



Breaking Barriers:

The Urgent Need to Accelerate Gender Equality for Young Women and Girls



The Mary Ward Centre for Education, Spirituality and Justice
is a Ministry of the Loretto Sisters (IBVM Canada).

5 GENDER
EQUALITY





Report Overview

This report provides an ‘on the ground’ perspective of the experiences of girls and young women in Canada concerning the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). It is informed by current policies and research, as well as the lived experiences of girls and young women, and takes an intersectional analytical approach. We identify significant obstacles to the achievement of gender equality for girls and young women in Canada with specific implications for employment and career development.

Key Learnings

- Research indicates that nearly 1 in 2 women (and 3 in 10 men) report experiencing harassment or sexual assault in the workplace. Girls and young women consistently report experiences of workplace sexual harassment and discrimination based on gender, race, religion, disability, and other identity markers.
- Women continue to be underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, making up less than 30% of those employed. Girls shared experiences of discomfort in male-dominated STEM classroom settings that negatively impacted their desire to pursue careers in these fields.
- Research indicates that girls and young women tend to be overrepresented in 'caring' professions and perform disproportionately more unpaid care work than boys and young men, which impacts their career possibilities. This relates to their experiences regarding traditional gender norms and societal expectations. Girls and young women both report societal and familial pressure to pursue marriage and children as a primary concern and career as a secondary pursuit.
- Young women and girls experience barriers in academic and sport settings. They perceive young men to receive preferential treatment in post-secondary academic settings which leads to superior networking and employment opportunities, and preferential treatment related to sports in secondary school settings. This relates to research concerning lack of mentoring and leadership opportunities for young women and girls. Without role models and opportunities for mentoring, girls and young women fail to develop the confidence and practical skills needed for career development, whether in STEM, sports, or other fields.
- While Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) frameworks and policies aim to ensure that all employees, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or other identities, have equal opportunities and protections in the workplace, young women and girls are concerned that recent backlash against DEI policies will negatively affect opportunities for women and gender inequality will increase.



Recommendations from Young Women and Girls

01. Enable and create opportunities for mentoring and networking among girls and women for career development that is responsive to diversity.

Mentoring and networking opportunities will help young women and girls create connections with peers and older women to support career development. Programs should include young women and girls from various socioeconomic backgrounds, and respond to racial, cultural and linguistic diversity as well as the realities of the rural-urban divide. Mentorship opportunities for women are especially needed in fields of STEM, sports, and trades where there are fewer role models and support systems to help women advance in these careers.

02. Increase scholarship opportunities to support the educational attainment of girls and young women.

Scholarships should be made broadly available across a variety of post-secondary qualifications. Funding should be allocated, in part, to digital technology and tools, including high speed inter-

net, to support young women and girls from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Increase the availability of scholarships based on socioeconomic need, remote geographical location, and intersecting identity markers.

03. Provide comprehensive education on gender equality across educational levels.

Provide comprehensive education on gender equality that addresses gender norms, values, and behaviours, and the harms of inequality. Education must begin in primary school and be reinforced at secondary and post-secondary levels. Education on menstrual health is critical to eliminate the stigma associated with menstruation. Provide education on labour rights for women that presents resources, knowledge, and practical skills to navigate the workplace, including how to negotiate salary, address discrimination and sexual harassment, etc.

04. Expand Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) frameworks and policies.

Protect and expand DEI frameworks and policies and ensure mandatory diversity training programs for employers and employees. Provide employers and employees with the tools to identify and correct biases that are negatively impacting the workplace. DEI policies should focus on shifting norms in the workplace with respect to maternity and parental leave, offer remote work opportunities to support women's re-entry into the workforce, and provide gender-neutral parental leaves. Offer practical resources and emotional support to returning mothers to ensure a smoother transition to the workforce after an extended leave. Policies must respond to multiple forms of marginalization that women experience, and must recognize that girls and young women experience gender discrimination in and through race, class, ability, and other vectors of social power and identity.

INTRODUCTION

We don't really hire girls for this position.

