

Project Insights Report

# Synergy: Workforce Development for Vulnerable Women to Succeed



**PARTNERS**

YWCA Canada



**LOCATIONS**

Across Canada



**INVESTMENT**

\$686,161



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## Executive Summary

The project aimed to advance gender equity in the Canadian labour market and address the unique challenges women and equity-deserving groups face in accessing gainful employment.

YWCA Canada and participating member associations from nine provinces and territories, identified and implemented community-based strategies for enhancing resilience and inclusion in the Canadian workforce.

The project provided skills training and pre-employment programming to more than 1,200 women and gender diverse people, with over 75% of participants completing employment readiness and placement programs.

The project generated program design recommendations to improve labour market outcomes for women and gender diverse individuals including flexible work or programming hours, schedules, and locations; providing childcare and transportation supports and subsidies; strengthening training and recognition of skills and experience; and peer programming and communities of support.

This project demonstrates the importance of community service organizations in the collaborative efforts to reduce barriers to the workforce for equity-deserving groups.

### KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 More than 1,200 participants across four pilot sites.
- 2 Over 75% of participants completed employment readiness and placement programs.

## ► The Issue

The extensive work of YMCA with more than 300,000 women and families across its 30 member associations in nine provinces and two territories, has highlighted that women and gender diverse people are confronted with systemic barriers that inhibit them from accessing the labour market.

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

Over the course of 2019-2020, YWCA conducted research with its member associations to better understand promising practices for engaging vulnerable women in the workforce. The research included a review of the literature, surveys, group discussions, and interviews with women accessing YWCA programming from Calgary, Halifax, Moncton, Montreal, Northwest Territories, Regina, Sudbury, Thompson, Toronto, and Vancouver. The key feedback from women who participated included:

- Access to **affordable, accessible and flexible childcare**, limits mother's available hours to work. The majority of research participants relayed a need for free or more affordable childcare options. To address these barriers, social service agencies should incorporate childminding as a core part of the design of all programs serving women, while employers can offer childcare subsidies, flexible work schedules, or childcare on site.
- Many participants expressed **educational or professional work experience requirements** in employment opportunities as a barrier to accessing gainful employment, often saying employers' were inflexible or disregarded lived experiences in lieu of education or professional experience. Many research participants said accepting or acknowledging lived experience in work recruitment was needed, particularly by mothers, young women, and newcomer women.
- The top recommendation and request from participants for improving their access to gainful employment was the need for **flexible working hours, schedules, and locations**. Whether due to care duties, disability, trauma, transportation, or safety, flexible working hours would drastically improve various women's ability to engage in and thrive in a work environment. The possibility of remote work, with provision of necessary equipment and resources, would give many women the ability to work while being available for dependents' needs as well as reducing transportation costs, needs, or barriers.
- More than 50% of the women who participated in the research were from households with incomes under \$30,000, and many mentioned housing security as a chief concern. Given this, employers and programming for women should offer **paid training, placement, and learning opportunities**.



## What We Investigated

This project sought to build on this research, by piloting and evaluating workforce interventions to improve labour market access for women and gender diverse individuals.

Working with YWCAs in Vancouver, Northwest Territories, Calgary, Regina, Thompson, Sudbury, Toronto, Montreal, Moncton and Halifax, the project aimed to answer the following research questions:

- How can a gender-based-analysis-plus (GBA+) lens improve labour market access programming and service provision for women and equity-deserving groups?
- What are the promising practices that can support gainful employment for these groups?
- How can these practices be mobilized and scaled up across different sectors and regions?

To answer these questions, the project involved three phases:

- The first phase piloted four promising practices at four YWCAs: accessible childcare, flexible work arrangements, skills recognition and paid training/placements and peer programming. Each site made efforts to incorporate one to three promising practices into existing programming and staff received training in evaluation and reporting to support cross-site knowledge exchange.
- The second phase incorporated key insights from the first phase into program design and delivery across 10 sites in Canada.
- The third phase involved putting into action the ideas and suggestions from groups, such as businesses, government stakeholders and community organizations. This included creating online

modules, organizing roundtables with employers nationwide, and organizing peer-to-peer communities of practice.

