

Closing the COVID Accountability Gap:

Canada's Gender-Based Analysis Approach

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In 2021, the International Budget Partnership published an assessment of 120 countries' management of COVID relief, which found that too many governments were using the excuse of urgency to avoid being as transparent, accountable or inclusive as they could be. These shortcuts and limitations, however, are neither necessary nor inevitable. IBP's report showcased notable instances in which governments acted swiftly to put in place adequate transparency around their policy responses, where accountability institutions — such as legislatures and supreme audit institutions (SAIs) — stepped up to provide effective oversight, and civil society organizations contributed information on the needs of the most vulnerable. In a series of briefs, we have taken a more in-depth look at these good practices — delving into government objectives in implementing the practices, the impacts achieved, and lessons that can be drawn from these practices for their replication in other countries. The main goal of these briefs is to provide governments with information on good practices in fiscal openness and accountability that they can incorporate into their own policies, to be implemented during periods of crisis and beyond.

This brief looks at the government of Canada's gender-based analysis plus (GBA+) approach for its COVID-19 economic response plan. High levels of

political and institutional commitment to gender equality have over time ensured that GBA+ is a widely implemented federal practice. With institutional resources and commitment, the government tried to draft and implement an inclusive COVID-19 economic response plan. Canada's approach to gender sensitive policy and decision-making is distinct from pandemic responses in other countries because it is an advanced practice that existed prior to the pandemic and was adapted and applied to the government's COVID-19 response. While still a work in progress, it is an uncommonly proactive approach that offers lessons on how to better prepare for future health and other crises.

The pandemic impacted people differently, depending on their gender, race, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. During health crises, women tend to be more vulnerable to infections, to face multiple burdens of risk and are often conspicuously invisible and absent from decision-making (Smith et al., 2021). Women also tend to be disproportionately impacted by economic hardships resulting from the pandemic. Systemic health and racial inequities also put minority groups at increased risk of COVID-19. This brief describes the government of Canada's proactive and preemptive approach for more inclusive pandemic response and its impact on women, men, nonbinary and gender-diverse groups.

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Understanding policies' differential impact

Gender mainstreaming is a globally accepted practice for promoting gender equality, and the Canadian government's commitment to advancing gender equality predated the pandemic. In 1995, as part of its ratification of the United Nations' Platform for Action, Canada introduced gender mainstreaming in federal policy and decision-making. The government dedicated a federal institution, Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE),¹ to ensuring gender-sensitive policy making.

Several key existing conditions enabled GBA+ implementation during the pandemic. There was political support for the system-wide practice of gender equality, especially after 2015 when the federal Liberal government came to power — government participants in one study noted GBA+ as a “priority” for the government (Hankivsky and Mussell, 2018).

Institutional commitment to GBA+ was visible in its design. WAGE was mandated to support the application of GBA+ across federal and some provincial governments, including skill- and capacity-building training for government employees. In 2016, based on the recommendations of the auditor general of Canada (Auditor General of Canada, 2015), the government renewed its commitment to GBA+ and developed an action plan — which was in effect as COVID-19 spread. Following the auditor general's recommendations, WAGE has worked in collaboration with the Privy Council Office and the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat. This interagency coordination has helped ensure that GBA+ is incorporated into memoranda to cabinet and Treasury Board submissions, including the federal budget processes. Canada's national statistical agency ensured availability of high-quality gender-disaggregated evidence to support decision-making (OECD, 2018). The role of oversight institutions such as the auditor general of Canada has helped to ensure that all federal agencies identified barriers to implementing GBA+ and to periodically assess and report on progress.

In response to COVID-19, the GBA+ was described as a systemic approach to making the “invisible, visible” (Women and Gender Equality Canada, 2020). The government's rationale in using GBA+ for its COVID-19 response was to advance its commitment to gender equality and protect its gender equality gains. In this sense, it demonstrated high-level commitment to understanding and acting on the needs of the most vulnerable groups.

¹Previously named Status of Women Canada.

Canada's GBA+ and the federal response to COVID-19

What does it mean to view emergency response through a gender lens? The pandemic forced governments to issue stay-at-home directives. However, for many women and children fleeing violence at home, the directives doubled the risk of exposure to gender-based violence. Recognizing that emergencies can lead to increased risk of violence, the government took necessary fiscal measures to support women's shelters and sexual assault centers, including centers for Indigenous women on reservations. The government also made fiscal allocations to build new shelters and support operational costs for shelters for Indigenous women and girls. Virtual mental health measures were also introduced to improve the health and well-being of vulnerable groups, especially youth, LGBTQ² individuals and immigrants.

The government's economic response plan is categorized by types of measures, and it is further disaggregated by categories of gender, income and generation, describing the expected benefits to each group. For example, the GBA+ summary indicates the expected benefits of the moratorium on student loans by age, gender and class/income. Using GBA+, the government introduced the moratorium on student loan repayment with expected benefits to low or middle-income individuals, of whom 60% are women and 80% are in the age group of 30 or younger.