Thirty years after the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – a landmark framework to achieve gender equality – was adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, women and girls still face barriers to full equality.



The Mary Ward Centre, in collaboration with young women and girls from across the Greater Toronto Area in Ontario, Canada, offers this report to draw attention to the realities facing girls and young women, and give voice to their experiences of gender equality in relation to employment. This report responds to the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration, as well as contributes to the analysis of progress in Canada on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). The Canadian Indicator Framework for the SDGs Data Hub indicates that only 2 of 5 targets related to gender equality are making progress (but need accelerated action), whereas the remaining 3 targets show little progress or no data is available to assess progress.

In 2015 all UN Member States adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a plan of action to ensure the prosperity of all people and the planet, and which proposes 17 SDGs. The SDGs address issues such as poverty, food insecurity, education, health, environment, employment and economic growth, and gender equality. The Government of Canada made a corresponding commitment to achieve the SDGs in Canada. Progress, however, is stalled and with only 5 years left until 2030, time is running out to achieve the goals. The 2025 UN High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development will address gender equality in-depth. Consequently, we hope this report will provide timely insight into the realities of gender equality in Canada and help catalyze the political will needed for accelerated action for girls and young women.

Methodology

This report provides an 'on the ground' perspective of the experiences of girls and young women with respect to gender equality and decent work. It is informed by current policies and research, and the lived experiences of girls and young women.

A preliminary review was conducted of Canadian government census data (i.e. Statistics Canada), research reports and studies by Canadian non-governmental organizations, and international agency reports (i.e. UNICEF) examining challenges and opportunities related to gender and youth work and employment. The themes generated through this review are placed in dialogue with the lived experiences of the young women and girls participating in this report.[1]

Wherever possible, this report uses an intersectionality lens to highlight the multiple and interlocking dimensions of young women and girls' lives which shape their experiences of gender discrimination in work and employment. 'Intersectionality' is a critical paradigm applied in

social research used to highlight the compounding effects of social power, identity, and discrimination in women's lives [2]. An intersectionality approach underscores that gender discrimination is shaped in and through race, class, disability, religion, nation and citizenship, sexual orientation, and other axes of social identity and power.

The lived experiences of young women and girls were collected using a Conversation Circle methodology. Conversation Circles are safe, small group dialogue spaces where all participants can express their thoughts and experiences without judgment. They are specifically designed to be led by youth, for youth, to allow meaningful conversation on identified issues.

Young women and girls were invited to participate in this reporting process by facilitating a 90-minute Conversation Circle and sharing a summary document for synthesis in the report. They were also invited to help draft the final report. All participants, or their guardians if under the age of 18 years, signed a consent form to participate in this report. Youth under the age of 18 participating in a Conversation Circle were accompanied by an adult ally.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to all of the young women and girls who participated in Conversation Circles and provided their crucial input to this report. We would like to acknowledge the participation of those connected with the University of Toronto, Toronto Metropolitan University, Loretto Abbey Secondary School, and the Mary Ward Centre for making the Conversation Circles possible.

Research and Drafting Team:

Ms. Mia Galitsiadis

Ms. Victory Okeugo

Sarah Redikopp, PhD

Sr. Sarah Rudolph, IBVM



Key Findings from Current Research

Since 1995, girls and young women have experienced an almost global increase in rates of education and employment. More women are being educated at higher levels, and workforce participation has increased overall.[3] However, despite increased education and labour force participation, young women continue to experience gendered barriers and forms of discrimination which impact their ability to access decent and meaningful work.

The International Labour Organization defines “decent work” as work that is

[P]roductive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.[4]

A review of the literature indicates that young women in Canada continue to struggle with access to decent work and career development opportunities. These barriers to decent work include the burden of unpaid care work and domestic labour, gender segregation in the workforce and a lack of mentors for young women, rising unemployment and precarious work, which negatively impacts working conditions, and persistent wage gaps and disproportionate rates of workplace sexual harassment, especially for young women.