This project also included an effort to use community-based approaches and collaborative outcome reporting across pilot sites to understand the effectiveness and impact. YWCA Canada coordinated the evaluation effort using 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 jobs, make career advancements, or start their own businesses after completing the program.

## **What We're Learning**

There were 1,243 participants across the four initial pilot sites and more than 75% of them completed employment readiness and placement training. Following the training, 38% of participants got jobs, started a business, or enrolled in further training programs. Another 47% felt ready and more confident in applying for jobs or starting their own business.

Based on the foundational research and the experiences of member associations implementing promising practices, project partners developed recommendations to guide program design to improve labour market outcomes for women and gender-diverse individuals.

### **Flexible work or programming hours, schedules, and locations**

- Extended hours or flexible scheduling, making support available online, by phone, or providing flexible locations
- Providing computer equipment and Internet access to mitigate the digital divide
- Formalized training programs and equitable guidelines to empower employees to use the different technologies and equipment

### **Provide childcare and transportation supports and subsidies**

- Free or more affordable childcare options with extended hours and on-site childminding or accessible childcare locations
- Offering equitable parental leave
- Context-specific and based on individual needs-assessment

### **Strengthen training and recognition of skills and experience**

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

## Peer programming and communities of support

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

In addition to the results from the pilot implementation, the participating member associations developed three training modules for employers and employment service providers, incorporating lessons learned from this project: Hybrid work and performance management; Bold steps to inclusion; and Advancing trauma-informed approaches in the workplace.

## Collaborative outcome reporting is not easy

Efforts to aggregate quantitative data on the effectiveness and impact of the pilots across sites proved challenging. The pandemic brought restrictions on service offerings, pausing of in-person services and pivoting to virtual services, reallocation of staff, all of which had a negative impact on the ability to use evaluation tools as planned. For example, program coordinators noted that prior to the pandemic, program evaluations were typically completed on paper, in-person, after each session with consistently high response rates. However, when evaluation tools were shared as a digital link at the end of each session, response rates decreased, became less consistent, and less accurate – with some participants completing the surveys multiple times. In response to these challenges, YWCA Canada supplemented participant surveys and quarterly activity reports with community of practice meetings where program staff and coordinators could openly share challenges they encountered, changes that were made, and impacts and benefits of these efforts for participants and the broader communities served.

## ★ Why It Matters

Effective interventions for women and gender diverse people recognize the intersectionality of barriers that each individual faces, such as housing insecurity, single parenthood, and discrimination. Such interventions require holistic, person-centered approaches to program design and delivery that are adaptable to changing needs and situations. Evidence from research and evaluation, alongside the direct feedback of equity-deserving groups and the sector that serves them are essential to designing policies and programs that work.

Community organizations have the potential to be catalysts and key contributors to broader labour market changes. 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.



**State of Skills:**  
**Sustainable jobs for economic growth**

Multi-service organizations (MSOs) such as YWCA Canada are deeply connected to the communities they serve and offer a broad range of services in response to emerging community priorities. People facing multiple, complex, and interrelated challenges can benefit from sustained, comprehensive, and integrated supports over time. 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.

Green-related skills and knowledge are growing in significance and are becoming widespread across many sectors and occupations, requiring more workers to upskill by building upon their existing competencies.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

Flexible funding streams are required to better support MSOs in providing coordinated services, including working more closely with training organizations and employers, especially for those aiming to diversify their workforces and attract groups that include women and gender-diverse people.

The efforts in this project to report on collaborative outcomes across sites highlights the complexity of this type of evaluation. There are lessons in this project for other non-profit organizations in how to foster a culture of evidence-informed programming, learning and improvement when locations are dispersed and programming models are diverse.

## ► What's Next

The project shared the promising practices with senior leadership and frontline staff to inform YWCA program standards and practices. The project also offered training, support and micro credentialing opportunities for frontline staff and other frontline providers to strengthen their service capacity and embed a trauma-informed and intersectional GBA+ framework into their interventions. As a result, member associations have embedded these principles into their existing employment training and advancement programs to better respond to emerging needs in communities.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact [communications@fsc-ccf.ca](mailto:communications@fsc-ccf.ca).

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