



WASHINGTON STATE
WOMEN'S COMMISSION

COVID-19 LISTENING FORUM REPORT

MARCH 2021

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INTRODUCTION

In response to the disproportionate impact that COVID-19 had on women, including the resulting 'she-cession' that saw the mass departure of women from the workforce, the Washington State Women's Commission hosted a Listening Forum which allowed Commissioners and Staff to hear directly from members of the community in an open format.

The purpose of the Listening Forum was to hear directly from the community about their experiences through the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the pandemic impacted their lives and areas of work.

The session was held online, through a Zoom meeting format, on Friday, March 26th, 2021 from 10:00am to 12:30pm.

The Listening Forum was facilitated by Regina Malveaux, the Executive Director of the Washington State Women's Commission. The facilitator provided a brief introduction to establish the five minute allowance per speaker, and the time cue which would be given.

Prior to the forum, speakers were sent prompts, which asked speakers to consider sharing the challenges they faced, programs that provided assistance, barriers to receiving assistance, and/or advocacy requests.

Speakers were each given five minutes to share their comments. The Forum was recorded and transcribed for the purpose of compiling into a summative report.

In total, the Listening Forum heard from 17 speakers. This report presents an overview of the community input received, categorized into issue areas that our Commission prioritizes: Economic Opportunity, Economic Security, Health, and Safety.

VOICES OF WASHINGTON WOMEN

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY + SECURITY

Women Entrepreneurs

Women entrepreneurs, particularly small business owners, found that accessing funding was challenging.

Emily Fergestrom, owner and chief brand officer of Fortuity Cellars, talked about the barriers that small businesses and startups in particular, faced. "We're still in startup mode, so we're not taking a salary and we're not profitable yet. Many of the programs required you either to have employees, or to show a revenue loss from 2019 to 2020. We're still in that growth period, so many of the programs we weren't eligible for, and it took a little longer for some of those adjustments to be worked into the Washington PPP grant."

Small businesses are essential to the local economy: "We help our economy run. We support so many other small businesses, since we source all of our grapes from small growers in Washington state. Our accountant, our insurance, our glass provider, our boxes to ship - all of our sources are small businesses here in Washington state. So certainly this type of public crisis has really hit small businesses very hard."

She went on to ask, "What can we do to get that relief quicker? Most of our relief came to us at the end of 2020, so we were just continuously putting in some of our savings into the business to help us run, because there weren't any other grants."

Aparna Masalkar, director of Aster Montessori, expressed frustration with the lack of consideration for possible harm to businesses as a result of the increased unemployment allowance.

She shared: "What I think failed and which really impacted businesses like us was the stimulus checks. After we got into in-person school, some of the assisting staff figured out that they were getting paid a lot more if they stayed home. And that was our big fall down, because while they loved the job, they let us know that the stimulus check is going to pay them four times more than what they are earning. So I was very sad in that time, because during a time like this where businesses really needed help, this is happening. So I strongly feel that there has to be checks and balances of some kind."

Undocumented Women Entrepreneurs

Undocumented women entrepreneurs faced even higher hurdles to access aid and relief funding.

As Rocío Carrión, executive director and co-founder of the organization I AM Empowerment, shared: "We see these issues that we're going through in general as people of color, and then as women, and then you add on being undocumented. So that's just an extra hurdle that I have to go through. I feel it's all interconnected - these continuous

rejections that I keep experiencing as an entrepreneur. I feel like there's this beautiful talk about equity, but there's no funding for us."

She added, "When I looked into the programs available for funding for entrepreneurs, [I knew] that I was going to run into those hurdles, again. Usually most programs require you to be a US citizen or legal resident. And oftentimes people get confused that because we have a work permit, that we can access those funds and that's actually a false belief. And the way that I see it is that I can legally be a business owner, but I can't legally access these funds. I can legally pay taxes, but I can't access federal funding opportunities."

