

# Synergy

Workforce Development  
for Vulnerable Women to Succeed

## EVIDENCE REPORT



This report was produced as part of a project funded by the Future Skills Centre (FSC), with financial support from the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program.

FSC is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to preparing Canadians for employment success. We believe Canadians should feel confident about the skills they have to succeed in a changing workforce. As a pan-Canadian community, we are collaborating to rigorously identify, test, measure, and share innovative approaches to assessing and developing the skills Canadians need to thrive in the days and years ahead. The Future Skills Centre was founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint ADE, and The Conference Board of Canada

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Future Skills Centre or the Government of Canada.





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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



The work that informs this report takes place on and across the traditional territories and current homes to many Indigenous nations. YWCA Canada's national office is located in Tkaronto, also known as Toronto, the traditional territory of the Wendat, the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee and Métis. We acknowledge the enduring presence of Indigenous peoples in this area and recognize the current treaty holders, the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, as contemporary stewards of the land.

We thank our colleagues at YWCA Regina, YWCA Sudbury, YWCA Moncton, YWCA Thompson, YWCA Northwest Territories and YWCA Toronto – particularly Community of Practice (CoP) attendees and report co-contributors Alexis Losie, Bernouse Davilus, Alicia Mazerolle, Kate Wilson, Maui Pare and Tsering Tsomo – for their commitment, insights, and vital contributions to both this report and broader service provision. We acknowledge the time, trust, and engagement of program participants across multiple sites.

This report showcases our collective work towards expanding equity-centered community programming and inclusive labour market access. We hope that learnings from this project will enhance the impact of YWCA Canada's ongoing efforts to advance gender equity for those from structurally excluded communities. We thank the Future Skills Centre (FSC) for partnering with us in this work.

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## INTRODUCTION

Synergy: Workforce Development for Vulnerable Women to Succeed is a national participatory research and knowledge mobilization project aimed at advancing gender equity in the Canadian labour market and addressing the unique challenges women and equity-deserving groups face in accessing gainful employment<sup>1</sup>. YWCA Canada and participating Member Associations, with support from the Future Skills Centre (FSC), identified and implemented community-based strategies for enhancing resilience and inclusion in the Canadian workforce.



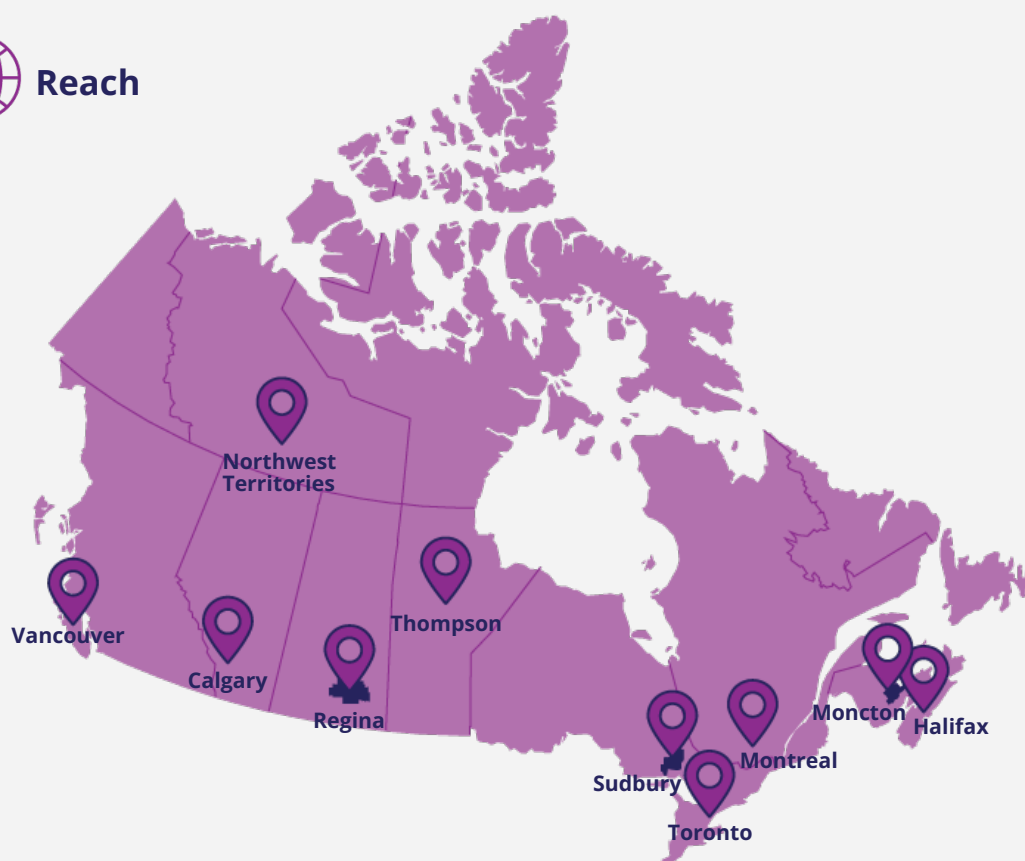
### Objectives

Through evidence-informed service delivery and employer engagement

- **Identify** promising workforce development practices
- **Improve** supports and service delivery
- **Implement** key lessons to transform recruitment, retention, and workplace culture
- **Increase** economic empowerment of women and gender diverse people in Canada
- **Inclusive** access and retention of gainful employment in Canada



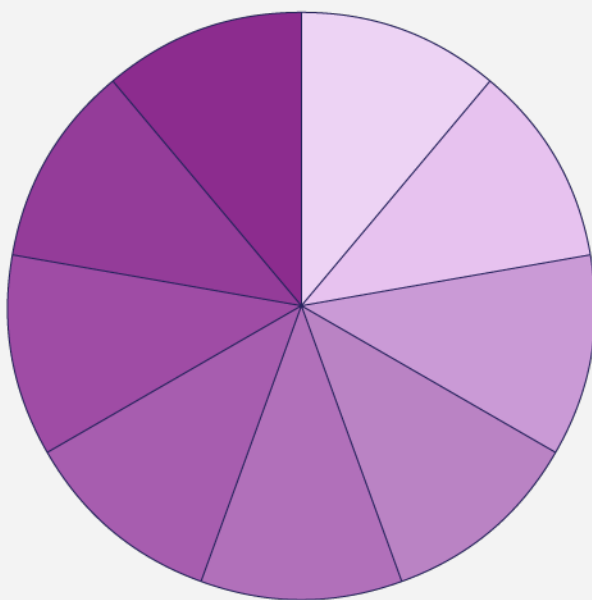
### Reach







Our employment interventions focus on addressing barriers and advancing opportunities for equity-deserving groups in Canada. In particular, women and gender diverse people at the intersection of a range of social and structural barriers (poverty, housing precarity, rural and remote living, immigration and settlement issues, single parenthood, Indigeneity, racialization, disabilities etc.).



