



Because Invisible Work Matters!

The Importance of Immediate Action

Against the Impacts of COVID-19 on Women

For a Proactive Recovery

Brief submitted to the parliamentary committee on the status of women and gender equality as part of its meetings on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women



July 7, 2020

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**Afeas presented its position to the committee during the meeting of Tuesday, July 7, between
2 and 3 p.m.**

Researched and written by H  l  ne Cornellier, Afeas Representative

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Afeas - www.afeas.qc.ca

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5999 De Marseille Street, Montreal, Quebec H1N 1K6
Telephone: (514) 251-1636 — Fax: (514) 251-9023
Email: info@afeas.qc.ca — Website: www.afeas.qc.ca

Afeas

The Association féminine d'éducation et d'action sociale (Afeas) is an action-oriented, cutting-edge feminist organization that promotes and advocates for gender equality in all aspects of society. Afeas gives a voice to women to help them actively participate in the development of Quebec society.

Through education and coordinated social action, Afeas is helping to build a society based on values such as peace, equality, fairness, justice, respect and solidarity. Its purpose is to empower women socially, politically and financially, enabling them to contribute to Quebec's democracy.

Afeas membership and structure

Afeas is a not-for-profit organization created in 1966 with the merger of two organizations: the Cercles d'économie domestique and Union catholique des femmes rurales. In 2019, Afeas represented 7,000 women in Quebec through 200 locals spread out across 11 regions.

Its grassroots structure, governed by a three-level board of directors, encourages Afeas members to express their opinions on social issues and their organization's policy directions. Thanks to its volunteer members, Afeas has been able to continue its mission for over 50 years.

Afeas priority issues and accomplishments

Ever since Afeas was founded, it has been advocating for gender equality in all aspects of society. As a result, it works on various issues affecting women in Quebec and Canada, including

- gender equality in all aspects of society;
- equal access to and participation in democratic institutions at all levels;
- the recognition of women's unpaid work as mothers and caregivers;
- women's lifelong financial security, including during their retirement;
- access to education, pay equity, non-traditional jobs and measures to support work-school-life balance; and
- access to measures to prevent and address violence against women and girls.

Over the years, Afeas has been advancing women's issues, including the recognition of the status of women who work in family businesses; family law and divorce; Old Age Security (OAS) pensions; recognition of women's unpaid ("invisible") work; and labour standards.

Afeas partnerships

Afeas is active at all levels of Quebec and Canadian society, fighting for gender equality in legislation and in practice. Through its pragmatic approach, it has gained credibility as a liaison with government bodies and women's rights organizations. In order to advance its key issues, Afeas is a member of organizations and groups from Quebec, Canada and around the world.

Introduction

The parliamentary committee on the status of women and gender equality was given a mandate to study the impacts of COVID-19 on Canadian women, which directly addresses one of the fundamental barriers to gender equality in Canada: the recognition of “invisible” work. That is the perspective from which Afeas is approaching this study.

As early as 1968, Afeas addressed the Bird Commission about the importance of recognizing women’s unpaid work in their families and society. Afeas argued that this work, seen as the “social role” of women, impoverishes them throughout their lives. Since then, Afeas has been working tirelessly to ensure this work, which is essential for families and society in general, is recognized.

In 1975, the UN defined this work as unpaid responsibilities and duties for the good of the family. Today, this invisible work also includes all the unrecognized, underpaid and devalued work performed by women, jobs related to their social responsibilities, exemplified by the personal support workers who make headlines every day.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, many interviews and newspaper articles, as well as some research papers, have highlighted the experiences of women during lockdown and now the re-opening. Current and future research, both by Quebec’s Council on the Status of Women (CSF) and by Status of Women Canada, will hopefully provide us with a gender-based analysis of the real situation experienced by women.

Women are bearing the brunt of the pandemic

Simone de Beauvoir once said: “Never forget that a political, financial or religious crisis will be enough to jeopardize women’s rights. These rights will never be vested. You must remain vigilant your whole life.”

We did not anticipate that this would arise during a health crisis, but since the beginning of the pandemic and lockdown, many positions revealing setbacks in women’s rights have been taken in Quebec, Canada and elsewhere in the world.

No one, it seems, had anticipated a health crisis of this magnitude. From the outset, the pandemic highlighted the glaring inequalities between men and women, especially for racialized and immigrant women.

At the same time, the pandemic has brought into the limelight those whose tireless work has kept most of society running and ensured that sick people are taken care of. In fact, 80% of health care workers are women, caregivers are women, and the education field also relies on women.

So, what have women experienced since the beginning of the pandemic? How has lockdown impacted them to date and how does it continue to affect them? What are the consequences of closing daycare centres, schools and shops? The impacts of essential jobs, teleworking and unemployment? What about the hygiene and distancing measures or the fear of infecting their families?