And I wish that I didn't have to exhaust the resources of my own community, that I could get help from the government, since I'm paying taxes and contributing in so many other ways - not just financially, I'm also contributing to the youth of America.

Carrión called for improvement to infrastructure and aid programs by incorporating an intersectional framework, prioritizing communities who fall in the gaps of existing systems: "If these organizations or institutions or policies want to [provide] more equitable opportunities for people of color, and really believe it's important to invest in us - that's what's really lacking."

"I do believe in myself and I believe in the quality of my programs and I do have faith that my community will show up [for me]. And I wish that I didn't have to exhaust the resources of my own community, that I could get help from the government, since I'm paying taxes and I'm contributing in so many other ways - not just financially, I'm also contributing to the youth of America."

Creatives, Gig Workers, and Solo Entrepreneurs

For artists, creatives, solo entrepreneurs, and gig workers, there are few mechanisms or safety nets that exist to support them in times of crisis or unemployment.

As Sharon Williams, Executive Director of the Central District Art Forum, shared: "Art is essential. Art is not just something that you put on as entertainment - it is something that you definitely have to have that is a part of our everyday lives."

"What we saw during COVID, was the fact that gig workers and solo entrepreneurs and artists, entrepreneurs and creative entrepreneurs, there aren't any mechanisms to really help them if they don't have a gig. We really had to fight for unemployment for them, and we really had to fight because some of them don't have healthcare."

"And so how do we as a community set up a system for arts and cultural workers - but even small businesses that can't that can't provide benefits and can't provide a huge insurance policy... How do we set up some type of system where these individuals can tap into those type of programs, transportation bus passes, things of that nature?"

Sharon also commented on the need for greater accessibility: "Some of the things that we had to learn was about accessibility - being more accessible and getting conversations started around our building being ADA accessible, and how to be accessible over virtual programming. I think a lot of arts and cultural organizations need your support in making sure that not just virtual programming is accessible, but their live performance programming is accessible as well."

A Need for Digital Equity

As Emily Fergestrom shared, the winery she and her husband own were able to pivot to online sales. However, not all businesses, particularly small businesses,

have the level of digital literacy or capacity to do the same.

She shared: "Fortunately for us, and I know it's a privilege that we have, my husband and I, having had previous careers in corporate communications and in tech. We had the opportunity to really up our digital game... But we know that there are wineries out there that for many reasons didn't have that opportunity to make a pivot quickly to digital and to online. That's probably an opportunity; maybe your organization can look at that digital divide."

Access to Resources

Emily Schneider, the Family Service Coordinator at the YWCA Spokane, shared that the resource that parents reported most helpful was expanded eligibility for pandemic cash assistance (EBT), and the increased SNAP benefit.

Yet, she emphasized the added difficulty in accessing available resources for many families, with COVID-19 exacerbating transportation challenges. "The last thing that's been challenging has been trying to access services - office hours are cut... staff have not been there, so they're having a hard time actually getting a hold of people at services to get assistance. If they do get someone on the phone, the wait times are really long. And then if they do receive a service that's physical. like a food box or a food

bank, if they don't have transportation, that has also been a barrier. If they're on the public transit system they can't take those goods home with them necessarily, and then there's just, you know, the fear of being on public transit to begin with."

A Need for Better Childcare Infrastructure

Childcare and early learning programs are essential for both the educational opportunity they provide for children and the opportunities provided for working women. Yet, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, women across all ages, income levels, and racial identities expressed deep concerns about access to high-quality and affordable childcare.

The transition to virtual schooling fueled a sharp increase in demand for childcare, as parents who typically relied on the public school system for at least 30 hours a week of care were suddenly left without childcare or academic support for their children.

