



## Brief for the Standing Committee on the Status of Women (FEWO) for its study on the Mental Health of Women & Girls in Canada

November 2022

The Canadian Women's Foundation is a national leader in the movement for gender equality in Canada. Through funding, research, advocacy, and knowledge sharing, we work to achieve systemic change. We support women, girls, and gender-diverse people to move out of violence, out of poverty, and into confidence and leadership. Since 1991, our partners and donors have contributed more than \$185 million to fund over 3,000 life-transforming programs throughout the country.

We welcome the Committee's study on the mental health and well-being of women and girls in Canada. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we have heard from countless community-based organizations that the mental health issues their service users are experiencing are increasingly acute and pervasive, and that those most affected are women, girls, and gender diverse people who are marginalized by intersecting and structural forms of oppression.

### The COVID-19 Pandemic Has Worsened Mental Health

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, women and gender diverse people had significant mental health concerns. Women were experiencing depression and anxiety twice as often as men and more barriers in access to care,<sup>1</sup> and gender-diverse people were facing even higher rates of mental health difficulties<sup>2</sup> compared to cisgender people.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health experts in Canada<sup>3</sup> have been documenting the worsening mental health conditions of the general population. Broadly, people are experiencing increased stress and anxiety related to their health status and the health and well-being of loved ones, increased isolation and loneliness, and financial stress.

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<sup>1</sup> Canadian Women's Foundation. *The Abysmal State of Mothers' Mental Health* (June 2021). <https://canadianwomen.org/blog/the-abysmal-state-of-mothers-mental-health/#:~:text=Women%20experience%20depression%20and%20anxiety,difficulties%20compared%20to%20cisgender%20people>

<sup>2</sup> Veale, J. et al., *Mental Health Disparities Among Canadian Transgender Youth* (2017). *The Journal of adolescent health* : official publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine, 60(1), 44-49. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.09.014>

<sup>3</sup> Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. *Mental Health and Substance Use During COVID-19* (n.d.). <https://www.ccsa.ca/mental-health-and-substance-use-during-covid-19>

A recent Angus Reid Institute survey found that 54 percent of Canadians said their mental health had worsened over the past two years, with women faring significantly worse than men: 60 percent of women aged 18 to 34, and 63 percent of women aged 35 to 54 said that their mental health had deteriorated in that period.<sup>4</sup>

### *Mental health impacts on mothers*

For the last two years, the Canadian Women's Foundation has been documenting the unique toll of the pandemic on mothers and family caregivers. Data from national polls we conducted in April 2021 and April 2022<sup>5</sup> show that mothers and family caregivers are overworked, overwhelmed, and undervalued, and their mental health is suffering. While our polls do not provide sufficient data to speak to the experiences of trans, non-binary, and/or gender diverse parents, or to disaggregate by race or other identity factors, we know from qualitative research and sector-wide consultations that these burdens are even greater for those who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

In relation to their mental health and emotional well-being, our polling data showed:

- 48% of mothers reaching their breaking point vs. 39% of fathers
- 67% of mothers concerned about their physical health in 2022, up from 55% in 2021
- 67% mothers concerned about their emotional well-being, with significant percentages reporting feeling anxious, sad, and upset:
  - o 41% felt anxiety compared to 34% of fathers
  - o 24% felt sad compared to 14% of fathers
  - o 22% felt upset compared to 14% of fathers

In relation to balancing the demands of paid work and caregiving, our polling data showed:

- 39% of mothers say they are struggling to keep up with work demands (up from 18% in 2021)
- 37% of mothers have put their career on the back burner to manage home and caregiving responsibilities
- 47% of mothers find it exhausting to balance work and childcare responsibilities

Overall, 96 percent of mothers agree that mothers and family caregivers have been significantly impacted by the pandemic and need more support. As one respondent reported: "I am at my limit. There is too much expected of people with dependents. You are burning out an entire generation of people. Something needs to change."

### *Mental health impacts on girls and non-binary youth*

The COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated issues impacting young people. Our grantee partners that specialize in programs for girls and non-binary youth report that many of their program participants are feeling isolated from their friends and peers and that they are taking on increased responsibilities for their siblings at home. They have had to navigate new

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<sup>4</sup> Angus Reid Institute. *COVID at Two: Vast majorities say the pandemic has pulled Canadians apart, brought out the worst in people* (March 10, 2022). Retrieved from <https://angusreid.org/covid-19-two-year-anniversary/>

<sup>5</sup> Polls conducted by the Canadian Women's Foundation in partnership with opinion research and insights firm Maru/Matchbox. For a summary of poll results, see <https://canadianwomen.org/the-mother-rising/>

virtual tools and adapt their learning styles to modified classroom environments. They have also felt the impacts of the challenges their households have faced throughout the pandemic, such as food and housing insecurity.

