

# MAKING THE ECONOMY WORK FOR EVERYONE: Intersectionality and Power



Confidence in the economy is shaped by the health of the population, and one pillar of that involves race, gender, class and other factors that intersect to impact marginalization and oppression.

*by Carmina Ravanera and Anjum Sultana*



**IN RECENT MONTHS**, federal, provincial, territorial and municipal Canadian governments have speedily implemented policy measures to address the economic, health and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there has been limited gender-based analysis of these measures and little-to-no intersectional analysis, either in the design of the policies or in understanding their impacts.

In Canada, gender-based analysis is mandated for all federal budget measures. The analytical framework is called GBA+: gender-based analysis, with the '+' representing the various intersecting identities that should be considered. Although there were promising actions taken before the pandemic — such as appointing a gender-balanced cabinet and the passage of the

*Canadian Gender Budgeting Act* — the lack of gender-based as well as intersectional analysis in shaping post-pandemic recovery policies thus far is deeply concerning.

'Intersectionality', developed in 1989 by Black feminist academic **Kimberlé Crenshaw**, is an analytic framework that describes how aspects of one's identity such as race, gender, class and other factors *intersect* to compound both marginalization and privilege. It is necessary to design all of our post-pandemic recovery measures using this lens, and to understand how policies work for people across many different social locations, including but not limited to race, age, gender identity, gender expression, disability, socio-economic status, sexual orientation and immigration status.

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One of the most significant actions the government can take now is to mandate the collection of disaggregated data on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic along these multiple dimensions of social identities. This data would allow policymakers to assess whether post-pandemic economic recovery policies are having intended effects, or if they are widening inequities. They could also allow policymakers to pivot programs and policies to better reduce inequities.

For instance, because Canada has not tracked COVID-19 statistics by race, its impacts on Indigenous, Black, and other marginalized communities cannot be fully ascertained. As scholar **Akua Benjamin** has noted in her work, “insidious silence or shunning (the absence and negation of racialized groups) have

become normative practices [of racism] within institutions.” Policy advocates and researchers have called for the development of disaggregated data for many decades, and this pandemic provides the window to finally realize this call to action.

In the data that has been released thus far on COVID-19, there has not been a full recognition of the unique vulnerabilities and contexts experienced by Indigenous communities. Researcher **Courtney Skye** has elaborated that, “The lived realities of First Nations are not captured and represented fairly. Clearly, First Nations have less access to healthcare, reporting, transparency. It’s frustrating, because you want to see people treated fairly and considered equally.”

Better data collection and analysis will be essential not just

### A Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for Canada by Sarah Kaplan and Maya Roy

The COVID-19 pandemic has had enormous impact in Canada and around the world. Globally, over a million people have tragically lost their lives to the illness. The pandemic has also had powerful economic consequences and securing the future of Canada’s economy is now top of mind for Canadian residents — whether they have lost their job, shuttered their business or are serving as frontline workers in essential services.

2020 marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the most comprehensive set of globally agreed-upon recommendations to advance gender equality. What might have been the moment to reflect on how far we have come as an international community may be seen as the year that the gains to advance gender equality over the last few decades unravelled. Without attention to inequity in post-pandemic recovery, a potential decline in our achievements is a real threat, given the gendered economic, health and social impacts of the pandemic across all aspects of society.

A paradigm shift is afoot. A broader range of people across Canada are now seeing the importance of feminized and racialized labour for our health and well-being — where women, especially women of colour and recent immigrants, are leading the response to a major health crisis and preventing further economic and social fallout. However, there was much that was not working before COVID-19. It took a pandemic for the country

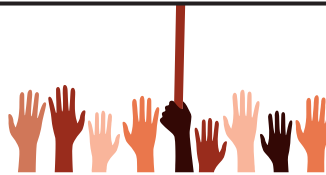
to see what was already broken. We cannot ignore the historical context that has created the unstable foundation for the harms we are seeing play out in this current crisis.

In the past few decades, Canada has made major strides towards a more gender-inclusive workforce — with cis women, trans women, non-binary, Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people gaining greater access to employment and advancement. But systemic barriers still exist — and the first phase of the pandemic’s economic downturn has shown that gender inequities are influencing who is bearing the brunt of the pandemic’s effects.

What lies before us is an opportunity to reimagine our future — a future that disrupts the thinking about who counts in our economy. The pandemic has revealed who is truly essential and the degree to which the caring economy — both paid and unpaid — underpins our entire economic system. After all, our Canadian public healthcare system materialized from the Great Depression and World Wars. Advocates for human rights and social justice recognized, as did the broader public, that building a strong safety net protects us all.