Women and Gender Diverse People

Rural, Remote & Northern Communities

Racialized Communities

People with Disabilities

Newcomers, Refugees & Immigrants

Language Minority Groups

Indigenous People

Youth

Single Parents

## Theory of Change

Synergy seeks to address inequities across skills training, pre-employment programming, employee recruitment, and retention.

Through our work with over 300,000 women and families across our 30 Member Associations in 9 provinces and 2 territories, YWCA Canada has learned that systemic barriers inhibit women and gender diverse people from accessing the labour market.

This problem is exacerbated for those from remote and Northern communities, Black, Indigenous and racialized individuals, disabled individuals those fleeing or experiencing violence, newcomers, single parents, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, those living on low incomes, people with criminal records or previously incarcerated, and those engaged in sex work or substance use.

Based on the fundamental premise that evidence-based practices can drive socioeconomic equity for communities at greatest risk of exclusion, the Synergy project aimed to improve supports and service provision in 4 YWCA Member Associations (Regina, Sudbury, Moncton, and Thompson). Key community learnings that center the voices, lived experience, and recommendations of marginalized women and gender diverse individuals were embedded into service provider interventions to improve access to gainful employment.



## Programs, Activities, and Stakeholders

Through research and engagement with service users, service providers, community organizations and employers across the country, the study sought to learn more about:

- Applying participatory and community-based research practices to the development of workforce interventions for women and gender diverse people facing intersectional and compounding barriers to work.

- Creating pathways from pre-employment programs to securing gainful employment or self-employment for women and gender diverse people.
- Implementing multi-stakeholder strategies for addressing barriers to women's and gender diverse individual's labour market access.



The first phase of the project piloted and shared promising workforce development practices aimed at building social and economic resilience among marginalized women and gender diverse groups. In the second phase, key insights were incorporated into program design and delivery. The third phase of the project mobilized these interventions by engaging community organizations, employers, and the public sector in cross-sectoral knowledge exchange and collaborative strategizing for greater equity in Canadian economy and society.

Activities included program orientation and evaluation training for staff from participating Member Associations to ensure each site delivered 1-3 training interventions (serving on average 100 users per cohort) such as workshops, job placements, skills learning, job shadowing etc. Each site made efforts to incorporate 1-3 promising practices identified in the research phase, and contributed to co-developing online training modules and curriculum materials. The National Office research team organized regional and sector-specific roundtables featuring employers from different sectors including retail, trades, and financial services, public sector representatives, and over 40 civil organizations and community partners. Knowledge dissemination strategies for learning tools were developed and roundtables were made available to all YWCA Member Associations to adapt training standards and service delivery methods.

While program offerings across multiple sites varied in method and mandate, incorporation of community-led insights into program design yielded significant improvements to labour market access and outcomes for women and gender diverse people. The following sections outline our progress and achievements towards these objectives.

## EVIDENCE OF IMPACT: COLLABORATIVE OUTCOME REPORTING

### Methodology and Evaluation Strategy

YWCA Canada engaged in participatory approaches to impact evaluation based on quarterly activity reporting, Key Performance Indicator (KPI) surveys, Community of Practice (CoP) meetings, and virtual research visits. Survey tools measured quantitative metrics including program completion, employment status pre- and post-graduation, networking gains, and changes to participants' self-reported confidence and readiness to apply for employment, make career advancements or start their own businesses after program completion. Member Associations were involved in collaborative outcome reporting through CoP meetings and virtual visits to share cross-learnings, challenges, and engage in discussion.



From the onset of the project, YWCA Canada conducted orientation sessions to (a) communicate and clarify the program's logic model and theory of change and (b) build internal capacity to conduct reporting and evaluation. The National Office undertook a narrative review of different programs, highlighting key elements of service design, common enablers and barriers, major successes, and expected and achieved outcomes to identify baselines and benchmarks to track progress. Ongoing consultations and participant feedback shaped the learning arc to emphasize the most salient insights from each site.



## Key Findings: Program Statistics and Impact Metrics



### Impact



Collaborating with 10 YWCAs  
in 9 provinces and territories



Developed 3 online training modules  
to strengthen capacity of employers  
and employment service providers



Improving supports and service delivery  
in 4 YWCAs (Regina, Sudbury, Moncton,  
and Thompson)



Organized 3 national employment equity  
roundtables featuring 6 employers from  
different sectors and 3 civil society  
organizations



2500+ women and gender diverse  
people benefitted from skills training  
and pre-employment programming



Over 75% of participants completed  
employment readiness and placement  
programs



### Insights

We bring together industry leaders and social impact organizations to discuss bold steps  
in advancing gender equity in the workplace

**500+**

registered attendees at roundtables

**1450+**

unique YouTube views

**222,500+**

audience reached through social  
media and web content

**25+**

employers engaged to deepen  
commitments to gender equity

## Out of 1243 participants reflected in the survey data from 4 sites:

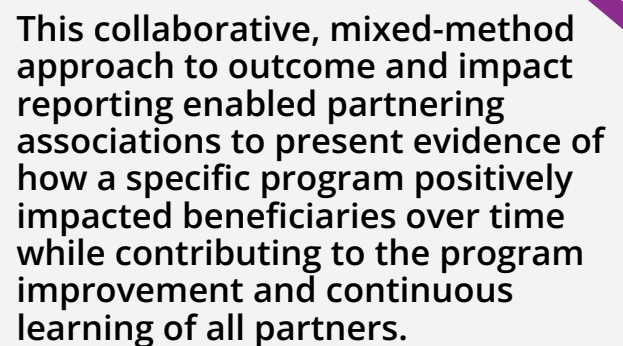
- Over 75% of participants completed employment readiness and placement programming.
- 72% of survey respondents expressed satisfaction with their training program and its contribution to building new skills and enabling them to overcome barriers preventing them from accessing and retaining work.
- 85% of participants were employed, enrolled in paid training, or ready to apply for employment or begin a business upon program completion. (38% of participants secured employment, started a business, or enrolled in further training programs<sup>2</sup>. An additional 47% of participants confirmed readiness and confidence in applying for employment or starting their own business.)
- 90% of participants were able to establish new contacts to leverage as they network and enhance the effectiveness of their existing networks.
- YWCA Regina's *Work Experience Program* employed a third of their participants internally and helped over 70% of other participants connect to gainful employment opportunities.
- Over 60% of participants from YWCA Sudbury's *Building Opportunities for Women* program reported gaining employment as a direct result of their participation in the program.
- YWCA Moncton's *Employment My Way* reported that over 85% of previously unemployed participants gained employment, paid training and/or started a business during or directly resulting from their program.
- When a [Gender-Based Analysis Plus](#) (GBA+) lens is applied to traditional labour market access programming and holistic, whole person supports are incorporated, participant outcomes are stronger and gainful participation in the workforce becomes more attainable.