In a survey from May and June, 25% of women who became unemployed during the pandemic reported the job loss was due to a lack of childcare, twice the rate of men surveyed.¹

Charissa Johnson, lawyer and shareholder at the law firm Stokes Lawrence, shared: "We like to talk about the invisible load or the mental

load commonly as working mothers, and that concept is meant to represent the mental labor that goes into managing the household and the family while we're also managing a full time job. And while this is certainly not a new concept to me...over the last year, it just grew exponentially while trying to manage a busy practice that itself was dealing with all sorts of new issues while doing that at this desk, which is situated about two feet from my bed, and I have kids out the door that are noisy and needing to come in for snacks, or just for a fun opportunity to sit on my lap."

"It's no wonder why women are making the difficult decision to leave the workplace, but I have real concerns that this departure is going to have long standing impacts on women's roles in the workplace, causing a huge step backwards related to equal pay and discriminatory stereotypes of women prioritizing personal life over work."

Emily Schneider shared that COVID-19 childcare relief grants were among the resources considered most helpful by families served in their program: "We have a very low income population - 110% [of the poverty level] for a family of four right now is just over \$29,000 a year. When you have a limited income, you may not be able to take as much time for yourself. Maybe you don't have the finances to afford childcare or babysitters, separation where children are able to learn and have a loving and supportive environment where their

needs can be met, that really is allowing for those parents and families to get the greater family need met during that time. [So that] our parents can love themselves and get the resources that they're needing."

Charissa Johnson added, "I think employee assistance programs are essential and need to be emphasize that it takes a village to raise kids. I think as employers we need to realize we're part of that village by providing flexibility to our employees."

Foster Children & Families

Foster children, who even before COVID-19 fell behind every other student group on every academic measure (i.e., test scores, graduation rates, etc.) were particularly vulnerable to the disruption the pandemic caused to routines, amplifying instability and mobility due to the increased stress in homes.

Jill May, Executive Director of the Washington Association for Children & Families, shared the difficulty that agencies faced in transitioning to an online service model, especially in the face of loss of staff and rapidly changing information and state guidance, to meet the heightened need of foster children and their families during the crisis.

She asked the Commission to consider the challenges of "just managing the

level of stress and anxiety for foster parents or children in their home, you know - a four year old is now having virtual visits with their parents and expectations of those visits are going to be an hour. How do you keep a four year old in front of a computer for an hour and how do you help them engage?"

As Dawn Rains, Chief Policy and Strategy Officer at Treehouse for Kids shared, "We found that about 11 percent of our youth are either completely disenrolled or completely disengaged at school, about 44 percent are in need of academic remediation tutoring or homework help, and about 36 percent of our foster and relative caregivers are need more support in meeting their needs educational needs. 22 percent of our youth experienced at least one placement change over a 10-week period this fall. 11 percent experienced at least one school change. It's about twice the rate of similar period we were seeing spring last year."

"We also were seeing that we had some young people go on a run, many in an attempt to connect with their birth family when they were unable to see them in person."

Women Impacted by the Criminal Legal System

Women who have experienced or been impacted by the criminal justice system were also particularly vulnerable in the

aftermath of the pandemic, but have been overlooked in both discussions about the criminal justice system and COVID-19 recovery.

According to the Center for American Progress, women currently account for more than 1 million individuals in the criminal justice system's total supervised population, including probation and parole: "The percentage of annual arrests of women rose from 15 percent of total arrests in 1980 to 27 percent in 2019. Within nearly the same time period, the incarceration rate of women grew by 700% - two times the growth rate for men." 2

Many women enter the criminal legal system with a number of challenges, including limited education, food and housing insecurity, low income, poor physical and mental health, and single parenthood. The consequences of a criminal record often create barriers that keep women in a cycle of poverty and relapse.


For Black and Hispanic women, who are overrepresented among incarcerated women, the impacts are even more dire.

As Dashni Amin, Program Coordinator at Collective Justice NW shared, speaking about their Healing Education and Accountability for Liberation (HEAL) Circles held for people who are incarcerated, "In our circles, we hold the outpouring of the immense amount of trauma that we have experienced, especially in BIPOC, low-wealth

communities for so long. But holding on to that is generational. Science shows how genetics pass on the pain and trauma that we carry."