Unpaid Care Work

Although more young women are participating in the paid labour force overall, the burden of unpaid care work significantly impacts the educational and working lives of girls and young women. Globally, girls aged 10–14 spend a collective 160 million more hours on unpaid care and domestic work than boys of the same age,[5] and in Canada, women and girls consistently spend more time on unpaid domestic labour than men, often reducing their participation in the paid work force as a result.[6]

This burden of unpaid care work and family responsibilities informs disproportionate rates of girls and young women not enrolled in education, employment or training programs (NEET). Globally, adolescent girls and young women aged 15–24 are twice as likely as boys to be NEET, and this ratio has remained stable for the last 30 years. [7] In Canada, girls and young women are more likely to leave school and the paid labour force due to family responsibilities when compared to young men: in a survey of Canadian youth aged 16-29 not in education, employment, or training, 46% of female respondents aged 25-29 are not in the labour market due to family obligations. The same was found to be true for only 5% of male respondents of the same age group.[8]



Gender Segregated Work

Girls’ and young women’s responsibility for unpaid care work, coupled with gendered expectations and social norms, impacts the kinds of paid work girls can and do take on. Although girls and young women are employed at higher rates than they were 30 years ago, they are more likely to hold part-time, precarious, and/or temporary jobs in the informal economy.[9].[10].[11] Girls’ employment tends to mirror gendered stereotypes for domestic work. Women continue to be overrepresented in ‘caring’ professions, and gender segregation in the labour market begins at a young age: Girl Guides Canada found that, while rates of summer employment for boys and girls aged 12-18 were roughly similar, 28% of girls were employed in caring work – such as babysitting – compared to 17% of boys.[12] Conversely, 23% of boys surveyed were employed in maintenance, gardening or grounds-keeping roles, compared to only 9% of girls.



Underrepresentation In STEM Fields

In addition to an overrepresentation in caring professions, which tend to be both undervalued and underpaid, young women and girls continue to be underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields.[13] In Canada, women make up less than 30% of those employed in STEM fields.[14] This percentage is consistent with global trends in women's employment in STEM and Artificial Intelligence (AI) reported by the World Economic Forum, signalling an urgent need for gender parity in the digital economy.[15]

begins at a young age. Girl Guides Canada reports that girls (aged 12-18) working full-time summer jobs earned about \$3.00 less per hour than boys.[22] The pay gap widened to \$6.31 per hour for girls who worked informally for family, friends, or neighbours on a full-time basis – an area where racialized and Indigenous girls are more likely to be employed relative to white girls and boys writ large. Moreover, only 24% of Black, Indigenous, and racialized girls reported pay satisfaction, compared with 50% of white girls, indicating racialized and gendered pay inequities.[23] In 2019, young women aged 14-29 earned approximately 6% less per hour than young men, despite higher levels of education.[24]



Precarious Work

While employment rates among young workers in Canada have oscillated as pandemic recovery unfolds, young workers are experiencing consistently higher rates of unemployment since 2023 [16] and greater difficulty finding full-time work, especially those without postsecondary education. Rates of precarious work are increasing overall, particularly among young women, who are overrepresented in retail, hospitality, and food service industries and more likely to be employed part-time.[17].[18].[19].[20]



Sexual Harassment And Discrimination

UNICEF names gender-based discrimination as a globally significant barrier to women's employment and workforce participation. Recent reports from Statistics Canada reveal startling rates of sexual harassment experienced by young female workers: nearly 1 in 2 women (and 3 in 10 men) report experiencing harassment or sexual assault in the workplace.[25] The highest rates were reported by female workers aged 25 to 34 (60% of women in this age group report sexual harassment or assault in the workplace)and LGBTQ-identified workers.Among girls aged 12 to 18, 1 in 10 reported some form of sexual harassment or assault while working in summer 2018: this rate doubled for girls aged 16-18 (19%). [26]



Gender Wage Gap

Although girls and young women in Canada are achieving increasingly higher levels of education, [21] the gender wage gap remains persistent and