## Data Sources, Limitations, and Evidence Generation Strategy

Gathering evidence on the effectiveness of interventions across diverse community and cultural contexts is a complex undertaking. Despite the attention given to documenting program processes and demonstrating their results, there were often gaps and inconsistencies in reporting. Challenges the pandemic imposed and/or exacerbated had ripple-effects on Member Associations, the communities they serve, and the services they run (such as COVID outbreaks, visitor/service user restrictions, reallocation of frontline staff, pausing of on-site services including childcare supports, and pivots to online or hybrid programming).

This led to acute staffing shortages, difficulties in recruiting and retaining program participants, and delays or decline in survey response and activity reporting. The differences in participant size and demographics among the array of pre-employment and reskilling programs included in the project led to some reporting inconsistencies and data discrepancies that made quantitative data analysis an ongoing challenge. Program coordinators noted that shifts to virtual or hybrid programming impacted evaluation methods and responses. Prior to the pandemic, program evaluations were typically completed on paper, in-person, after each session. The response rates were very high and consistent. When evaluation tools were shared as a link at the end of each session, response rates reduced, became less consistent, and less accurate – with some participants completing the surveys multiple times.

To grow our evidence-base and develop a rich picture of which interventions were most effective, replicable, scalable, and appropriate in each community or local context, YWCA Canada supplemented participant surveys and quarterly activity reports with CoP meetings where program staff and coordinators could openly share challenges they encountered, changes that were actioned, and impacts and benefits of these efforts for participants and the broader communities served.



**This collaborative, mixed-method approach to outcome and impact reporting enabled partnering associations to present evidence of how a specific program positively impacted beneficiaries over time while contributing to the program improvement and continuous learning of all partners.**

In addition, these forums allowed the YWCA research team to validate and ground the survey findings and follow-up on any reporting gaps.

For Member Associations where progress was not always linear, the mixed-method approach enabled them to report on program updates in a way that contextualized their learnings, activities, and outcomes. This approach was appreciated by participating Member Associations as a way to keep one another connected, learning, and expanding their toolkits. According to Alicia Mazerolle from YWCA Moncton, “[i]n our experience, it works best when we apply these learnings and implement these models into our operations/policies and then share about them with our partners, as it demonstrates to the community that these practices are feasible, viable, and sustainable.” In these and other ways, the cohort of participating Member Associations learned from, with, and alongside each other to expand and adjust their programming to meet emerging needs of women and gender diverse people.

## EARLY LEARNINGS: THE CASE FOR A COMMUNITY-BASED LENS

In May 2020, as part of the Born to Be Bold: Measuring success for women's access to the labour market project funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE), YWCA Canada surfaced promising practices and priorities for equitable economic empowerment and workplace inclusion of multiply-marginalized women and gender diverse people through research with 10 YWCA Member Associations (Calgary, Halifax, Moncton, Montreal, NWT, Regina, Sudbury, Thompson, Toronto and Vancouver).

Participants from diverse social and geographic locations identified distinct barriers to accessing gainful employment – lack of affordable housing, childcare, and transportation – as well as other systemic challenges including biases in skill recognition, Canadian experience requirements, and need for trauma-informed hiring and employment practices.

**Member Associations identified promising practices to address these employment barriers and, more fundamentally, to enact a structural shift in the labour market.**

Some of the strategic priorities included ensuring participants have accessible, affordable, and quality housing, childcare, transportation, and mental health supports as they navigate the workforce and balance its impacts with their family life. Other critical enablers of labour market participation and success included flexible work arrangements and service provision, peer-led programming, and opportunities for continuous professional development and paid placements.

## 4 Community-informed Strategies to advance inclusive labour market access in Canada



**Flexible  
Work**



**Childcare  
and Transport**



**Training  
and Skill  
Recognition**



**Peer  
Programming**

The following promising practices were shaped by and shared with the broader YWCA movement to inform YWCA program standards and practices. They have been tested, operationalized, and integrated into Member Association programs:

**Recommendation 1:** Flexible work or programming hours, schedules, and locations

- a. Extended hours or flexible scheduling, making support available online, by phone, or providing flexible locations
- b. Provision of computer equipment and Internet access to mitigate the digital divide
- c. Formalized training programs and equitable guidelines to empower employees to utilize the different technologies and equipment

**Recommendation 2:** Provide childcare and transportation supports and subsidies

- a. Free or more affordable childcare options with extended hours and on-site childminding or accessible childcare locations
- b. Provision of equitable parental leave
- c. Context-specific and based on individual needs-assessment

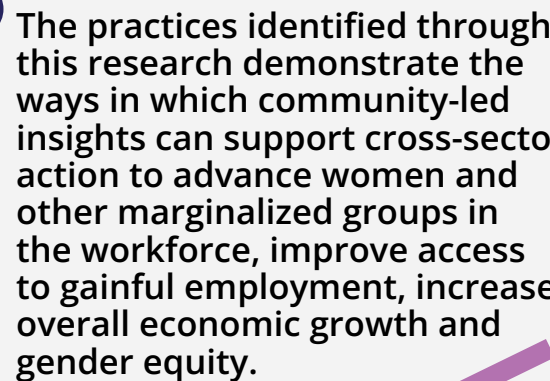
**Recommendation 3:** Strengthen training and recognition of skills and experience

- a. Acknowledge lived and international experience and expertise and compensate appropriately
- b. Provide paid training, placements, and learning opportunities
- c. Employment-specific skills training including resume and application writing, interview preparation and practice
- d. Skills upgradation through recognized accreditation or access to free professional certifications

**Recommendation 4:** Peer programming and communities of support

- a. Peer-led programming to leverage shared experience, demonstrate potential benefits, and promote success
- b. Cohort-based models and communities of support that build connections, care, and mutual reliance
- c. 1:1 supports and systems navigation that enables access to the resources and networks necessary for individual needs

By engaging women and gender diverse people from across Canada and centering their experiences, these findings shed light on the importance of nuanced and person-centered programming, intersectional research, and deeper understandings of the context of gender equity in labour market access.



**The practices identified through this research demonstrate the ways in which community-led insights can support cross-sectoral action to advance women and other marginalized groups in the workforce, improve access to gainful employment, increase overall economic growth and gender equity.**

YWCA Canada validated their saliency through surveys and research visits with program staff.

Through the project's knowledge mobilization campaign, key insights were shared with employers, service providers, and the public sector to guide the implementation of equity-enhancing policies, practices, and processes. Feedback from sessions and community engagement were incorporated into the development of training modules. Across the YWCA movement, these insights continue to inform how we move forward, plan, and deliver services and programming. The following section traces how Member Associations have embedded these principles into their existing suite of employment training and advancement programs to better respond to emerging needs in communities.