"And it's been really really difficult for us to go fully virtual. First, at the very beginning we had no contact with these folks we've been working with in prison. We were not able to see how things were going, we weren't able to come into the prison with the way that COVID-19 was spreading. We have folks who are on our staff who represent the populations we work with - they have both been on both sides of the criminal legal system, and they have loved ones inside - and that was a deep emotional pain."

"And then as we started holding these drop-in community circles on Zoom for folks to come through. And there were such outpourings of grief. Such cathartic sobbing sessions, you know - going around holding each other through...the layers, the intersection of all these systems, of all these different pains. [The virus] was able to just reveal all these existing schisms, all these existing gaps."



The virus was able to just reveal all the existing schisms, all these existing gaps.

Gender equity, and its intersection with racial equity and economic justice, must be the foundation of any recovery efforts, to ensure that all women are given an equal opportunity to contribute and build toward a successful future.

As Akua Amaning writes for the Center for American Progress, "For justice-impacted women who were already disadvantaged in the job market, two years is entirely too long to wait for quality job opportunities. A person's chances of successfully reentering society and rebuilding their lives significantly decrease the longer it takes them to find a job."

VOICES OF WASHINGTON WOMEN

HEALTH + SAFETY

Interruptions in Care

The urgency of addressing and containing COVID-19, and the redirection of resources towards that effort, led to unintended disruptions to care for non-COVID-19 health conditions, including urgent and emergency care, routine cancer care and care of chronic illnesses, and delayed diagnoses of diseases and conditions.

These delays and disruptions for critical medical and surgical procedures heightened the risk of untimely deaths and worsened quality of life due to lack of management and care of diseases and conditions.

As Dr. Rachel Issaka shared, "Cancer and other chronic conditions do not stop in the midst of the pandemic. Healthcare organizations are taking extreme precautions to ensure the safety of all individuals, and women who need cancer prevention and screening as well as care for other chronic diseases, so it's safe to come access services."

"At the peak of the pandemic when the Centers for Medicare/Medicaid Services told our health care providers to stop non-emergency care, it led to a 90 percent decrease in mammograms, a 90 percent decrease in pap smears, and a 90 percent decrease in colonoscopies. These are all preventative tests to prevent and catch early stage cancer."

"Since that recommendation in the spring of last year, we've slowly seen an increase in breast cancer screenings and cervical cancer screening, as well as colon cancer screenings, but we have not reached the rate at which we were screening prior to COVID-19."

"And it's estimated that because of these significant delays, an additional 5,000 women will die from breast cancer, and additional 4,000 men and women without going to colorectal cancer as a direct result of this pandemic."

Susan Stacey, Chief Operating Officer and Chief Nursing Officer at Providence Sacred Heart Medical Center & Children's Hospital, "One of the biggest challenges moving forward will be working with people who have delayed their health care. People have delayed their mental health care. We have a full population of people - whole communities impacted by disproportionate care - who have not received basic care during this time. And I am concerned that we're going to see this influx not just of basic health care, but of unmet healthcare needs, that now suddenly is going to be in place."

According to a recent article by McKinsey, deferred care could increase annual healthcare costs in the U.S. by between \$30 billion and \$65 billion.³ In addition, data from the National Cancer Institute estimates that, over the

next ten years, the pandemic's negative impact on screening and treatment could lead to nearly 10,000 excess breast and colorectal cancer deaths.⁴

Loss of Health Insurance

With the loss of health insurance due to COVID-19 related job loss, barriers to healthcare access have heightened.

Dr. Issaka noted that "because of the significant loss of employment, and health care that is related to employment, subsequently individuals are not seeking out care because they are not insured."