As Canada rebuilds, we can realign the economy around equity for all Canadians. The proposals in our report — “A Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for Canada: Making the Economy Work for Everyone” — offer an intersectional perspective on how we can recover from this crisis and weather difficult times

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for COVID-19 recovery but for longer-term adaptability to economic trends such as automation — to which Black, Indigenous, and racialized women, Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people are more vulnerable. For example, 33.8 per cent of Indigenous workers across Canada are working in sectors that face a higher risk of automation.

Note that the collection of race-based data is fraught because of histories of exploitation and its use in advancing discriminatory policies in many countries around the world. Rightfully, many communities facing marginalization are wary because of historical harm done to them through surveillance. As such, it is crucial that data collection be done in an ethical and sensitive way. It is especially important to implement guidelines around who has

access to and owns data. The First Nations Principles of OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access and Production) provide standards for how data collection and research can be done ethically.

### Addressing Root Causes of Systemic Racism

Recent events have shown very clearly how the historic and ongoing processes and generational impacts of colonization and the transatlantic slave trade continue to produce economic, political and social inequality in Canada. Many different racialized communities have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is important to focus on the needs of Indigenous and Black communities facing disproportionate impacts due to historic and current systemic racism.

ahead, while ensuring the needs of all people in Canada are considered in the formation of policy.

To truly create an economy that works for everyone, actions that resist, counteract and dismantle sexism, anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous colonial racism, anti-Semitism, bigotry, biphobia, colonialism, queerphobia, homophobia, Islamophobia, misogyny, patriarchy, transphobia, xenophobia, and hate and discrimination in all its forms will be essential.

As organizations strive to be anti-racist, anti-oppressive, feminist and progressive, they cannot ignore and must explicitly name that the foundations of this nation and the resultant economy were built on the backs of Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities; newcomer, immigrant, refugee and non-status workers; LGBTQ+ communities; people with disabilities; women, Two-Spirit and gender-diverse people and many other communities that experience marginalization and discrimination.

The eight pillars put forth in our report — one of which appears above — should not be considered as an exhaustive list, but rather as a starting point for action. Several other organizations are putting forward their own plans and policies to build back better. Our contributions should be viewed as complementary, additive and mutually reinforcing to those many ongoing efforts within Canada and around the world.

However, we see these eight steps as non-negotiable if

Canada hopes to generate future prosperity. An unwavering focus on creating a more inclusive economy is essential not only to aid the recovery from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, but to ensure well-being for decades to come. Societies will be increasingly challenged by the cascading impacts of a phenomenon that will transform large economies in the world: population aging. Simply put, we need to 'build back better' by tackling systemic inequalities. Inclusion must extend to both inputs and outcomes. Going forward, inclusion must be the metric when asking for contributions or distributing benefits to achieve societal goals.

**Sarah Kaplan** is Director of the Institute for Gender and the Economy (GATE), Distinguished Professor of Gender and the Economy and Professor of Strategic Management at the Rotman School of Management. She is the author of *The 360-Degree Corporation: From Stakeholder Trade-Offs to Transformation* (Stanford Business Books, 2019). **Maya Roy** is CEO of YWCA Canada. "A Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for Canada: Making the Economy Work for Everyone" was co-published by YWCA Canada and the Institute for Gender and the Economy. The full report is available online.

## Confidence in the economy is shaped by the health of the population.



To have an inclusive and healthy economy, all forms of anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism must be rooted out from all aspects of society, from the criminal justice system to education to healthcare. That means including the voices and recommendations developed and driven by Indigenous and Black communities.

Anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism has long affected the economic opportunities of these communities, resulting in outcomes including lower employment rates, lower savings and reduced incomes, on average. For example, research estimates that occupational concentration in certain sectors and wage discrimination led to CAD\$1.5 billion in losses for Black workers in the Canadian workforce in 2006. A study from **Statistics Canada** found that in 2014, 13 per cent of Black Canadians compared to six per cent of non-Black Canadians experienced discrimination over the course of a job search process or on the job.

Indigenous and Black women and gender-diverse people face intersecting marginalization due to gender inequity. For instance, Indigenous women working full-time, all year round earn an average of 35 per cent less than Indigenous men. A discussion of an economy without this explicit acknowledgment would be incomplete and inaccurate. More than platitudes, concrete action must be taken to address the historical and ongoing instances of inequities and discrimination.

As Dr. **Cindy Blackstock** and **Isadore Day** have noted, only \$305 million or less than one per cent of the federal government's COVID-19 funding went to Indigenous communities. This amount is insufficient to address the scale of concerns highlighted herein. Systemic changes are needed and the policy recommendations we offer below point towards meaningful actions that can be taken. Their implementation must be supported by targeted funding to Indigenous-led women's organizations to support gender-based programming and economic development.