## **EMERGING PRACTICES: COVID-19 AND HOLISTIC SUPPORT STRATEGIES**

### **What We Learned: Lessons from Implementation**

Many of the early learnings that underpinned the project became more salient with the disruptions to social and economic life wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. As labour market conditions shifted and pandemic protection measures were lifted, the nature of supports also evolved. In addition to the promising practices previously identified, community organizations and service providers have been making iterative adjustments to reflect emergent community needs and COVID-related challenges.

Member Associations noted that the turn to remote and virtual programming/work has deepened access divides for those with limited digital literacy or limited access to digital infrastructures including internet connections, devices, and other technological barriers. Program coordinators highlighted that hybrid programming harbours challenges around engagement, relationship-building, and retention. Service users who are visual or social learners do better in community programs with in-person supports. Many felt further isolated during the turn to virtual programming. Others identified the disproportionate burden on women and gender diverse people who work at home while balancing the care needs of children and other family members. Notably, participants were unable to access childcare supports and on-site child-minding facilities when attending virtual programs. A significant challenge encountered by participating programs that are delivered online or in hybrid formats, was how to create and maintain safety and spaces where people feel like they can belong, trust, and feel like they can be real and vulnerable and connect with other participants.

To account for the challenges and changing needs associated with remote/hybrid service delivery and social isolation, a number of Member Associations expanded their culturally responsive programming and holistic supports. Program coordinators offered programming that was asynchronous, available on weekends, or during school hours to increase accessibility for people with children and embedded Talking Circles facilitated by Elders, culturally resonant food, and more group counselling to mitigate isolation and make participants more open to individual referrals. This resulted in increased connection and community engagement, particularly amongst rural, Indigenous and Immigrant communities.



## What We Learned: Lessons for Policy and Service Delivery

Effective interventions for individuals and groups at the intersection of a range of systemic barriers (such as housing precarity, rural and remote living, poverty, immigration and settlement issues, single parenthood, Indigeneity, racialization, disabilities etc.) require holistic, person-centered approaches to program design and delivery that are responsive to shifting circumstances. Through our feedback and validation process, it became apparent that many promising workplace practices are limited to larger, better-resourced employers and overwhelmingly only available to non-frontline workers. To ensure we are creating resources that are relevant to workplaces where vulnerable women and gender diverse people are employed, we expanded partnership development, piloted promising practices and convened cross-sectoral exchanges to discuss the possibilities and pitfalls of adopting and scaling the project recommendations and promising practices.

We revisited some of our initial recommendations for equitable workforce development in light of the workforce changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated increased attention to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) work in employment. For instance, our recommendation for flexible and hybrid arrangements has since been widely embedded into service delivery and certain workplaces and sectors, allowing for better balance of caregiving responsibilities and easing transportation costs for employees. However, frontline, service, and retail sectors – staffed primarily by women and equity-deserving groups – have not adopted flexible practices to the same degree, leaving many marginalized groups outside of the potential benefits associated with flexible work.

**Effective interventions for individuals and groups at the intersection of a range of systemic barriers require holistic, person-centered approaches to program design and delivery.**

Furthermore, with the rise of hybrid work arrangements, [proximity bias](#) (wherein employees who are in the office frequently are seen as more dedicated and better performing than remote workers, resulting in better pay and more advancement opportunities for on-site workers) needs to be acknowledged and addressed. Recent return-to-office mandates risk setting back the gains to gender equality realized through the work of Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) advocates.

Our research and knowledge mobilization work has focused on these complexities and convened cross-sectoral conversations to envision and enable policies that explicitly center the needs of women and gender diverse people in the workforce.

## 4 Holistic support strategies



**Continuity of  
Supports and Peer  
Engagement**



**Digital  
Connectivity**



**Capacity Building  
and Trauma-  
Informed**



**Culturally  
Responsive and  
Wraparound Supports**

The expanded learnings emerging from Community of practice forums include:

1. Continuity of supports and peer engagement
2. Digital connectivity and addressing the digital divide
3. Capacity building, staff training, and integration of trauma-informed approaches
4. Culturally responsive programming and wrap-around supports

With input and guidance from Member Associations and partner organizations, [a series of online modules](#) and learning tools were developed and disseminated to [advance trauma-informed approaches](#); [cultivate bold steps to workplace inclusion](#); and [foster hybrid work and performance management rooted in equity principles](#).

Included below are case studies and participant testimonials from our community-based programs. These vignettes indicate how key learnings have been incorporated into robust and responsive programming by Member Associations and provide positive models for community-focused services across Canada.

## FROM THE FIELD: IMPACT STORIES

### CASE STUDY 1: CONTINUITY OF SUPPORTS AND PEER ENGAGEMENT

YWCA Moncton's [Employment My Way program](#) enables women's and gender diverse individual's economic independence through self-employment. The 12-week training program trains participants to develop a business plan for their micro and small business ideas. Using a gender-based approach, specific barriers and challenges that women and gender diverse people face in the workforce and as entrepreneurs are identified. Additional supports in market research, financial literacy, marketing, communication and human resources are made available to enable participants to succeed in starting or building an enterprise.

Among the most resounding successful practices emanating from research were the continuity of supports offered to participants and the integration of peer programming. Participants are engaged and supported after completion of the program, through periodic check-ins and follow-ups, helping them navigate the self-employment process and benefit from a continuum of services and ongoing assistance. Beginning with asset mapping, coordinators support participants to use their skills to find appropriate employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. Coordinators also continued to provide one-on-one coaching, and networking opportunities to individuals who already completed the program.

**“It was my dream to have my own business and with this program I have been able to figure out my way. The facilitator provided us with all the necessary information and guidance to help build up not only our businesses, but also our confidence, and belief in ourselves, our power, and ability to go forward.”**

- Participant, Employment My Way, YWCA Moncton.

Further equity-forward practices incorporated have been to offer programming during times when women/parents with children will be available and able to attend (oftentimes during school hours and weekends), make sessions or workshops available online so that women/parents can access them from their own homes or while children are taken care of, and to provide childcare honorariums or childminding on site.

During intake, program coordinators noted that many participants seeking services were already employed, although often in precarious positions or with fewer hours or lower wages than they required. Individuals were supported in not only establishing themselves in self-employment, but also with career development if they identified that self-employment was not for them. Staff maintained contact with all past and current participants to provide individualized supports. One-on-one supports were also offered to participants who were not ready to enter the program. Some of the key barriers applicants or participants expressed related to essential needs such as housing and food security, and these individuals were referred to alternative services within YWCA Moncton, and through community partners.

