

# Low wages and gender wage gap contributed to women leaving the workforce during COVID-19

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Nearly 350,000 Canadian women who lost their jobs during the pandemic hadn't returned to work as of February 2021, resulting in a

drop in women's unemployment not seen in the last two decades, according to a new Simon Fraser University study.

SFU health sciences research associate, Julia Smith, who co-leads the Gender and COVID-19 Research Project, and Lokpriy Shurma, post-doctoral fellow at the University of Saskatchewan, found that [women](#) lost a disproportionate number of jobs in sectors particularly hard hit by the pandemic, including low wage occupations, where women make up more than half of those employed.

According to Smith, low wages and a "persistent [gender wage gap](#)" contributed to women leaving the workforce, leading the pandemic's economic impact to further stall progress on closing the [gender](#) wage gap, which remains unchanged since February 2020.

Smith also noted that COVID-19's impact on the sectors that primarily employ women, such as food services and accommodations, is only part of the story and does not fully account for the disparity in job losses.

"When looking at the data, we can see that women lost more jobs than their male colleagues in the hardest hit sectors, which tells us there are more factors at play than just the impacts of the pandemic," says Smith. "We have to acknowledge that other factors such as gender norms around unpaid care and [wage](#) discrimination have played a role in exacerbating pre-existing gender inequalities over the past year."

According to the study, women consistently lost a disproportionate number of jobs in every job category outside of health care and social assistance. Worst hit was [retail trade](#), where women make up 50 percent of employees, yet lost 91 percent of the [jobs](#).

"Prior to March 2020, women comprised 48 percent of the workforce, and yet they sustained 58 percent of lockdown related job losses during

the first two months of the pandemic. Unfortunately, a year later and the burden continues to fall increasingly on women, which is why more needs to be done to address this disparity and prevent additional economic damage."

Smith and Shrma note that the long-term implications for an equitable economic recovery are dire unless immediate and targeted policy actions are taken. The team has put forward five key recommendations, including increased training for women employed in hard hit sectors to diversify employment opportunities. They are also calling on the government to strengthen the Pay Equity Act, invest in childcare and introduce a mixed system of parental leave policies that encourage men to take on more childcare responsibilities.

**More information:** Women in a COVID-19 recession: Employment, job loss and wage. inequality in Canada,  
[www.genderandcovid-19.org/wp-c ... economic-impacts.pdf](http://www.genderandcovid-19.org/wp-c...economic-impacts.pdf)

Provided by Simon Fraser University

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