As noted in a recent examination of the gendered approach in budget processes, GBA+ works best when it is applied early in the policy process to "account for the differential impacts and address challenges in design and implementation" (Lipsev and Coronel, 2021). In the emergency response, GBA+ was introduced at midpoint when the proposals were being finalized and/or at a later stage after proposals were finalized, prior to submission. In some cases, such as financial relief for the Indigenous community through the First Nations Finance Authority, the emergency response was a continuation of an existing policy. For new fiscal measures, GBA+ considered the benefits for diverse groups of people. For example, availability of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) required additional support from national governments as the pandemic imposed global shortages. Through the lens of GBA+, it is understood that additional funding for PPE was meant to reduce the risk of transmission for patients and caregivers. Given the high percentage of female support workers in long-term care and social assistance fields, the expected direct benefits of the funding were higher for women. However, the additional financial support also benefited domestic industry workers as companies acted to support domestic production, and this measure indirectly benefited all Canadians by reducing the risk of transmission.

²A term used by the government of Canada to refer to the Canadian community. It stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and two-spirited. The latter is a term used within Indigenous communities and encompasses an individual's cultural, spiritual, sexual and gender identity.

The GBA+ impacts of COVID-19

Women were at the forefront of the government's COVID-19 response. Some of the biggest portfolios (Finance, Health and Procurement) were led by female ministers (Oxfam Canada, 2021). In provinces with female chief medical officers, the pandemic was also less devastating (Cousins, 2020). But what did use of the GBA+ approach to COVID-19 achieve?

While the government proactively disclosed information on various components of its economic response plan, including a GBA+ summary, the GBA+ impacts of COVID-19 appear less evident. The Canadian government's analysis of the GBA+ impact of COVID-19 notes that it is "limited by the availability of data, especially for certain identity factors such as race, sexual orientation and disability ... [and] more work [is needed] to ensure that disaggregated data are collected and to ensure that all of our policy measures are analyzed and implemented from an intersectional lens."

This finding is echoed by other analysts who recognized the strengths of GBA+ in early pandemic response but also called for more disaggregated data collection on those contracting COVID-19 to better understand spread by race, gender, age and class. These analysts also noted the importance of more consultation and collaboration with civil society organizations working with vulnerable groups (Timmers and TenBruggencate, 2020). Analysts also noted that the government's COVID-19 data is limited to age and sex, calling on the government to sharpen GBA+ to better understand the "relationship between identity and health" (Johnstone and Momani, 2020).

The government's approach to GBA+ also triggered some criticism from feminist scholars and women's rights advocates who developed an alternative gender-responsive pandemic plan (Rosener et al., 2021). An independent analysis of Canada's COVID-19 policy response — based on a review of federal government documents and key informant interviews — finds that GBA+ was narrowly applied to the emergency response (Murage, 2021). For example, only two social and economic policies (violence against women and virtual mental health services) met the definition of gender sensitive measures. This study claims that the implementation of GBA+ helped "mitigate" but did not "reduce inequalities or offer protections against further rights violations" (Ibid). It also notes that an explicit (though narrow) focus on gender-based violence did not always ease the "triple burden" shouldered by women: paid work, unpaid care work, and domestic and community engagement (Center for Health and Sexual Equality, 2021).

According to Oxfam Canada's Feminist Scorecard 2021, the government of Canada's response to the pandemic was welcomed as a "feminist, intersectional response to the pandemic" (Oxfam Canada, 2021). However, women's rights organizations and feminist movements on the front line of COVID-19 response efforts continue to find it difficult to access decision-making spaces within government. Women's rights organizations are unable to access government funding as they do not meet the funding criteria. COVID restrictions resulted in programming cutbacks. To ensure their sustainability, women's rights organizations require unrestricted funding support. The launch of the Feminist Recovery Fund is a positive step to address the funding gaps experienced by these organizations.

Lessons from Canada

In Canada, political support, institutional commitment to the principles of gender-sensitive policy and decision-making, as well as resource commitments and government's responsiveness to oversight audit institutions and civic actors, allowed the government to adapt an existing practice to its pandemic response. Several lessons from Canada's GBA+ approach for its COVID-19 economic response plan can offer lessons for gender-sensitive policy and decision-making in other countries.

Other governments can apply GBA+ approaches to policy, programming and legislative processes by identifying their gender and diversity issues. Some of the questions to consider include: How might policies, programs and legislation affect people of different identities and genders in different ways? How might governments collect and use data from and about diverse groups and vulnerable populations? What kinds of platforms and data collection techniques should be used to make individuals feel comfortable providing personal information to the government?

Governments could create a federal institution to develop, anchor and oversee its gender-based analysis approach and practice. Governments could consider the following: Will the federal institution have sufficient resources to undertake technical capacity and skill development to implement and engage GBA+? How can they best promote interagency coordination to ensure that policy, budget and legislative proposals incorporate and/or are informed by gender-based analysis?

Another lesson is to promote women leaders by ensuring they oversee key portfolios such as finance, health and procurement. Government could also strive to enact policies that help reduce the burden on vulnerable groups. For example, governments could find ways to ease the triple burden that forces women out of the labor market during crises. Support for childcare and closing the gender pay gap could also be prioritized alongside financial and mental wellness support.

Finally, governments should recognize that implementing gender-sensitive policy and decision-making takes time and requires continuous refinement and learning. This learning can occur at two levels: 1) internal or organizational learning to change mindsets and ensure government employees have the autonomy to articulate constraints, which governments should try to address through sensitivity trainings (to allow bias and ignorance to surface), skill development and capacity building; and 2) external or third-party evaluations and learning. The following should be supported: audit reports and recommendations by supreme audit institutions, involvement of women's rights organizations and LGBTQ+ groups within countries to co-develop the official approach to policy, programming, and legislative processes using a gender and intersectional lens. Governments should also make oversight and monitoring reports and recommendations public and refine both approach and practice in line with accepted feedback.

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