Keeping in step with the success of peer-to-peer models, Moncton's Employment My Way program has also begun to offer group programming, as well as regular networking meetings with graduates from past cohorts. Most notably, participants benefited from the representation of community members and program alumni from similar social locations that faced or continue to face similar challenges. Participants mentioned the empowering effects of seeing and hearing from peers with mental health challenges, criminal records, and those that engaged in sex work or substance use, as they work to advance their labour market outcomes. In discussing contributors to their success, participants highlighted the importance of a community of peers modeling successful pathways, and the impact it had on shedding shame and stigma that they carried. For participants involved or exiting sex work, no one ever told them their entrepreneurial skills could be transferable, that their past experiences could inform and enable their labour market success.

**“We maintained contact with all participants (completed or left) to provide individualized supports. We also provided one-on-one supports to participants who were not ready to enter the program.”**

- Service Provider, YWCA Moncton

Crucially, the province of New Brunswick whose population until recently was comprised of only 4% immigrants has seen historic influxes of new arrivals since 2016. [The number of recent immigrants settling across Atlantic Canada has almost tripled](#) with introduction of the Atlantic Immigration Pilot project (AIP) and arrivals of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. The connections and networking opportunities baked into YWCA Moncton's programming allow newcomers to navigate the labour market and build necessary social capital and professional connections to overcome the realities of a hidden job market<sup>3</sup> that poses significant employment barriers and prefers to hire from within employer networks.

Participants who are already employed or secure employment after the program also benefit from provision of continued supports from other YWCA Member Associations. Women are supported to advance in their careers including learning new skills, applying for promotions, or looking for a new job. As an example, over half of the participants that enrolled in YWCA Thompson's [Steps to Success program](#) were already employed. Through continuous intake and year-round classes, this free program offers training and workshops on the skills necessary to get into or keep going in today's workplace. Based on participants' need and schedules, adult literacy and workplace essentials skills for success, and other training and upgrading opportunities are provided on an individual basis. This includes workshops and sessions on basic computer skills, Microsoft Office software, essay writing, Learners' Permit preparation, grammar, goal setting, dictionary use, mechanical reasoning and more.

The need for a continuum of supports that extends beyond the short-term or program duration was echoed by Kate Wilson, Director of YWCA Northwest Territories' (NWT) [Transitional Housing program](#), “it's not just a one-year journey. It's as long as they want us to be involved in their lives. Program staff work with families based on individual needs and connect with them based on how frequently they would like to be contacted.”

## **CASE STUDY 2: DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY AND ADDRESSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE**

Challenges of accessible virtual engagement and digital connectivity have risen to the fore with the pandemic-accelerated turn to online programming and reduction in onsite training and 1:1 supports. This has affected the approach, design, and facilitation of programming across YWCA Member Associations and the non-profit sector. While virtual programming can increase accessibility it can also impede participation of those that do not have access to or fluency around the systems, internet services, or equipment necessary to access online programs.

Member Associations utilized sponsorships and supported funding to loan smartphones, laptops, technological hardware, and software to participants or create digital device lending libraries to reduce this barrier. Others have incorporated new technologies and devices into their hybrid program models to ensure virtual participants equitable opportunities to fully participate in the programs offered such as OWL- 360° video conference cameras that have a 360-degree view of the room and shifts to allow participants online to see and hear from all attendees.

During intake, program coordinators noted that many participants seeking services were already employed, although often in precarious positions or with fewer hours or lower wages than they required. Individuals were supported in not only establishing themselves in self-employment, but also with career development if they identified that self-employment was not for them. Staff maintained contact with all past and current participants to provide individualized supports. One-on-one supports were also offered to participants who were not ready to enter the program. Some of the key barriers applicants or participants expressed related to essential needs such as housing and food security, and these individuals were referred to alternative services within YWCA Moncton, and through community partners.

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**“Phones are a great gift and service to provide, but if we could find someone who would provide Internet packages at a really discounted rate, or even better for free... We can give people all the computers and smartphones they want but if they cannot connect to the systems needed what is the point? That would be one of my wishes – that we would be able to get people set up so that they don't have to go to the library or to the coffee shop across the road, that they could work within their own space.”**

- Service Provider, YWCA Regina

While a number of Member Associations offered online services or planned to make virtual programs available prior to COVID-19, these were often conceived as a complimentary option to in-person programming. The public health-related restrictions on onsite programming increased the barriers that many YWCA programs fundamentally strive to eliminate: childcare and transportation. Without the ability to provide these services directly, programs established alternative supports such as honorariums and/or financial support for childcare, access to digital devices and internet, and outreach services. A key success by Member Associations during this period was the provision of smartphones and laptops through digital lending libraries or redirection of donated devices, however, in some cases staff noted that the inaccessibility of regular and affordable Internet packages, particularly in rural and remote areas, diluted the positive impact of these efforts.

Among the many YWCA programs that pivoted to digital delivery of workshops or included online streams is the [Building Opportunities for Women \(B.O.W\) program](#) at Sudbury YWCA Geneva House. The BOW Program is a 12-week education and support service for self-identified women 16+ who self-identify as having experienced, or feel they are at risk of experiencing, intimate partner violence in Sudbury & District 6 in Northeastern Ontario. The program was delivered in-person prior to the pandemic, in moving locations across the city of Greater Sudbury, often taken to outlying areas that are far-removed from essential supports. After COVID-19 emergency measures were put in place, the coordinator of the BOW program, swiftly modified the program to be delivered virtually. It is currently being offered to participants in remote (fully online) and in-person modalities to small groups of 10-15 participants.

Through these sessions, a skilled facilitator supports women in exploring their potential and achieving greater personal, social, and financial stability and skills while also learning about gendered violence. The BOW program also helps participants meet new people and gain exposure to relevant and exciting learning opportunities. Beginning with individualized and participatory goal-setting, the program includes information on identifying and interrupting abuse, staying safe and free from abuse, stress management and self-care, improving communication, budgeting, and access to employment, training or education.



Both the BOW Program's curriculum and ongoing qualitative program evaluation are based on a methodology of connection (to resources and one another), reflection (on their experiences and information received), and skill building (towards self-identified goals) that is trauma-informed and adapted to the increasing isolation faced by participants accessing online services. The facilitator was able to work with each participant to ensure internet access, which was a challenge for some members and is a consideration for the future. Where the facilitator would have provided refreshments during the in-person sessions, some funding was redirected to phone cards and other resources to ensure continuity of access.

**“This is an excellent program, it is empowering. New immigrants, women starting again after escaping abusive relationships and young women who are just starting out should attend this program. I learned how to take care of my mental health in every way possible. This program was a self-renewal for me. I learned about self-confidence and how to identify abuse.”**

- Participant, BOW program, Sudbury YWCA

Among the key aspects of the BOW program is enabling women to establish a trusted support network among one another. This objective stems from key learnings shared by past program participants demonstrating that meaningful connections are essential to empowering participants to get the most out of sessions and to access the public health, housing, education, and social services they are entitled to. Alongside boosting confidence and independence, the program also nurtures interdependence and community care. Social isolation and lack of social support have been identified as defining contributors to and consequences of Gender-Based violence (GBV) and Intimate Partner violence (IPV), keeping survivors and their families from seeking support or assistance. [Social support has been found to be an important factor in improving the physical and mental health outcomes of survivors of violence.](#) The program aims to address the needs of participants and survivors to connect with community after experiencing IPV or GBV. Program participants repeatedly highlighted the many opportunities offered to share and connect amongst themselves as a key takeaway from the program and underscored the violence prevention potential of these connections.