It has mostly been women at the FOREFRONT since the start of the pandemic. However, they are excluded from the decision-making process, even though the day-to-day decisions directly impact them.

Measures to prepare for what comes next

Afeas is proposing a set of short and medium-term measures to prepare for a second wave of the pandemic and inform a plan for recovery or some return to normal.

1. Short-term measures (3 to 6 months)

These short-term measures will set benchmarks for more concrete and realistic measures now and in the future.

From the outset, Afeas is proposing two essential benchmarks to ensure that all legislation, policies, programs and measures provide for the participation of women, the ones most affected. This means involving not only women MPs, but also women's and community organizations and researchers who, year after year, work FOR and WITH women.

On Tuesday, April 3, 2001, Afeas established *Invisible Work Day* to educate the public and decision-makers about the consequences women face when their invisible work goes unrecognized. In 2010, Nicole Demers, the Bloc Québécois MP for Laval, introduced a motion to make the day official, but although the motion was unanimously adopted, nothing came from it. On Tuesday, April 7, 2020, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Afeas marked the 20th year of its annual campaign by again calling for a *National Invisible Work Day*.

In 1992, Statistics Canada estimated that women's invisible work constituted between 34% and 54% of the country's GDP, or between \$235 billion and \$374 billion. In 1995, the UN estimated the annual value of women's unpaid work worldwide at US\$11 trillion. This work is therefore valuable and, as such, the Canadian government must make it visible, as it does with the work of companies and/or institutions.

We need to spell it out!

The way out of this crisis requires a social, economic and environmental solution that cannot be achieved without women. Let us therefore involve them and recognize the essential work they do for families and society.

(a) A twofold requirement focused on women

To include women in decision making, Afeas is calling on the Government of Canada to

- **introduce** a requirement for all relevant bodies established to manage this crisis to have equal gender representation; and
- **use** intersectoral gender-based analysis (GBA+) to ensure that women's perspectives and needs are heard and taken into account.

(b) Real recognition

To shine a light on the contribution of Canadians who do this invisible work, Afeas is calling on the federal government to

- **declare** the first Tuesday of April each year *National Invisible Work Day*; and
- **quantify** the economic value of the unpaid, invisible work of Canadians **and factor it** into the country's GDP.

2. Medium-term measures (6 to 12 months)

Afeas is proposing concrete, necessary measures to address some of the major challenges facing women.

(a) Women's health and safety

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused women, who are managing the day-to-day impacts of the pandemic, and the people they look after—children, seniors and persons with a disability—to experience *stress, anxiety and anguish*. In addition, for many women, *job loss*, even if their income has been temporarily replaced by the CERB, adds further stress. There has also been a *resurgence of spousal and family violence*, which has victimized an even greater number of women and children during lockdown.

To address this, the federal and provincial/territorial governments, in the event of a return to lockdown, must

- ***create*** services for children, seniors and others in need;
- ***ensure*** regular follow-ups with vulnerable people who may be victims of violence, namely women and children, to let them know they are not alone;
- ***strengthen*** the network of shelters for victims of violence; and
- ***provide for*** the creation of health, physical and psychological support services when things return to normal.

(b) Economic impacts

According to the CSF, *120,000 women have lost their jobs compared to 55,100 men, and twice as many women are working part-time*, which has not been inconsequential for women. The CSF also points out that *the average weekly earnings for single fathers and single mothers are \$1,169 and \$809, respectively*. It is easy to imagine the consequences of this difference of more than \$200 per week for single mothers.

Additionally, in Canada, it would cost between \$4 billion and \$10 billion to hire 1.2 million full-time workers to replace the hours worked by caregivers, 54% of whom are women.

According to the Réseau des aidants et aidantes naturels du Québec, only 3.2% of caregivers received a tax credit in 2017, for an average amount of \$559 (CSF, 2018), because the eligibility criteria are restrictive.

Research shows that in Canada, caregivers spend an average of \$7,600 per year on those in their care, regardless of their initial income level, and that 20% of caregivers experience financial insecurity.

To support and recognize the all-too-often invisible contribution of Canadians, as parents and caregivers, Afeas is calling on the federal government to

- ***make*** the currently non-refundable tax credits for parents and caregivers refundable and ***create*** new tax measures that are truly adapted to their situation;
- ***modify*** the EI compassionate care benefits, family caregiver benefits for adults and family caregiver benefits for children by
 - abolishing the mandatory waiting period;
 - providing 35 weeks of benefits for each of the three benefits; and

- replacing the current definition of a critically ill child or adult with one that allows access to benefits if they develop a chronic illness and replaces the criterion of “life is at risk as a result of an illness or injury” with “a health situation requiring intensive care and support by a family member.”
- **create** fair and equitable pension plan benefits (QPP and OAS) for parents and caregivers to compensate them for periods when they must stop working to take care of children and family members who cannot look after themselves or are sick, elderly or disabled; and
- **introduce** a requirement to implement pay equity programs in government institutions, businesses under federal jurisdiction and businesses that receive government contracts, grants or loans.