Despite the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment and the widespread adoption of workplace harassment policies in Canada, their implementation is inconsistent. Statistics Canada suggests that 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men reported not receiving information on reporting procedures from their employer,[27] and data indicates that racialized women and women

belonging to a visible minority are less likely to report experiencing workplace harassment than white women. This is not an indication that racialized women experience less harassment than white women – rather, it is an indication that racialized women are less likely to believe that their reports will be meaningfully acted upon by employers. According to Statistics Canada, 1 in 5 women do not report workplace harassment because they fear negative consequences, and 1 in 4 women do not report because they believe no action will be taken to redress harassment in the workplace.[28]



Leadership Opportunities

Lack of confidence and mentorship are significant barriers to girls' leadership, with implications for work and career development. A 2019 study by Plan International found that 6 in 10 Canadian girls aged 14-24 years doubt their leadership capacity due to lack of skills and confidence, despite believing that women and girls have natural qualities to become good leaders [29]. A further 6 in 10 say they occasionally feel pressured to change how they act to achieve their leadership aspirations. Only 27% of girls reported that they are confident in their leadership skills, with most girls feeling confident to lead in family settings (20%). 16% of girls report feeling confident to lead in school, 13% in sports and extracurriculars, 11% in the workplace, and 8% in community groups. Girls identify education (23%), family support (22%), community support (11%), a mentor (9%), access to leadership courses (9%), and gender equality (8%) as key tools needed to build leadership skills. Only 8% of respondents said they have the tools they need to engage in leadership opportunities.

Mentorship is a key part of girls' leadership and career development. Girl Guides Canada indicates that while 56% of girls who participated in their

study reported that they made friends, and 52% of girls reported gaining skills to help in a future career, only 17% of girls reported meeting a mentor during their course of summer work [30].

The Canadian Women's Foundation affirms the need for women to have access to leadership training, confidence-building and decision-making opportunities, and networking in order to pursue leadership roles. [31]

Lived Experience Of Gender Equality And Access To Decent Work

A total of 49 young women and girls participated in Conversation Circles. Two online Conversation Circles were held for young women aged 19 to 24 years, comprising a total of 18 participants who represented a diverse range of racial and cultural backgrounds, and different self-identified financial situations, from low-income to middle class. The participants were all university and college students, with most working part-time positions to support their studies, or some taking on summer work positions. Many work in the food and hospitality industry, and identified various impacts in such sectors. Two in-person Conversation Circles were held with a total of 31 girls aged 15-19 years to explore how gender inequality impacts girls, particularly in relation to employment experiences and their career aspirations.

These young women and girls reflected on personal experiences, societal expectations, and potential solutions to gendered barriers in work and employment. Their responses reveal the complex interplay of stereotypes, systemic barriers, and cultural norms affecting their perceptions of gender roles and employment pathways.

The themes emerging from the Conversation Circles mirror the findings uncovered by the literature review. Young women and girls consistently raise concerns about intersecting forms of discrimination, sexualization and sexual harassment in the workplace, confronting traditional gender norms regarding marriage and family and the kinds of work they feel supported in pursuing, and barriers in academic and sport settings.



Intersecting Discrimination

Young women indicated that they experience intersecting forms of discrimination based not only on gender but race, religion, health status, disability, immigration status, marital status, and even their career aspirations. For example, one young woman shared her experience working at a retailer where all of her coworkers were male. She felt that she was held to a higher standard of performance than her coworkers because she is a woman. She also felt that her religious affiliation as a Muslim woman increased the preconceived biases and stereotypes about her.

Young women shared many stories about compounding discriminations based on gender and race: one young woman shared about her experience working at a law firm as a young Black woman. She felt she was treated differently by her supervisor compared to other legal assistants. Her supervisor would talk about her and laugh, and she was told she needed “tough skin” to work there. Eventually, she left her employer. Another young woman recounted a family member telling her she would never be at par with a white person, even if she worked hard. Yet another young woman was laughed at by colleagues for her accent. She subsequently took a course on racism, and is now able to identify racism on individual and systemic levels.