### **CASE STUDY 3: CAPACITY BUILDING, STAFF TRAINING, AND INTEGRATION OF TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES**

Participating Member Associations committed to redefining what wellbeing and growth looks like at work through culture shifts and policy changes to take better care of their teams. Staff at YWCA Regina were provided coaching opportunities through [Destination Leadership](#) to enhance their communication and leadership skills. Program staff also received [Mandt training](#) to reduce and address workplace violence through de-escalation techniques. Attendees were taught to recognize triggers in clients and themselves and equipped to serve people from a place of understanding.

Staff highlighted increased internal capacities and training to identify and triage the mental health needs and priorities of team members and direct them to appropriate services. They were trained to identify secondary and vicarious trauma in frontline service provision and better understand how to mitigate any effects on their own professional and personal lives. Other staff training opportunities included Occupational Health (OHC) training, Naloxone (NARCAN) training as well as Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) and First-Aid training. To extend the organization-wide benefits of these training programs, YWCA Regina enabled Work Experience placement students to access staff training.

Learning opportunities from a cultural perspective were also offered: staff had the opportunity to participate in a Blanket Exercise, were supported to attend Sweat Lodges or other ceremonies, and invited to attend meetings and sessions by marginalized and diverse groups. This has reportedly enabled them to expand what the YWCA Regina team looks like, understand the different cultures on the team, and better understand the communities they serve.

Alexis Losie, Senior Director of Operations at YWCA Regina, outlined a recent success where a worker self-identified a need for accessing counselling and the program was able to create flexibility during her workday to attend sessions and reduce barriers that she may have otherwise encountered with balancing home and care responsibilities. They were able to request scheduling around when her children needed to be picked up, provide additional childcare and transport supports, as well as invite the team member to attend Indigenous staff caucus meetings.

The program acknowledges how much people manage outside of their workday and aims to lessen the challenges associated with staff training and wellbeing. In addition, the program views the increased confidence and decision-making capabilities that staff and Work Experience students experience through counselling or therapy as a benefit to the program as a whole.




This has led to formal recognition of mental health or counselling sessions as part of staff professional development plans and budgets. YWCA Regina also actively encourages other employers with whom participants work on placements to make space and resources for mental health and change benefit structures to include broader conceptualizing of staff professional development and personal wellness.

The overarching focus on staff development at YWCA Regina has made it clearer to management that staff members have greater potential and should be given the right opportunities to realize and apply their skills. There is greater recognition that staff who are not currently in supervising roles or are performing responsibilities outside of their typical scope of work may thrive when given the opportunity to do so. In another instance, a member of staff applied for an internal posting and did not get the position. However, management identified their incredible potential and provided constructive feedback. Recognizing that the person struggled with confidence and English as an additional language, they were connected to an internal tutoring program and signed up the same day. The willingness to identify and invest in the skills and potential of staff members has contributed to increased trust, morale, and staff retention.

Overall,



**there was convergence among  
Member Associations around the  
need to embed a trauma-informed  
framework into every aspect of  
their work**



including labour market access interventions at all stages – beginning with client intake or staff recruitment and onboarding. For example, all paperwork within YWCA Sudbury's B.O.W program from intake forms to evaluation surveys have been framed with a trauma-informed lens using the principles of safety, trust, cultural relevance, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. Documents that include potentially sensitive queries about participants' social or cultural identity are reviewed to ensure participants are providing only required information and in a way that is simple, fast, respectful, and relevant. Participants are invited to identify themselves using the language and terminology that is most comfortable or aligned with them whether in relation to religious, ethnic, or racial identity, their gender or sexual orientation, and to share as little or as much about the nature and extent of their experiences with gender-based violence.

#### **CASE STUDY 4: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PROGRAMMING AND WRAPAROUND SUPPORTS**

Interventions and programs that provided holistic, whole person support and culturally responsive, context appropriate programming reported reduced participant attrition and significant positive outcomes in their communities.

Participating Member Associations offer Talking Circles facilitated by Elders, provide culturally resonant food, and programming that identifies and works with issues particular to a community.

Through their [Transitional Housing](#) umbrella program, YWCA Northwest Territories' (NWT) offers safe, supported, temporary and emergency housing options to women and families. Utilizing a client-driven, strength-based, gender-based, and trauma-informed approach, the program guides clients towards programs, services and resources that empower them to transform their lives and that of their families. YWCA NWT offers both all-inclusive, wraparound programming as well as intensive personal supports for all transitional housing clients. Employment programs are available for those who identify as ready to work as well as those who wish to prepare to work if they are not. These supports are not limited in duration to one year, rather involvement and support is offered for as long as clients need to be attached to YWCA's programming.

All clients at Family Housing and Lynn's Place Safe Housing for Women are encouraged and supported to attend specialized programming streams offered. FOCUS Employment Program assists clients transition into employment by providing career development support, advice, and guidance. It includes everything from addressing the root causes of why clients cannot find and keep employment in the first place, to assisting with resume preparation and job search, and money management and budgeting after they receive their first and ongoing pay cheques.

Alongside the wraparound services, the program now offers in-depth personal support recognizing that many clients get by on low-incomes, have been unemployed long-term, are receiving income assistance or unemployment support, and have had previous or current issues with finding and keeping suitable employment. At our employment equity Community of Practice, NWT Program Director Kate Wilson shared the significance of meeting individually with clients and families to discuss their specific needs, collectively map goals, and plan support accordingly. Understanding the need for childcare supports, staff have been made available to supervise and engage kids in learning and play as parents attend programming. Literacy and computer skills are another focus of the Transitional Housing Program. Family support workers and other skilled local organizations work with clients and children to assist with literacy skills and basic computer skills such as word processing, email, and more.

The program models 1:1 resource navigation and job supports to connect clients with local employers and assist job placements. Through years of service delivery expertise, program coordinators recognize that finding and keeping a job is much more complex than preparing a resume and finding job opportunities that match participant skill sets.

Even when they have the requisite skills, there may be insecurities around being out of the workforce or being precariously housed. Before embarking on their employment journey participants need housing insecurity and food insecurity to be addressed. YWCA NWT staff provide daily support to their clients with navigating the systems and processes for their various needs including income support, education, childcare, health, and cooking. Many of the clients with whom YWCA NWT works have been out of the workforce for long periods of time, are new immigrants who are unfamiliar with the Canadian workplace, and/or have various issues and impediments that impact their job finding abilities and success (e.g., lack of training/education, lack of affordable childcare, addictions etc.).