Many are now calling systemic racism against Indigenous and Black communities a public health crisis that has laid the groundwork for COVID-19's devastating impact. The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted these communities because of their over-representation in essential occupations in the care sector, a lack of culturally responsive healthcare services, and systemically racist healthcare systems that devalue and deprioritize their needs.

Racism makes it likely that Indigenous and Black communities have limited access to protections such as adequate and safe housing, equitable working conditions, and paid sick leave, which are all social determinants of health. Because of these systemic factors, Indigenous communities may be more vulnerable to illness due to underlying health conditions such as the increased likelihood of diabetes. Many Indigenous communities also do not have access to clean water, and live in overcrowded conditions.

While race-based data on COVID-19 has yet to be released in Canada, recent analysis suggests that in Toronto, there is an association between coronavirus rates and neighbourhoods with large Black populations, indicating systemic racism experienced by Black communities is correlated with poorer health outcomes related to COVID-19. Studies have also shown that Canada is underestimating the number of Indigenous people with COVID-19, as a result of a lack of reliable data collection and patchwork public services for Indigenous communities.

Indigenous and Black communities have been calling for policymakers to address these concerns, to ensure health and well-being and to address employment disparities. This is of foremost importance in the post-pandemic recovery period. As Mi'kmaq lawyer Dr. **Pamela Palmater** notes, "Canada's pandemic response must include a gendered lens that not only develops emergency measures for Indigenous peoples developed in partnership with Indigenous governments, but it must include a plan to address the specific vulnerabilities of Indigenous women and girls, done in partnership with Indigenous women".

There have been many carefully studied recommendations developed by Black and Indigenous communities to address these systemic inequities. We echo the call for their implementation, as the need for them is only greater in the midst of the pandemic. We take guidance from the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Calls for Justice in the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Report, the Parliamentary Black Caucus, the Black Health Alliance, and the City of Toronto's Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism, and urge the prioritization of recommendations relating to disaggregated data, decent work, economic security, ensuring access to health services, addressing police brutality and representative leadership. We also emphasize the importance of Indigenous-led work on the environment

and the ways in which environmental concerns intersect with employment, health and many other types of inequity.

The **United Nations** is currently marking the International Decade for People of African Descent, which spans from the years 2015 to 2024. While there has been some recognition in Canada of this significant milestone, substantial investments in change have not followed. In the 2018 Budget, the federal government made a commitment of \$19 million over five years for Black mental health programming services. Black communities are calling for more tangible actions and robust investments, such as making marked changes in the healthcare system and in the economy as a whole to better address the needs of Black communities.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATION 1:** Implement the Calls to Action in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report and the Calls for Justice in the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry Report, especially:

- (a) Ensure that Indigenous peoples and especially women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people have equitable access to jobs, training, and education opportunities, and that they gain long-term sustainable benefits from economic development projects. Programs for employment must be available within all Indigenous communities; and
- (b) Provide adequate, stable, equitable and ongoing funding for Indigenous-centred and community-based health and wellness services that are accessible and culturally appropriate, and meet the health and wellness needs of Indigenous communities, especially women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATION 2:** Implement recommendations to remediate anti-Black racism such as those from

- (a) the City of Toronto’s Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism;
- (b) the 2020 Black Health Alliance Black Experiences in Health Care report; and
- (c) the Parliamentary Black Caucus.

### In closing

As this excerpt from our Feminist Economic Recovery Plan demonstrates, the traditional economic playbook for responding to this pandemic-induced recession will be insufficient. Canada

will need new measures of success.

In the past, economic recovery focused on moving the needle on traditional metrics such as improving GDP, increasing the rate of economic growth and accelerating the number of jobs created. Now, we must consider measures such as the reduction of gender-based violence; the access that Indigenous, Black and other racialized communities have to employment and essential health and social services; the number of new affordable housing units created; and the number of decent, sustainable jobs that provide paid sick leave and a decent income. We must also consider how to re-evaluate GDP measures to factor in the enormous economic contribution of care and all other forms of unpaid work that is currently performed predominantly by women.

As we have seen quite clearly during this pandemic, confidence in the economy is shaped by the health of the population. Data from Australia and the U.S. suggest that when consumers are cautious due to rising infection rates, economic recovery is weaker. By focusing on equity, justice and security, our Feminist Economic Recovery Plan provides a roadmap for post-pandemic recovery that can help us all pull through this crisis — and increase our resilience to deal with the next one. **RM**



**Carmina Ravanera** is a Research Associate at the Institute for Gender and the Economy (GATE) at the Rotman School of Management. **Anjum Sultana** is Director of Public Policy & Strategic Communications, YWCA Canada.

This article is an excerpt from the report, “A Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for Canada: Making the Economy Work for Everyone”, co-published by YWCA Canada and GATE. The full report is available online.