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CONTRIBUTORS

OPINION

# Poverty reduction central to building back better

By **Heather McGregor** Contributor

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Before the pandemic began, one out of five children in Toronto grew up in poverty. Six months later, the situation is dramatically worse. The temporary relief measures introduced by both federal and provincial governments will run out soon. To ensure women, racialized communities and gender-diverse people are not left behind, we must prioritize poverty reduction as we rebuild our economy.

Almost two million Canadians will be unable to access income supports such as Employment Insurance when the CERB ends. Many women will be excluded from EI because women constitute the majority of the part-time workforce, which means they have little job security. Those who do qualify for EI will be expected to live on 55 per cent of their previous income; 55 per cent of minimum wage is not enough to survive.

Given that women are concentrated in part-time, minimum wage, and precarious work, the CERB ending will have devastating gender and racial impacts.

In every category — Indigenous women, immigrant and refugee women, Black women, senior women — women's poverty rates are higher than those of men. It is the poverty of women that is behind the poverty of so many children in our city and province. At YWCA Toronto, we recently submitted recommendations for an equitable, gender-responsive recovery plan to the province that prioritizes poverty reduction.

Recent data released by Toronto Public Health also reveals that communities with a high proportion of low-income, newcomer and racialized residents experience much higher levels of COVID-19. For example, while racialized people make up 52 per cent of Toronto residents, they make up 83 per cent of all COVID-19 cases. Conversely, while white people make up 48 per cent of all Toronto residents, they constitute only 17 per cent of COVID-19 cases.

Women who are racialized are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, which is confirmed by the data from Toronto Public Health. Poor people tend to do worse in a public health crisis, and women and racialized people are overrepresented among the poor.

Prioritizing equity, rejecting austerity and rebuilding social infrastructure that support communities facing poverty and violence will promote resilience. Without aggressive poverty reduction measures, our province will not bounce back from this pandemic.

Deep systemic dynamics of inequity have given rise to poverty — it goes beyond mere individual choices. Women are overrepresented among the poor because they are typically the primary caregivers of their children and elderly family members, child care continues to be expensive and difficult to access, and work in feminized industries is often poorly paid and exploitative. These dynamics must change.

While the pandemic has laid bare many pre-existing inequities, it has also created an opportunity to reimagine and rebuild our social infrastructure.

COVID-19 recovery must focus on building back better, and poverty reduction is central to these efforts. As Ontario develops its next five-year poverty reduction strategy and continues to respond to the challenges posed by this pandemic, recovery measures should align with robust poverty-reduction targets. This means reforming Ontario's income security system and strengthening decent work practices, particularly in feminized industries. This also means collecting race-based data and other forms of information to evaluate the efficacy of poverty reduction initiatives.

At the federal level, a commitment to poverty reduction means seriously exploring a basic income program. While there are policy detractors, a national basic income program can lift adults and children out of poverty by providing a guaranteed income floor below which no Canadian can fall.

Given that unpaid care work is a source of women's marginalization and poverty, we believe a basic income program will support women on low and fixed incomes in particular. The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls report also calls for a guaranteed annual livable income for all residents of Canada, including Indigenous Peoples. Therefore, a well-designed basic income program may be able to support reconciliation efforts.

As highlighted in a series of consultations with YWCA Toronto shelter residents and program participants, poverty destroys lives and limits opportunities. If we are committed to ending systemic racism and closing gender disparities in our country, all levels of government must act to reduce poverty now.

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*Heather McGregor is the CEO of YWCA Toronto, the city's leading multi-service nonprofit organization serving girls, women and gender-diverse communities.*

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