Over the last three quarters of 2020, an estimated 3.5 million people will become uninsured (and not gain coverage through other sources) due to COVID-19-related job losses, a situation that could be worse in states that did not expand Medicaid. Consequently, the number of Americans who choose to postpone or forgo treatment due to cost concerns will likely increase as the ensuing recession persists.⁵

Healthcare Delivery

Washington was early to respond to COVID-19, but faced many challenges early on, including lack of PPE, confusion due to constantly changing and sometimes conflicting information from different entities. The overarching challenge, according to Susan Stacey,

was finding the 'sweet spot' of how to provide care to large majority of patients in safest way, as well as dealing with large influx of patients. This challenge was compounded by fluctuations in the workforce due to sickness and challenges for working parents and families.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 80 percent of healthcare workers and 83 percent of workers who provide child care, emergency services, and social services, are women. And women-dominant occupations, such as nurses and personal care aides are among the most vulnerable to getting sick and spreading it to others.⁶

She shared: "We are nowhere close to recovery from a caregiver standpoint, and in fact I think the next 18 months is going to be a very important time. We've offered a lot of support, internally, around behavioral health issues about preventing burnout, about taking care of yourself, about how do we as an organization provide support. But I'm thinking we're already seeing early retirements."

"We have so many other health care folks who have been negatively impacted. I had an environmental service worker housekeeper actually come to me and say, 'When a patient dies we're never included in those. And yet, I am in that patient's room every day. I see them. I don't know all of

what's going on, but I can see what's happening.' And there's this secondary trauma, for people who are not the doctor and the nurse...when they see and care about and have empathy for that patient as well, even though they're serving them in a different way. And I can't do my job [as a doctor] if they're not doing their job."

Mental Health

A recurrent theme in the experiences shared in the Listening Forum was the impact of the pandemic on women's mental health. Most women shared experiencing feelings of burnout, high levels of stress and anxiety, and loneliness, isolation, and disconnection.

The disproportionate job loss experienced by women, along with widespread closures of schools and daycares, have compounded experiences of stress for women. Women are bearing the considerable weight of additional burdens at home, while isolation and social distancing recommendations have removed social and family supports as relief options.

Older women, who are more likely to live alone or in managed care, are both unable to provide support to their families, but are also feeling an extended burden of extreme isolation and fear of infection.

For women with existing mental health

needs and conditions prior to the pandemic, such as those suffering from anxiety, substance abuse, post-partum depression, or those in abusive relationships, the pandemic conditions intensify stress and magnify feeling of isolation and helplessness in the face of acute fear and anxiety.

Terran Echegoyen, the Counseling Center Manager at the YWCA Spokane, shared her struggles with alcohol consumption as a coping mechanism, despite feeling guilty for maintaining a level of security and success through the pandemic: "...So we have a ton of silver linings in my story. I'm very grateful, which honestly made being so sad and depressed and lonely and feeling isolated that much worse, right? I have all of these amazing things in one hand and then I have all my struggles in the other, and ones in which I didn't know I could access help or access anybody through, because I'm a strong woman, I do everything on my own, right?"

Shannon Griffiths, Director of ECEAP at YWCA Spokane, shared: ""Being a leader of an organization, I managed twenty-eight individuals - the intensity, the emotions were just over the top. There was a lot of tears, a lot of anxiety, and it's a really isolating experience in general to be a leader. But it's also a very isolating time [as a leader] because you're navigating the same exact situations, but you're trying to be the pillar, when that's not necessarily how you're feeling internally."

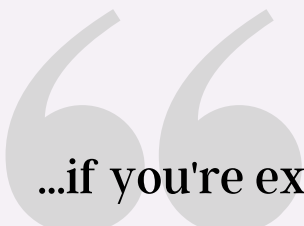
She added: "We try to share with [the parents we serve], you know, it's about your stability. First, your kids are going to be as impacted as you are, so if you're experiencing anxiety, stress, loneliness, you better believe your kids are right there with you. And so how do we get our parents connected and feeling safe, and trusting that the world around them is there to lift them up and see them succeed, not that they have to manage things alone?"

