

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON
Women in the Four County Region
DECEMBER 2021



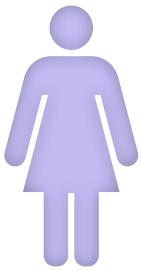
Executive Summary

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While the battle against the pandemic is ongoing, many studies have suggested that COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact on the employment status of women. Due to the nature of the pandemic and its workplace restrictions, female and male workers in different sectors have experienced the economic impacts in different ways. Nationally, there was massive exodus of female workers in the beginning of the pandemic mainly due to the disruption of childcare services and school closures. At the time of this writing (December 2021), many women have still not returned to the labour market, and the impact of the pandemic is ongoing. The longer these women remain out of the labour market, the harder it may be for them to go back.

Using key labour force statistics derived from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), this report examines the impact of COVID-19 on women in the Four County Region between February 2020 and October 2021 (20-month period). We have analyzed the key labour market variables (e.g. employment, unemployment rate, not in labor force, employment rate, age cohorts, etc.) indicating a difference between men's and women's labour force participation, as a result of COVID-19. Moreover, there is a further exploration of sectors in which women's participation in the labour force has been significantly impacted. Through this analysis, we may gain a greater understanding of the challenges that women in our region are facing, how to best assist them with possible re-training and re-entry to the workforce post-COVID, and how to design effective and equitable solutions as we move forward.

Key Findings



Between March and October 2020, the female unemployment rate was lower than that of males. Since October 2020, women's unemployment rate surpassed the male unemployment rate and remained this way throughout the last year. This high female unemployment rate suggests a relatively higher availability of female workers in the labour market. When the second wave ended in February 2021, the female unemployment rate started to decrease and it eventually decreased to 3 percent in October 2021.

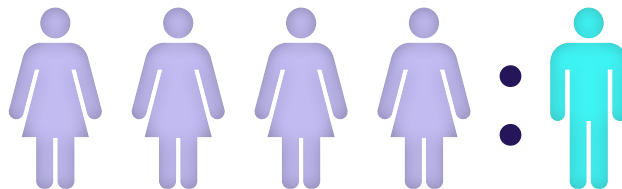
As of October 2021, male full-time employment recovered to 78,600 workers, just 600 below its pre-pandemic level. The number of female full-time workers reached 55,200, which was 4,300 higher than the pre-pandemic level. However, both male and female part-time employment had not fully recovered to pre-pandemic levels.



23%
MORE WOMEN
LEFT THE LABOUR
FORCE BETWEEN
FEBRUARY &
OCTOBER 2020

Even though we saw women's employment fully rebounded from the pandemic, this does not reflect the whole story. Women have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and many of them have left the labour force. Ever since the pandemic's onset in March 2020, there were about 11,700 women added to the "not in the labour force" category from February to October 2020 in the Stratford-Bruce Peninsula Economic Region (ER). This is a 23 percent increase in the number of women who reported they left the labour force during the same time period when 6.8 percent of women reported losing employment. From these data, we can see that the employment losses among women during the initial phases of the pandemic were more severe than what was seen from the lens of unemployment— people who still actively look for work.

Between February 2020 and August 2020, the Stratford-Bruce Peninsula ER saw a nearly 4:1 ratio of women leaving the labour force compared to men. In other words, for every man who left the labour force, there were four women withdrawing from the workforce. In some months such as March to June



2020, women accounted for 100 percent of the increases in the number of people who are not in the labour force as there were fewer men who reported they were "not in the labour force" than the pre-pandemic level. Therefore, women were more likely to leave the workforce than men, which put them "at higher risk of long term job-separation and future wage penalties."¹

¹ Desjardins, Dawn and Carrie Freestone. "Canadian Women Continue to Exit the Labour Force." RBC Economics. November 19, 2020. https://thoughtleadership.rbc.com/canadian-women-continue-to-exit-the-labour-force/?utm_medium=referral&utm_source=economics&utm_campaign=special-report

18.8% MORE WOMEN WERE NOT IN THE LABOUR FORCE BY *October 2021*

By October 2021, there were still 9,500 more women who reported not being in the labour force compared to the pre-pandemic level. Indeed, the number of women who are out of the labour force has increased 18.8 percent since February 2020. In contrast, only 600 more men reported not being in the labour force compared to February 2020.

Among all age cohorts, workers aged 15-24 years old have fully rebounded with a positive 15 percent employment increase by October 2021. Other age groups still lagged behind their pre-pandemic employment level. In terms of full-time employment by age cohort, the largest gain came from the 15-24 age cohort with an increase of 4,900 workers compared to February 2020 with October 2021. People aged 25-44, however, experienced the greatest loss with 1,500 workers between February 2020 and October 2021. Over the past 20 months, workers among 65 years and over have been relatively unchanged.

