

PURSuing GENDER EQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE DURING COVID-19



The Canadian private sector is in a unique position to leverage gender equality practices to address many of the impacts of COVID-19. Some of the impacts include a loss of revenue, mass layoffs, and challenges to liquidity. In the medium-term, many companies will face longer-term shifts in consumer markets and changes in regulatory environments.

In past crises, we have seen inclusion and diversity practices decline as a strategic priority for businesses. However, research indicates that gender diversity is directly tied to the performance, innovation, and resilience of a company.¹ Companies that view their inclusion and diversity practices as a strength are more likely to bounce back faster from the crisis while increasing their representation and inclusion.

Investing in an effective emergency response that addresses the unique challenges faced by all genders during COVID-19 will allow organizations to foster greater employee engagement and sustainable business growth after the pandemic.²

Leaders have the opportunity to forward gender equality during COVID-19. Some opportunities for leaders during this time include:³

- **Assess your organization's response to COVID-19** using the [Target Gender Equality Quiz](#) to ensure it is gender-responsive.⁴
- **Begin meetings by acknowledging everyone present** and the realities of the pandemic. Set the tone by sharing your own experiences or challenges. In smaller meetings, check-in with each individual to see how they're doing.
- **Show empathy and compassion towards your employees during this time**, especially to those who bear the brunt of unpaid care work. [Provide support](#) through increased flex work options, deadline extensions, care services, etc.
- **Ensure all genders are represented and included in all planning and decision making.** Step up and [apply an intersectional lens](#) to accurately represent the workforce population in COVID-related processes, such as crisis task forces and response teams.

Fostering inclusion through the attributes of an inclusive environment on the road toward gender equality enables companies to embed representation and inclusion in crisis response planning and decision making. Here are some recommendations to foster gender equality during the pandemic:¹

- **Drive employee satisfaction and motivation:** Companies that are committed to diversity are more likely to exhibit a pro-teamwork culture. Use feelings of solidarity to create an agile and inclusive work culture both during and after the pandemic.

¹ McKinsey & Company, "Diversity still matters," 2020.

² Canadian Center for Diversity and Inclusion and Talent Canada Staff, "Diversity and inclusion should be leveraged, not ignored during pandemic: CCDI," 2020.

³ Ruchika Tulshyan, "How to Be an Inclusive Leader Through a Crisis," Harvard Business Review, 2020.

⁴ UN Global Compact, "Is your company's response to COVID-19 gender responsive?" 2020.

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- **Adapt new [measures](#) to improve organizational culture:** Remote work can make it difficult for some individuals to avoid publicly sharing personal aspects of their lives. Some good practices to support an inclusive organizational culture include⁵:
 - Schedule meetings to enable employees to speak up about concerns regarding any changes caused by COVID-19 in their work life.
 - Check in with employees to ensure that any new policies are inclusive, such as surveys.
 - Support women and minorities by ensuring all employees have equal access to home-office resources, such as adequate internet, computers, tablets.
 - Continue to recognize and appreciate your employees' contributions.
 - Maintain a sense of normalcy by continuing to celebrate the diversity in your company.
- **Build capacity and raise awareness:** Provide appropriate resources to crisis task force teams and other new teams created to respond to the pandemic.
- **Consider applying the 3Ps** – Presence, Perspective, and Personality – to avoid harmful gender stereotypes in internal and external communications.
- **Maintain a diversity lens in talent management** to ensure that diversity isn't lost by:
 - Monitoring the demographic profile of your workforce.
 - Applying a diversity and inclusion lens when conducting layoffs, hiring freezes, and downsizing, to ensure that no one group is being solely affected.
 - Keeping an eye out for gender bias in performance evaluations, focus on performance rather than hours worked.
- **Support working parents, bearing in mind that the majority of unpaid care work falls on women:** Build on existing policies to support childcare, and equal maternity and paternity leave. For example, Starbucks temporarily expanded its Care@Work program for employees which includes 20 days of paid care and full reimbursement for external care services.⁶
- **Help address the unintended consequences and challenges of stay-at-home measures:** As part of your COVID-19 response, [address the challenges](#) that make individuals more vulnerable. For instance, [support victims of gender-based violence](#) through health care services and hotlines.
- **Support women-owned businesses:** Build relationships and provide financial services throughout the value chain. For example, WEConnect International, a global network that connects women-owned business to qualified buyers around the world, compiled [a directory](#) of women-owned SMEs producing in-demand products and services.
- **Partner with government and other organizations to tackle COVID-19:** Learn more about how your company can support women through organizations such as [UN Global Compact](#), [UN Women](#), and WEConnect International, among others.

Despite the challenges the pandemic has posed the world, the lessons learned from adopting gender-inclusive workplace policies and practices can provide guidance in closing the economic gender gap in the private sector. By following these guidelines, companies can continue to leverage diversity and pursue gender equality in the workplace.

⁵ Deloitte, "Addressing the impact of COVID-19," 2020; McKinsey & Company, "Diversity still matters," 2020.

⁶ Ruth Umoh, "How Diversity Heads Are Steering Their Companies Through The COVID-19 Crisis," Forbes, 2020.

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ABOUT THE GCNC



Global Compact
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The GCNC is the Canadian network of the United Nations Global Compact, an organization dedicated to catalyzing business action to advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 10 Principles of the UN Global Compact in Canada. GCNC and its many corporate and nonprofit participants unify and build the capacity of the Canadian private sector to embrace sustainable business practices by convening and accelerating opportunities for multistakeholder collaboration. SDG 5 – achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls – is central to the successful realization of all 17 SDGs.

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