Qiana Tyeskey, the Director of Housing for the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle, shared her feelings of isolation and loneliness while quarantining with COVID-19: "The worst part was being alone. Actually people, they would come to the door and drop things off, they would be supportive, but they wouldn't want to be around."

She added: "You never really appreciate having people around until you can't have anybody, and especially when you're sick. I was really sick - I couldn't breathe. I could barely walk to the kitchen. I did lose my smell. I did lose my taste. I had the support of people around me, random things they did to help like calling on video chat, people checking up on you every day. That really was helpful, but it just made me realize, like, a lot of the people that are dying from COVID are dying alone, and that's just not a good feeling."

Rocío Carrión shared: "It was during the pandemic that I realized that I hit my

limit of advocacy. I was burning out. And that's one of the things that I teach my workshops, is trying to balance between activism and self care. So I wanted to not just preach it out but I wanted to practice it myself."




...if you're experiencing anxiety, stress, loneliness, you better believe your kids are right there with you. And so how do we get our parents connected and feeling safe, and trusting that the world around them is there to lift them up and see them succeed, not that they have to manage things along?

Mental Health Care

As Dashni Amin shared: "We say that when trauma happens, it's a rupture of connection, and it happens in isolation. And when you're able to connect safely, it's one of the most important healing works that can happen."

However, as a result of stay-at-home orders, mental health services shifted to online delivery methods.

Shannon Griffiths shared the difficulty in replicating therapy and counseling services remotely: "When we go to mental health services, it's a really sacred experience, and then to bring that into your home and try to replicate that...it's not the same. So a lot of those services deteriorated during that time."



As the COVID pandemic expanded, the other pandemic - structural racism - surged on through disproportionate impacts on Black and Brown people's employment, and undocumented immigrants that were excluded from stimulus relief. The disparity in COVID infection and death rates were evident from the beginning.

Racial Trauma & BIPOC Mental Health Access

Debbie Lacey, founder and CEO of Eastside for All, shared: "As the COVID pandemic expanded, the other pandemic - structural racism - surged on through disproportionate impacts on Black and Brown people's employment and undocumented immigrants that were excluded from stimulus relief. The disparity in COVID infection and death rates were evident from the beginning, and the alarming increase in anti Asian hate and violence was all in the mix."

Yet, despite an increase in traumatic experiences amongst communities of color, compounding the heightened mental health impact of the pandemic, attention on and specialization in racially and culturally sensitive mental healthcare is limited.


As Ashley McGirt, president and founder of the Washington Therapy Fund Foundation, shared, "During that time, people were reaching out - one [reason] was due to the grief, and stress and COVID, but they also started reaching out because of the George Floyd protests and just the incessant police brutality that's been happening in our community, especially because I'm one of the only black therapists who specialize in this, and racial trauma."

"I'm a therapist, I see a therapist, and I know the challenges of what it's like trying to find therapists. especially of color, not only here in Washington state but across the globe. Because about 0.02 percent of psychologists are African American across the globe - and then when we start thinking about Muslim therapists, trans therapists, and all of these identities, there's just not enough going around."

In addition, Ashley shared how standard prices for mental health services are prohibitively high, particularly for many communities of color and vulnerable communities who most need the care: "And what I realized was that there are a lot of people who were reaching out to me - which, this was an occurrence before COVID but it was even worse during COVID - where they couldn't afford my services, and my fees are already set at a lower rate than what they should be for therapists of my caliber."

It is critical to advocate for communities of color, particularly Black and Indigenous communities, who are disproportionately facing the magnified stress and mental wear of COVID-19's impact.

There is a need for improved equity in access to health care and social and community services, in order to better address and prevent psychological harm as a result of ongoing structural and institutional racism.