The program invests time in supporting clients to navigate all the factors that deter them from finding and keeping suitable employment. Food insecurity at the individual and community level has been identified as a key barrier in the area. Staff recognize that when a person is hungry or does not have adequate shelter, they are unable to focus on getting a job and keeping themselves out of poverty. Families in Yellowknife often do not have enough money to buy food, given the astronomically high food prices in the region. Cooking and Nutrition Programs teach basic principles of good nutrition in a respectful way and provide families with nutritious, culturally-appropriate and traditional food, and support for families to live healthy lives with dignity.

The need to develop and maintain community linkages and engage peer leaders is another feature of NWT's programming model. Through established ties with local grocery stores, butchers and co-ops, the Food Box Program allows individuals to purchase meat and traditional foods at a much lower price than prices at the supermarket and offers a 'hand up' and not a 'hand out'. During a Research Visit to YWCA NWT in 2020, YWCA Canada's Research Officer noted that many program attendees mentioned how much they liked being able to access the Food Rescue program – an initiative that redistributes unsold food at the grocery store to local charities and organizations. YWCA NWT support workers help facilitate access to this program to give clients another avenue to access food. YWCA NWT also works with housing clients in various other ways to ensure they are able to feed their families – this ranges from providing heavily discounted meat through a partnership with the local butcher, as well as providing grocery cards to families when money is really tight so they can get what they need when they need it.

Leveraging local ties and relationships, the program is able to offer clients transportation provided through partnerships with taxi companies. According to the Program Director, these services are offered "whether they are attending employment programming or going for counseling or to the hospital, or going to work, or training or coming to the center for food."

Other allies in the community assist with everything from event set-up to furniture assembly and contributions to client 'starter kits' that include clothes, pantry items, laundry supplies, furniture, and toys for families with children. This deep community connection has also helped them successfully recruit and engage past clients in peer-to-peer education and mentorship.

Across all Member Association programming, the value of wraparound services is well understood. YWCA Regina offered all participants support around criminal record checks and acquiring driver's licenses. In addition, responding to a barrier identified by participants who couldn't afford or didn't have access to a vehicle for their driver's test or training, they make their fleet vehicles available to participants and work experience staff for driver training with staff. They have also loaned the program vehicles as a car for participants and staff to use for their driver's exam that passes the safety inspection.

Participants of YWCA Toronto's Skills Development Centre, Moving On To Success and Education & Training Institute who are seeking employment benefit from a combination of wrap-around services and supports such as paid/sponsored training, placement, advancement learning opportunities and/or personal supports. Many of their participants have been out of the workforce for a long period and are transitioning or re-entering, or are new to Canada, and face multiple barriers. All women who applied to participate, whether they joined the program or not, received the referrals and resources to move forward towards education and employment endeavours and become more ready and confident to take the next steps required to apply for employment or begin upgrading/developing the necessary skills. YWCA Toronto works with participants in a supportive environment doing group-based work and one-on-one supports to build a customized Action Plan based on their strengths, assets and goals. The aim is to connect women with employment and/or further education that are aligned with their self-identified goals and priorities.

## **HOW WE MOVE FORWARD: BUILDING FEMINIST FUTURES OF WORK**

### **Expanding Knowledge Mobilization**

Despite decades of advocacy and service delivery experience, the impact of research evidence from community organizations on workplace policies and practices is not strong enough. Community organizations have the potential to be catalysts and key contributors to broader labour market changes. Evidence-based recommendations from equity-deserving groups and the sector that serves them are essential to designing policies that meet the need of women and gender diverse people.

To maximize the impact and use of our findings, YWCA Canada has been developing our communication and dissemination strategies to reach more audiences. Research findings communicated in the form of traditional reports exclude many knowledge users and potential beneficiaries of research. Delivering research findings in different forms and mediums throughout the research process has improved our ability to link and engage with cross-sectoral partners and communities closest to issues to advance collective priorities. This has allowed us to validate and contextualize research findings, increase uptake of recommendations, and advocate for research-informed policy changes that yield better equity outcomes.

### **Scaling Existing Models of Education and Employment Programming**

Individuals from marginalized groups face distinct challenges in accessing education to help them advance into meaningful and gainful employment. These include discriminatory employment standards, language requirements, and accessibility barriers. A key learning from the project (and YWCA's broader work with equity-seeking communities) is that most employment interventions have not fully considered (or been resourced to support) the economic and social responsibilities of participants. Partnerships between educational institutions, employers and community organizations have helped develop continuing training opportunities that are responsive to in-demand skills or industry changes, and deliver it in formats that are flexible and suited to those seeking to acquire new skills. When women and gender diverse people are trained for high demand jobs, their employment opportunities expand and that is good for the entire economy.

Flexible and supported micro-credential opportunities help women and other equity-deserving groups upskill themselves in ways that are accessible to learners with varying needs. YWCA Canada Member Associations run a number of low barrier and supported education, training, and placement programs that center the needs of marginalized communities. YWCAs across Ontario collaboratively offer the Uplift Program to provide fully funded training and employment support to help women transition into high-skill jobs in sectors where they are traditionally underrepresented. YWCA Canada's Uplift Program provides women and non-binary people the opportunity to enhance and acquire skills and knowledge to enter the information and cybersecurity field through certification training with a provincially recognized educational institution and additional supports related to navigating non-traditional workplaces and job development. All training expenses for participants are covered by the program and paid by FedDev Ontario.

This model has been adapted and scaled from YWCA Hamilton's Uplift program that offers training in advanced manufacturing and specialized technology as well as Data Science. Training has been adapted to respond to local labour market demands. YWCA Kitchener-Waterloo offers a Data Analytics certificate, YWCA Cambridge's training includes Project Management, and YWCA St. Thomas-Elgin offers training in AutoCAD and design software. Rapid and responsive training pathways hold immense potential as inclusive labour market pathways for jobseekers and as a platform for partnerships with employers committed to equitable employment practices.

### **Continuing Cross-Sectoral Engagement and Coalitional Work**

Throughout the arc of this work, YWCA Canada facilitated cross-sectoral dialogue and interactive knowledge exchanges on how inclusive policies can be mainstreamed into workplace structures and policies. We developed and shared strategies for improving job access and retention and engaged employers in learning and training activities. We partnered and consulted with private sector employers to ensure that they sustainably recruit, retain, and invest in women and gender diverse people, and plan for equitable workforce development and diversification. Engaging employers directly in this work as champions increased the number of people we were able to reach and deepened our engagement with decision makers.

Through this broad engagement, we drew attention to the persistent barriers that prevent the promising practices from being universally applied across workplaces and sectors. Even as some recommendations are being implemented by employers and sector partners, they are not always done in an equity-focused manner. Roundtables uncovered the surface-level attention to intersectional needs of the Canadian workforce when incorporating flexible/hybrid work policies. The project delivered effective policymaker- and employer-focused recommendations and thought leadership.