Another participant described a sister’s experience with discrimination based on disability. Living with cerebral palsy, her sister has struggled to access education. She also has experienced discrimination in job interviews when employers become aware of her skin colour and disability.

Girls recounted experiences of discrimination in the workplace based on others’ perception of their gender. One girl shared her experience of working in a hardware store and consistently being overlooked as customers asked for male employees to assist them. She believed it was based on a perception of not being knowledgeable in the field. Another girl participant recounted an experience of applying to work at a hockey rink. She was told “We don’t really hire girls for this position.” She attributed that remark to a perception that she would not be able to lift and move equipment because she was a girl, despite the fact that she does weightlifting at the gym.

One girl also shared her belief that while there are laws that protect women or ensure equality in the workforce, “that doesn’t mean women are respected as equals.”

These experiences indicate that young women and girls continue to experience intersecting identity-based discrimination in the workplace. These factors compound with their gender to create negative experiences of employment.



Sexualization and Sexual Harassment

Input from the Conversation Circles indicated that young women and girls experience sexualization and sexual harassment in the workplace. The Conversation Circles also revealed that young women and girls are hesitant to report incidents of workplace sexual harassment for fear of repercussions, or because they don’t think they will be believed. Some young women indicated

that their reports were met with inaction or apathy by their employers.

For example, one young woman explained that in her workplace, men are often in positions of authority and frequently sexualize female workers through both overt and subtle comments. She identified a normalizing of this behaviour in which she was expected to accept the rude or sexual comments made by male staff and customers. She felt that if she were to speak against it, she would be perceived as overly dramatic or emotional. Consequently, she would rather avoid bringing such situations to the attention of her employers in an attempt to avoid facing the neglect or hostility of her coworkers. Other young women in similar situations said that when they informed their employers, many chose to ignore the situation instead of confronting it or devising possible solutions.

Another young woman who also works in the hospitality industry noted that hiring managers frequently hire women for certain positions, such as hosting, as they are the face of the restaurant. She noticed that many hosts were hired based on conventional attractiveness rather than capability. She was told, “Customers are always right and make the customers happy.”

A young woman who works as a lifeguard noted that her male co-worker would often assume an authoritative role, inserting himself in other people's shifts and micro-managing other employees. His behaviour extended beyond professional boundaries as he stayed after work to speak to younger female workers, making inappropriate comments and offering to drive them home. Although many employees, including the young woman, reported this behaviour to the manager, the concerns were dismissed. The manager downplayed the situation, which made the young woman feel that the male co-worker was being protected, which the participant believes exemplifies workplace harassment and inaction.

One young woman shared about an experience of being physically harassed. Due to fear of being reprimanded or causing an escalation of the harassment, the young woman hesitated to report the incident to her employers. Upon learning that other female coworkers had similar experiences with the same male worker, the young woman decided to take action. Despite being reported, however, the male worker was demoted not on the basis of harassment but due to poor work performance. Other young women recounted experiences of being touched by men in the workplace. Despite workplace training and policies on sexual harassment, victims are not always believed and little action follows.

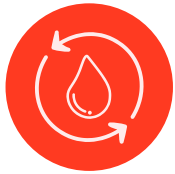
Experiences of catcalling, inappropriate jokes, and being manipulated by men were disturbingly common among girls. One girl noted, “They [men] are not educated on what women go through, but we are all too aware.”



Early Sexualization

Girl participants also shared experiences of being sexualized at an early age. A significant number of participants pointed to early sexualization and being looked down on by male peers. One girl noted, “Being catcalled—sexualized at a young age—made me feel powerless.” Beauty standards also emerged as a major pressure point. Girls felt they were held to higher appearance standards and were more frequently judged on their looks. The emotional labour expected from them—being pleasant, smiling, and well-behaved, particularly in the face of challenging situations—adds to the burden girls and young women experience.

