As a result, more women than men were laid off or had to cut down on paid hours of work to care for loved ones."

Another report published in July of 2020 by the Royal Bank of Canada shows in the first two months of the pandemic 1.5 million Canadian women lost their jobs and says while they absorbed 51 per cent of job losses, they only account for 45 per cent of job gains in the economy recovery.

"I think that this is just a really strong indication that women's economic position, was never that strong to begin with before the pandemic, so when the economic system got shook up, that women were really highly impacted and weren't able to recover in the same way," said Gunraj.

Part of their recognition of International Women's Day, the Canadian Women's Foundation is running initiatives calling for action to gender justice. The organization is asking people to go online and send letters to their local representatives asking for investments into gender justice, if they have the resources to donate, and to educate themselves on how they can advocate in their own lives and community.

"This pandemic is very much a gendered pandemic, and we have to take gendered action in order to address it."

While in just a year, the COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the foundations of 30 years of progress, Gunraj says recovering from these impacts depends on what is done now.

"We've many times expected things to happen just by osmosis, or just by the passage of time, things like the gender wage gap? if we wait for that to happen naturally it will take hundreds of years," said Gunraj. "When we look at the broader issue of gender recovery, it's really hard to say, it's hard to predict the future, but we do know that it's not going to happen naturally on its own in any meaningful way."

To learn more about International Women's Day, or to donate go to www.canadianwomen.org.