Private sector and non-profit organizations that attended sessions, received training and/or formed connections with us during the project have made meaningful commitments to further gender equity. This willingness to discuss and co-develop strategies to mainstream GBA+ approaches into workplace policies was evident among roundtable participants and partners. Through the project's knowledge mobilization, key insights were shared with employers, service providers and the public sector to guide the implementation of equity-enhancing policies, practices, and processes.

The project-identified promising practices were shared with YWCA senior leadership to inform YWCA program standards and practices. Capacity-strengthening and training opportunities made possible by the project were widely accessed and implemented across the broader YWCA Canada movement. Training, support and micro credentialing opportunities for frontline staff were taken up by and embedded into programs and interventions beyond the scope of the project.

### **Resourcing Multi-Service Organizations for Human-Centric Progress**

Multi-Service Organizations (MSOs) such as YWCA Canada are deeply connected to communities they serve and offer a broad range of services in response to emerging community priorities. People facing multiple, complex, and interrelated challenges can tremendously benefit from sustained, comprehensive, and integrated supports over time. Housing these services under "one-roof" in multi-service agencies or community hubs can lead to greater access and uptake of services. Even when MSOs do not directly provide a certain service, they usually have the connections and local knowledge to provide referrals, resource navigation, and collaborate effectively with other organizations that can offer the service.

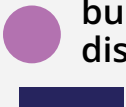
YWCA Canada and YWCA Member Associations offer a suite of supports including housing services, educational and training programs, harm reduction services, survivor support, financial literacy programs, job development, youth programs, and childcare supports. Staff at YWCA Member Associations work with individuals and families in the community to co-create development plans; understand what supports are needed to achieve those outcomes and what barriers may impede them; provide those services in a coordinated way; and follow up to ensure the individuals and families attain their goals. Standalone employment services run the risk of not seeing or supporting participants and jobseekers as a whole person with multi-faceted needs and priorities. Community organizations, such as YWCA Member Associations, understand the context of their clients' lives and are uniquely positioned to offer holistic support.

Current funding models largely support individual programs or relatively narrow sets of activities and outcomes. Most funders are relatively unwilling to support integrated service models. This does not allow for or account for movement of participants from one service to another and does not cover the staff time, processes, and measurement involved in ‘care coordination’ among services. Flexible funding streams are required to better resource MSOs to provide coordinated services. Evaluations methods must also be adapted to be outcomes-oriented and not target-based. To realize the full potential of MSOs for social impact, it is necessary to break down organizational silos and ensure diversified and flexible funding to improve service quality and client-centric outcomes.

### **Putting the Care Economy at the Center of Recovery and Restructuring Efforts**

Caregiving is essential work. Whether home-based or community-based, whether for children, aging adults, or people with disabilities or chronic illness, care is fundamental to how we function as a society. The provision of care must be recognized as critical social infrastructure and a vital sector of the economy. Affordable, accessible, high-quality and universal childcare is a necessary precondition to an equitable, feminist economic recovery. Any progress made towards improved wages and work conditions for women and gender diverse people in Canada, however, could be stymied if not accompanied by continuous investments in the care economy.

The pandemic has shone a light on the inequitable gendered distribution of caregiver labour in our country. Women, particularly Black, Indigenous, racialized and immigrant women take on most of the care burden and are over-represented in the care workforce. [Robust public investments in care will add millions of jobs, particularly for women, and provide significant returns to the economy, while also supporting children’s development.](#) This could engender a shift in what is viewed and valued as a priority growth area of the economy.



**As Canada’s second-largest childcare provider, we know that coordinated care services can help build an inclusive workforce and dismantle barriers to decent work.**

The expansion of Canada-wide early learning and childcare agreements can ease the entry and ensure the return of women from equity-deserving groups into paid work. However, many sectors and segments (e.g., shift workers and rural communities) have been left out of these arrangements. According to a May 2023 report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, [nearly half of Canadian children younger than kindergarten age live in childcare deserts – areas of the country facing a serious shortage of available licensed childcare spaces.](#) This gap is even more pronounced for rural and remote communities.

In current conditions, the promise of \$10/day childcare is not going to be easily realized because the sector cannot sustainably recruit and retain Early Childhood Educators (ECEs). Meaningful inroads to workforce participation depend on strengthening the care economy. Given our childcare expertise and presence in 9 territories and 2 provinces, YWCA Canada is well-positioned to be a national leader in ECE training and placements. Through credentialed training and placement at our childcare centers, YWCA Canada could advance women and gender diverse people into the early learning and childcare sector. This would address the deep and significant care gaps or ‘care deserts’ in communities across Canada, the lack of care arrangements that support shift workers, the opportunities to integrate community childcare providers (e.g. YWCA) with on-site childcare provision at workplaces, and the need to interrogate, broaden, and shift understandings of ‘in-demand skills’ to include childcare and other critical infrastructures that sustain more recognized growth areas of the economy such as manufacturing and the tech sector.

YWCA Member Associations have holistically integrated care considerations into all aspects of program design and deliver. YWCA Moncton has incorporated childcare supports and subsidies across all programs. On account of the lack of spaces and long waitlists to get children into an Early Learning Centre (ELC) or affordable day-care, they have made onsite childminding options available for program participants. Coordinating transportation and childminding is the designated role (0.5 FTE) of one staff member, demonstrating the need and will to allocate adequate resources to making programs more accessible for participants. Through the Synergy project, YWCA Canada has partnered with employers to fostering gender-responsive, inclusive, family-friendly work policies, such as pay equity, maternal and paternal leave, flexible working arrangements, and adjustments to compensation matrices that include care allowances. In these and other ways, YWCA Member Associations across the country work to address systemic barriers and provide inclusive services that leave no one behind.



## Endnotes

1 Employment that offers consistent work, job security, safe working conditions, wages to sustain a meaningful living, and that is free from all forms of violence and discrimination.

2 While this figure may appear modest, it is to be noted that this number reflects the number of participants who were employed, self-employed, or enrolled in further training prior to or on the date the program ended. Those participants who received employment offers and started entrepreneurial ventures after the program end date are not reflected in these statistics.

3 The hidden job market is a term used to describe over 80% of the job opportunities in Canada that employers do not publicly advertised or post online. The job-seeking efforts of many newcomer are limited to jobs that are advertised online through portals, company websites, and social media, thereby missing out on opportunities that are hidden or made available to industry connections. The hidden job market relies heavily on referrals to fill positions, rather than applicants responding to job listings. Employers may reach out to their own networks, including internal staff and professional peers, or actively recruit from competitors. This further disadvantages candidates without significant Canadian, local, or sectoral professional experience and connections.