Girls recounted experiences of being labelled pejoratively around sexuality and gender. For example, being called ‘pick me’ or ‘asking for male attention’ or ‘slut’ when showing interest in boys or young men. Conversely, if a girl doesn’t appear to show enough interest in men, they’re considered a ‘lesbian’. Girls also reported being called a ‘whore’ for wearing makeup if it is perceived to be worn for male attention.



Menstrual Stigma

Young women and girls noted the stigma concerning menstrual health, and in particular, the lack of benefits, such as sick leave, specific to menstrual health. Participants also noted the cost associated with menstrual care products. One girl participant stated, "If men had a menstrual cycle, menstruation products would be free." Destigmatizing menstruation is seen as essential for increasing gender equality, through means such as comprehensive education on menstruation in school curricula. [32]



Traditional Norms Re: Marriage And Family

Young women shared a range of experiences showcasing how gender inequality has shaped their access to decent work, education, and career opportunities. A recurring theme is the persistent societal expectations that women face concerning traditional marriage and family roles. For instance, one young woman shared that upon beginning her university studies, she was constantly questioned about whether she wanted to pursue an education, or go down a more traditional route, to prioritize marriage and family responsibilities in comparison to professional aspirations. Young women are often asked, "What about kids and a family?"

Girls indicated facing similar pressures to conform to societal pressures around marriage. Many girls expressed feeling constrained by traditional gender expectations from a young age. These included domestic expectations such as being "expected to clean and cook" or being assigned more chores than male siblings. One girl recalled, "My mother said that I have to be quiet... because I'm a girl." Others discussed the emotional double standards placed on girls, such as being labeled more emotional and being expected to smile more.

These pressures are experienced within family contexts as well. One young woman noted that her mother had wanted to be a journalist, however, because her parents did not want that for her, she was encouraged to focus on starting a family rather than developing her professional skills to work towards her preferred career. In contrast, the young woman’s uncle was encouraged to follow any career he chose. Another young woman shared that while her mother was offered a promotion at work which would have advanced her career, due to the reality of pregnancy, impending maternity leave, and her father’s insistence that her mother prioritize the family and household, her mother declined the promotion. Many women feel that they must prioritize family and raising children over following a career path.

One girl participant shared about the reality of forced marriage saying that an arranged marriage was imminent within her friend group. The expectation in the arranged marriage is that “the woman is expected to be silent, to be tame while the groom is allowed to go off and get drunk. These barriers enforce the notion that women should stay at home and take care of the kids, instead of pursuing their career aspirations.”

Gender stereotypes—such as girls being expected to be caregivers and emotional support systems for others—undermine ambition and create a sense that leadership belongs to men.



Barriers In Academic Settings

In academic settings, whether at the secondary or post-secondary level, many young women and girls experience gender-based barriers. One young woman shared her experience that at the post-secondary level she perceived many teaching assistants and professors in her department often chose male students over female students to perform research endeavors. She felt this advantages male students in advancing their career and personal connections. When approaching a professor about participating in a research project, she was told, “I don't know if you have it in you to do it.”

Girls reported feeling unwelcome in technical trades, science, or construction-based career pathways. Even within their own schools, the lack of traditional men's trade classes offered to girls was noted. One participant shared that in a tech class, she experienced the boys in her class giving her weird looks. The teacher distributed pamphlets entitled ‘Women at Work’ while similar pamphlets were not distributed to the boys.

Negative experiences in the classroom impact the way girls think about their future employment possibilities. For example, one girl said that she doesn't want to work in a male-dominated field because she feels more comfortable in a work environment with more women than men. She once considered a career in coding, however, she recalled an experience in a male-dominated coding class that prompted her to cry in the bathroom before every class.



Barriers In Sports

In the context of school athletics, one young woman shared her perception that male athletes are often praised and favoured more for their contributions and work in comparison to their female counterparts. She gave an example of her sister who is involved in competitive track and field and wants to pursue it as a career in the future. She sees, however, that males on the track and field team are favoured. There is more funding for male sporting events and more recognition.