FULL-TIME WORKERS AGED
15 - 24 YEARS OLD

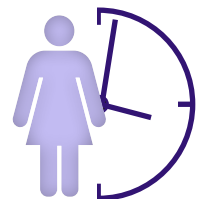
+4,900

FEBRUARY 2020 TO
OCTOBER 2021


3,000 fewer
FEMALE FULL-TIME
WORKERS AGED 55-64
IN OCTOBER 2021

For male full-time workers, the biggest loss came from the 25-44 age cohort with 3,900 fewer workers compared to February 2020. In the meantime, males among 45-54 experienced the most gain with 1,900 more full-time workers. In contrast, the number of female youth (aged 15-24) working full-time increased the most (+5,200) over the past 20 months. Females aged 55-64, however, decreased the most with 3,000 fewer workers in October 2021.

On the contrary, all age cohorts of female part-timers experienced losses between February 2020 and October 2021. The biggest loss came from females aged 65 years and over, followed by youth aged 15-24 and women aged 55-64.



When COVID-19 hit the economy in March 2020, Construction, Retail trade, and Accommodation and food services were mostly affected in the first three months. Twenty months later, employment in Construction and Accommodation and food services continue to lag behind the most compared to pre-pandemic levels, with losses of 4,800 and 4,900, respectively. Between February 2020 and October 2021, Accommodation and food services experienced the largest employment gap at negative 52 percent. Continued support is required to help these left-behind sectors recover.





On the other hand, employment has recovered in several sectors initially hit by the pandemic including Health care and social assistance, Transportation and warehousing, and Retail trade.

Compared to February 2020, Health care and social assistance and Transportation and warehousing both rebounded well and beyond their pre-pandemic levels by adding 3,300 jobs. Overall, goods-producing sectors such as Agriculture have shown a degree of resilience to the pandemic due to their safety measures and exemptions from mandatory closures.

Educational services, as the largest female dominated industry, experienced increases in female employment in March and April 2020. With changes to online learning, its employment level has been relatively stable. Compared to February 2020, female employment in this sector has almost recovered to the pre-pandemic level in October 2021, with only a 300 difference. Among female dominant industries, Accommodation and food services was hit the hardest by the pandemic. It was still 3,300 below its pre-pandemic level in October 2021. However, female employment in Health care and social assistance and Finance and insurance have fully recovered from the pandemic as of October 2021. While the employment level in Health care and social assistance remains high, the shortage of healthcare workers is always a concern. The almost two-year battle against COVID-19 has increased the workload of healthcare workers and staff are weary. This has made both retention and recruitment in this sector even more difficult.



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WOMEN RECEIVING
REGULAR EI
BENEFITS ROSE BY

+400%

From the change in regular Employment Insurance (EI) benefits (caused by permanent layoffs) between February 2020 and August 2021, the number of women receiving regular EI benefits rose by 3,920 (+400%), while there was an increase of 110 (+3%) among men. Women accounted for a larger proportion of regular EI recipients in all age groups except youth aged 15-24 years old, compared with their male counterparts. This shows the local females' dependency on financial support as a result of COVID-19. The concern for this situation would be how long they need to rely on EI benefits due to COVID-19 and how to help them get a job in the future.

In July 2020, we conducted a local survey and asked a few questions about women's work-life balance. A total of 103 valid surveys were completed from the Four County region. Women accounted for 96 percent of all responses. While asking how COVID-19 has impacted their work and life balance, 61 percent of respondents indicated that their mental health has been worsened. Fifty-eight (58) percent of respondents said life has become more challenging with reduced outdoor activities/isolation, and 56 percent indicated remote working as a challenge. When asked how the closure of schools or childcare

"58% OF RESPONDENTS
SAID LIFE HAS BECOME
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WITH REDUCED OUTDOOR
ACTIVITIES/ISOLATION"

has affected their work arrangement and life since March 2020, about half of 104 survey respondents left a comment about their experiences. Most moms who responded indicated an increased level of stress while balancing full-time employment, home schooling, and childcare. Not surprisingly, the widespread closures of schools and the unavailability of childcare services during the COVID-19 pandemic have created additional family burdens on working mothers' shoulders and made it hard for working mothers to maintain the same level of productivity. As a result, some working mothers have chosen to leave the labour market, as reflected by our LFS findings.

In the survey, we asked respondents for recommendations of how to help the retreated women to re-enter the labour market. The top suggestions are:

- Employers offering flexible schedule, better pay, and hybrid working arrangements
- Available and affordable childcare: more spaces and funding
- Keeping skills updated through online training
- Reaching out to local employment services for help
- Taking care of yourself/mental health first

In response to the female labour participation issues mentioned in the report, we have proposed several recommendations on workforce development, youth development, childcare services, and funding. We believe that it is important to apply a gender lens to designing social programs and recovery planning. The longer the retreated women are unemployed or do not use their skills, the more their skills will lose value in the labour market. As the economy recovers from the pandemic, women's path to re-entry and reengagement in the workforce should be clear.



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