All of this has resulted in heightened anxiety and serious impacts on their mental health and well-being. Our grantee partners report that many of the girls and non-binary youth they support have increased their time spent on social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which have also been identified as a source of negative mental health impacts.

### *Mental health impacts on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth*

The mental health impacts of the pandemic have been particularly acute in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) communities that were already dealing with significant mental health challenges—a tragic result of intergenerational trauma and poverty resulting from the ongoing and violent process of colonization. For Indigenous youth, many of whom live in communities facing food scarcity, overcrowded housing, unsafe drinking water, environmental catastrophes, substandard infrastructure, and lack of access to critical services, the pandemic added another layer of stress and trauma impacting their mental health and well-being.

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, close to one in five Indigenous youth had been diagnosed with a mood disorder (19.3%) and nearly one in four had been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder (24.3%); young Indigenous women were also more likely than men to be diagnosed with a mood disorder.<sup>6</sup> Rates of suicide are reported to be 5 to 7 times higher for First Nations youth living on reserve than the national average, and 5 to 25 times higher for Inuit youth.<sup>7</sup>

From October 2021 to January 2022, the Canadian Women's Foundation worked with Indigenous youth to survey their peers on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. These young people developed the survey, translated it into English, French, and Inuktitut, implemented it with 95 FNMI youth between the ages of 18 and 30, and wrote a report analyzing their findings.<sup>8</sup> Among the survey respondents, 82 percent identified as female, Two-Spirit, non-binary, or as another gender identity. Approximately 52 percent of participants identified as being First Nations, 11 percent identified as Métis, and 37 percent identified as Inuit. The majority of respondents came from the northern-most regions of Canada, with 69.5 percent of participants coming from one of the three territories (Nunavut, Northwest Territories, and the Yukon). Indigenous youth from the north are rarely consulted or included in decision-making that affects them, and their responses to this survey point to worsening trends in individual and community well-being that warrant urgent public policy attention.

Respondents indicated that since the pandemic began:

- 28% have sought support from a professional therapist, counsellor, or spiritual guide
- 40% feel somewhat less happy now than in their pre-pandemic life; 20% indicated that they are much less happy

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<sup>6</sup> Anderson, Thomas. *Portrait of youth in Canada: Data report Chapter 4: Indigenous Youth in Canada* (December 1, 2021). <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/42-28-0001/2021001/article/00004-eng.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Atkinson, D. *Considerations for Indigenous child and youth population mental health promotion in Canada* (2017). Canada: National Collaborating Centres for Public Health.

[https://nccph.ca/images/uploads/general/07\\_Indigenous\\_MentalHealth\\_NCCPH\\_2017\\_EN.pdf](https://nccph.ca/images/uploads/general/07_Indigenous_MentalHealth_NCCPH_2017_EN.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Canadian Women's Foundation (2022). *Resetting Normal: The Impacts of COVID-19 on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Youth*. <https://canadianwomens.wpenpowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Resetting-Normal-Impacts-of-COVID-on-FNMI-Youth-EN-final.pdf>

- 77% shared that they are more stressed, with 54% identifying as being significantly more stressed since March 2020
- 73% reported increased anxiety
- 78% reported increased depression
- 82% reported increased feelings of isolation and loneliness
- 74% reported an overall negative impact on their mental health

As one respondent reported: “Since having to quarantine at the beginning of the pandemic, a lot of my past traumas have resurfaced, and I turned to addictions to cope. My mental health has worsened.”

Our survey also shows significant impacts of the pandemic on community well-being:

- 40% of respondents experienced a loss of a family member, friend, or colleague
- 43% reported having less family time due to social distancing measures
- 63% of Indigenous youth identified that they spend less time with their friends
- 58% identified that they feel less connected with their community

These results point to worsening individual and community well-being, compounding the crisis-level challenges these communities were already facing. And although there are some community supports in place to mitigate these issues, they are often insufficient, under-funded, or inaccessible to the youth in their communities.