(c) Social pressure and obstacles

The coronavirus pandemic first forced the government to keep people aged 70 and over in their homes, followed by school children, and finally to close non-essential businesses. Overnight, people had to find different ways to shop, keep their children occupied at home and care for loved ones who need support looking after themselves or are in lockdown. This is on top of performing paid work by working from home or by providing essential services, that is if we still have a job. Above all, we had to avoid catching the virus and infecting others. All this additional burden, which no one was prepared for, fell on women’s shoulders.

To support women in the coming months, Afeas is calling on the Government of Canada and its provincial and territorial partners to introduce measures to

- **ensure** that family duties and responsibilities are shared equally;
- **strengthen** family organizations and services; and
- **negotiate** agreements with employers to reduce productivity requirements while maintaining full weekly wages.

Other essential measures to support women

To **further contribute to** the study of the impacts of COVID-19 on women, Afeas is calling on the federal government to

- **create**, from coast to coast,
 - a public network of nursery schools;
 - a program that includes ten days of paid sick leave;
 - sufficient good-quality affordable housing; and
 - comprehensive, consistent and sufficient good-quality home health and social services.

In addition to these concrete measures, Afeas is calling on the federal government to

- **increase** funding to the Department for Women and Gender Equality and Status of Women Canada and **reopen** the regional offices that were closed due to the deficit, because achieving gender equality relies on local support from major government bodies to women's organizations across Canada;
- **resist introducing** austerity measures when the economy reopens, which would only impoverish those, especially women, already in need and decimate public services and the social security system; and
- **pay special attention to Indigenous communities**, both on and off reserve. How can we expect people infected with the virus to self-isolate if they are living with their families in overcrowded homes due to a lack of adequate housing? How can we expect them to comply with health measures without access to running water? Indigenous communities and women who are managing this crisis must be in charge of identifying their own needs and solutions, and making their own decisions.

Recommendations

As part of the study of the parliamentary committee on the status of women and gender equality, Afeas is calling on the federal government to

Short-term measures (3 to 6 months)

- **introduce** a requirement for all relevant bodies established to manage this crisis to have equal gender representation; and
- **use** intersectoral gender-based analysis (GBA+) to ensure that women's perspectives and needs are heard and taken into account.
- **declare** the first Tuesday of April each year as *National Invisible Work Day*; and
- **quantify** the economic value of the unpaid, invisible work of Canadians **and factor it** into the country's GDP.

Medium-term measures (6 to 9 months)

- **create** services for children, seniors and others in need;
- **ensure** regular follow-ups with vulnerable people who may be victims of violence, namely women and children, to let them know they are not alone;
- **strengthen** the network of shelters for victims of violence;
- **provide for** the creation of health, physical and psychological support services when things return to normal;
- **make** the currently non-refundable tax credits for parents and caregivers refundable and **create** new tax measures that are truly adapted to their reality;
- **modify** the EI compassionate care benefits, family caregiver benefits for adults and family caregiver benefits for children by
 - abolishing the mandatory waiting period;
 - providing 35 weeks of benefits for each of the three benefits; and
 - replacing the current definition of a critically ill child or adult with one that allows access to benefits should they develop a chronic illness and replaces the criterion of "life is at risk as a result of an illness or injury" with "a health situation requiring intensive care and support by a family member."
- **create** fair and equitable pension plan benefits (QPP and OAS) for parents and caregivers to compensate them for periods when they must stop working to take care of children and family members who cannot look after themselves or are sick, elderly or disabled;
- **introduce** a requirement to implement pay equity programs in government institutions, businesses under federal jurisdiction and businesses that receive government contracts, grants or loans;
- **ensure** that family duties and responsibilities are shared equally;
- **strengthen** family organizations and services; and
- **negotiate** agreements with employers to reduce productivity requirements while maintaining full weekly wages.

Other key measures

- **create**, from coast to coast,
 - a public network of nursery schools;
 - a program that includes ten days of paid sick leave;
 - sufficient good-quality affordable housing; and
 - comprehensive, consistent and sufficient good-quality home health and social services.
- **increase** funding to the Department for Women and Gender Equality and Status of Women Canada and **reopen** the regional offices that were closed due to the deficit, because achieving gender equality relies on local support from major government bodies to women's organizations across Canada;
- **resist introducing** austerity measures when the economy reopens, which would only impoverish those, especially women, already in need and decimate public services and the social security system; and
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