I'm a therapist, I see a therapist, and I know the challenges of what it's like to find therapists, especially of color... And what I realized was that there are a lot of people who were reaching out to me...where they couldn't afford my services, and my fees are already set at a lower rate than what they should be for therapists of my caliber.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WOMEN

AN OVERVIEW OF NATIONAL TRENDS

As Lynda Laughlin and Megan Wisniewski wrote for the United States Census Bureau, “Thirty-four million women work in jobs officially classified as essential... Because women make up a large portion of the essential workforce, they have played a critical role in the U.S. economy and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.” ⁷

Yet COVID-19's negative impacts have disproportionately affected women in the U.S, with women at significantly increased risk for leaving the workforce, and with the gender wage gap likely to grow. The impact of COVID-19 threatens to roll back gains for women, with women of color and working mothers bearing the brunt of the crisis.



4x

In September 2020, four times more women than men dropped out of the workforce, with higher unemployment rates for Black women (11.1%) and Latina women (11%) than the national average. And while the unemployment rate for other racial and ethnic groups gradually decreased, the rate of unemployment among Black women increased in January and February of 2021. ⁸



Despite making up only 47% of the workforce prior to the pandemic, women 55% of the job losses due to COVID-19, in part because they were overrepresented in occupations and sectors hit especially hard during the pandemic, such as accommodation, food, sales and manufacturing. ⁹



SLOW

As a result of COVID-19, women are 1.3 times more likely than men to have considered stepping out of the workforce or slowing down their careers—particularly mothers, senior women, and Black women. The participation gap in the workforce between men and women ages 25-54 is once again widening after COVID-19. ¹⁰



5%

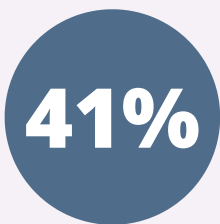
A National Bureau of Economic Research working paper predicts that the wage gap could widen by five percent after a pandemic recession. ¹¹

Women are more vulnerable to the economic impacts of COVID-19 because of existing gender inequalities. In the words of Nicole Bateman and Martha Ross for the Brookings Institute, “COVID-19 is hard on women because the U.S. economy is hard on women, and this virus excels at taking existing tensions and ratcheting them up.” ¹²

Women have been disproportionately affected by unemployment, poverty and hunger during the COVID-19 pandemic, with women facing higher rates of job loss and child care responsibilities falling primarily on women and girls. In addition, women have faced higher rates of poverty and food insecurity during the crisis.



According to the Food Research and Action Center, women have been more affected by food insecurity than men. Census Pulse survey data showed that 11.2% of women, compared to 9.4% of men surveyed, reported sometimes or often not having enough to eat.¹³



According to the Brookings Institute, 41% of women live in households below 200% of the federal poverty level, a common measure capturing the working poor. More than one quarter receive safety net benefits like SNAP, Medicaid, Social Security, or other public assistance income.¹⁴

According to the National Women's Law Center (NWLC) and the Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University, "Child care is crucial to children's development and parental employment - it is the work that makes all other work possible."¹⁵

Yet, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, women across all ages, income levels, and racial identities expressed deep concerns about access to high-quality and affordable childcare. The pandemic put the child care system under heavy strain, with many providers closing their programs, unable to sustain operations with diminishing enrollment, placing the burden of childcare largely on women and girls.



In a survey conducted by Dr. Alicia Sasser Modestino of Northeastern University, 25% women who became unemployed during the pandemic reported the job loss was due to a lack of childcare, twice the rate of men surveyed.¹⁶



According to Washington STEM, 6 in 10 children were without access to care at the beginning of the pandemic.¹⁷

COVID-19 severely impacted domestic and sexual violence survivors, as well as communities of color: "a pandemic within a pandemic."¹² Reports showed an increase in domestic violence, and possibly child maltreatment, during the pandemic. This increase can partially be attributed to disrupted access to protective family and social networks, increased time at home with abusers, and lack of access to school resources.