### *Mental health impacts on survivors of gender-based violence*

With the rise of #MeToo, police-reported sexual assaults increased over four consecutive years from 2015-2018, increasing by 13 percent in 2017 and another 15 percent in 2018, despite as few as 5 percent of sexual assaults being reported to police.<sup>9</sup> Simultaneously, sexual assault centres saw much more significant increases in calls without matching increases in funding. As February 2020 ended, sexual assault survivors across the country—some at high risk of suicide—were stuck on waiting lists for mental health counselling ranging from nine months to more than a year.<sup>10</sup>

The pandemic and its associated restrictions exacerbated this situation, resulting in significant increases in all forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, workplace violence and sexual harassment, and sexual assault. In the Canadian Women’s Foundation’s Gender Justice Labs consultations in the summer of 2021, we spoke to gender-based violence service providers across the country who described the compounding effects of a Shadow Pandemic of gender-based violence,<sup>11</sup> an over-stretched and under-resourced women’s sector, and an over-taxed mental health care system that was close to a breaking point pre-pandemic.<sup>12</sup> They indicated that their service users lack access to timely and

<sup>9</sup> Moreau, Greg (2019) Police-reported crime statistics in Canada 2018, Statistics Canada, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2019001/article/00013-eng.html>

<sup>10</sup> Mancini, Melissa and Roumeliotis, Ioanna (2020) Sexual assault centres struggle with limited funding as more women come forward to say #MeToo, cbc.ca: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sexual-assault-centres-fundingservices-1.5450099>

<sup>11</sup> UN Women. *The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19* (n.d.). <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>

<sup>12</sup> Canadian Women’s Foundation. *Insights from the Gender Justice*

affordable mental health counselling in “normal times,” and that the need for this kind of support has become even more urgent and less available.

### *Mental health impacts on service providers in the women’s and gender justice sector*

As the staff of women’s shelters and sexual assault centres—most of whom are women and gender diverse people who are among the lowest paid in the non-profit sector—struggle to respond to the increased demand for their services, they also lack access to the necessary supports to deal with vicarious trauma and PTSD in the course of their work. This has contributed to mass burnout and what Women’s Shelters Canada has termed a “feminist brain drain”<sup>13</sup> from organizations serving GBV survivors. It is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit and retain staff to offer these critical community supports.

### **Lack of Access to Inclusive, Anti-Oppressive Community Mental Health Supports**

The ripple effects of the crucial service gaps described above, which have disproportionate impacts on women, girls, and non-binary people, particularly those marginalized by multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, have significant impacts on our individual and collective well-being. The mental health stressors described in this brief are compounded by the lived experience of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including sexism, racism, ableism, ageism, homophobia, and transphobia.

Our grantee partners have identified the need for new and better mental health interventions for women and gender diverse people that support them in confronting and challenging these systemic barriers, rather than focusing on individualized interventions that put the onus on them to “get better” in the face of multiple systemic oppressions. Promising practices that our grantee partners have developed incorporate a holistic view of community and individual well-being and culturally specific programming and supports.

None of this is possible with out a significant reorientation of the way the women’s and gender justice sector is viewed, valued, and funded to match its necessary role in our communities. Women’s shelters, sexual assault centres, and other community agencies serving women, girls, and gender diverse people are among the first to respond to urgent and emerging community needs, brought on by systemic discrimination and oppression, colonization, and/or community-wide crises like environmental disasters or pandemics. For decades, these organizations have been starved for the resources they need to fulfill their missions, and the result is unmet community needs that are contributing to a mental health crisis felt most acutely by those facing multiple forms of oppression.

### **Recommendations**

To address the significant mental health issues affecting women, girls, and gender diverse people in Canada, the Canadian Women’s Foundation recommends the following:

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*Labs on Emergency Preparedness* (May 2022). <https://canadianwomens.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Gender-Justice-Labs-Final-Report-EN.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Women’s Shelters Canada. *New Study on Feminist Brain Drain in the VAW Shelter Sector* (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://endvaw.ca/feminist-brain-drain/>

- Recognize the public health role of the organizations that make up the women's and gender justice sector with stable and permanent funding that supports the fulfillment of their missions and decent work for their employees
- Invest in mental health services and community organizations providing trauma-informed care, with a view to addressing service gaps for FNMI communities, 2SLGBTQ+ people, and Black and racialized women and youth
- Invest in holistic community-based mental health interventions that foster connection to culture and community and build social connection.
- Invest in community-based and academic research on anti-oppressive approaches to supporting mental health that consider systemic oppressions and build community resistance and resilience.

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