Despite domestic violence hotlines anticipating increased demand for services as a result of stay-at-home mandates, many organizations experienced a drop in number of calls, some by more than 50%. This reflected not a decrease in rates of IPV, but rather indicated that victims were unable to safely connect with services.¹⁸



COVID-19 amplified economic instability, a lack of safe and stable child care, a lack of social support and access to safe housing, and increased neighborhood violence - all social factors which may be predictive of worsened domestic and sexual violence.¹⁹

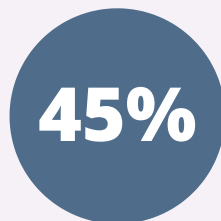


Economic independence is a critical factor in violence prevention. For many survivors, financial entanglement with an abuser is too difficult to sever without an alternate source of support. The pandemic has heightened financial entanglement due to increased unemployment, particularly among women of color and immigrants.²⁰

Reports show an increase in discrimination and violence towards communities of color, as well as a rise in xenophobic rhetoric and hate speech. In addition to continued disproportionate violence against Black and Indigenous communities, there has been a significant uptick in violent incidents that have targeted Asian people.



Even before the deadly Atlanta-area spa shootings in March, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) had faced nearly 4,000 hate incidents since the pandemic began, a 149% rise over the previous year, according to analysis of official preliminary police data by the Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino.²¹



45% of Black adults also say it is more common for people to express racist views about Black people than before the outbreak.²³

Evidence shows that communities of color, and especially women of color, experience significant health disparities when compared to the general population, including limited access to healthcare, poorer health outcomes, and increased mortality rates.

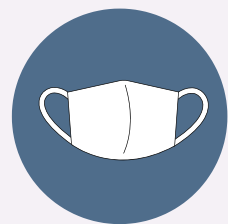
These existing health inequities have been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, with higher infection and mortality rates amongst communities of color and the most vulnerable populations.



According to a New York Times analysis, one in three jobs held by women is designated as essential, with women of color disproportionately represented in the essential workforce.²⁴



Of approximately 19 million healthcare workers nationwide, women comprise nearly 80% of workers. Women make up nearly nine out of 10 nurses and nursing assistants, most respiratory therapists, a majority of pharmacists and an overwhelming majority of pharmacy aides and technicians.^{24 25}



73% of healthcare workers infected by COVID-19 were women.²⁶



According to National Nurses United, Filipino nurses make up only 4 percent of the total registered nurses in the U.S. However, as of April 2021, 24 percent of the nurses they surveyed who died from COVID-19 complications were Filipino.²⁷



Evidence indicates that COVID-19 has exacerbated racial maternal health disparities, particularly Black maternal health. In the first six months of the pandemic, Black women experienced a 2.3-year drop in life expectancy. Prior to the pandemic, Black mothers were 3-4 times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than White mothers. While data is not yet available, maternal health disparities are expected to worsen as a result of COVID-19.²⁸

CONCLUSION + NEXT STEPS

Overall, the listening sessions were well received and will serve as a model for future community outreach.

The statements received indicate that several of the Commission's current priorities (i.e., improving the childcare system; improving safety for domestic violence and sexual assault survivors) appear to remain relevant and at the forefront of community concerns as the 2021 legislative session comes to a close.

The speakers also highlighted additional issues (i.e., increased support for immigrant/undocumented immigrant communities and businesses; improving accessibility to mental healthcare;) as needing further attention as potential focus areas for the Commission.

As the Commission plans its priorities, activities, and communications in the coming year, this report serves as a summary of select community input to guide where the Commission's attention should be focused, and how Commissioners can advocate for the needs of Washington state women.

The Commission's next steps include consideration of this material, revising current priorities and defining new legislative priorities, and incorporating community feedback into the Commission's future plans, ensuring responsiveness to their constituents.

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