Girls shared that they are often discouraged from participating in or excelling in male-dominated environments, including sports and technical careers. They also noted unequal access to opportunities. For example, boys were often prioritized in gym or swim meets. At dance competitions, boys were awarded extra points just for participating, while girls were expected to outperform just to be seen as equal. One participant said, “At dance comps the boys always win. They get extra points just for being there.”

Many girls felt that there were few role models or mentors to guide them in the field of sports. Another noted that there was little support for female-led school sports.



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Interconnectedness of the SDGs related to SDG 5 and SDG 8

In addition to discussing the key themes of this report, Conversation Circle participants were invited to explore any of the other SDGs that were significant to them.

Many noted the interconnectedness of the SDGs. Several SDGs impact on both barriers and opportunities to achieve gender equality and employment among girls and young women.



Young women identified SDG 1 (no poverty) as a pressing issue. Many young women are increasingly concerned about financial issues and poverty. They experience widespread anxiety about affording basic needs such as housing and food. Financial independence is perceived to be unattainable due to their increased financial constraints. Compounding this is the lack of job opportunities for young people. [33] In addition, because it is not part of the high school curriculum, young women feel there are limited opportunities to gain financial literacy and money management skills, which impacts their experiences of poverty.



Young women and girls both identified the linkages between SDG 1 and SDG 4 (quality education) and the impacts on SDG 8. Quality education is understood to be an enabler to access decent work and poverty reduction in the future. Inclusive and equitable education that addresses gender inequality is also seen as critical to achieving SDG 5.

Girls identified the connection between SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) and SDG 8. They called for greater attention to policies that reduce systemic disparities in pay, promotion, and the participation of women and girls in the economy, especially with respect to unpaid care work.

Young women identified the relationship between SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and SDG 5 and SDG 8. They understand SDG 11 to be essential for a prosperous future. However, there are concerns about political barriers to achieving this goal such as short-term focus on economic growth rather than long-term prosperity and sustainability. As an example, one participant brought up a concern that the KXL Pipeline Project was negatively affecting Indigenous communities for the sake of economic growth.

Young women and girls both identified the importance of SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) to achieving SDG 5. All are concerned that the democratic system is under threat as the Canadian political landscape is perceived to be extremely polarized. Instability is also perceived in other Western democracies. Such divides are directly impacting the ability to achieve SDG 5 and SDG 8. As remedies, they argue for the necessity of laws protecting youth from harassment and opportunities to hold public institutions accountable to commitments.



Summary of Findings

Both the review of current research and data capturing lived experience of young women and girls regarding gender equality and employment reveal significant trends that need to be addressed.

Fourth, young women and girls also acknowledge experiencing barriers in academic and sport settings, perceiving boys and young men to be advantaged in both settings. Young men are perceived as being given preferential treatment by professors in post-secondary school settings which leads to superior networking and future employment opportunities. In secondary school settings, boys are perceived as receiving preferential treatment in sports, with less funding and opportunities going towards female-led school sports. The barriers experienced in both academic and sports settings relate to the research concerning lack of mentoring and leadership opportunities for young women and girls. Without role models and opportunities for mentoring, girls and young women fail to develop the confidence and practical skills needed for career development, whether in STEM, sports, or other fields.

Finally, it is necessary to note the continued gender wage gap reported in the research review. Pay inequity persists for both girls and young women, and continues as women seek advancement in the workplace. DEI frameworks and policies aim to ensure that all employees, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or other identities, have equal opportunities and protections in the workplace. Concerns were raised in the Conversation Circles that recent backlash against DEI policies will mean that opportunities for women will be taken away and gender inequality will increase.

The trends from this analysis are troubling. Despite progress made since the 1995 Beijing Declaration, gender inequality continues in myriad forms. In order to address these challenges, we present a number of recommendations proposed by young women and girls.



Recommendations From Young Women and Girls

01. Enable and create opportunities for mentoring and networking among girls and women for career development that is responsive to diversity:

- Prioritize mentorship and networking opportunities for young women and girls that begin at an early age, such that they are forming connections with their peers and older women and fostering a network of possible “allies” that can support their career development.
- Mentorship programs should include young girls from various socioeconomic backgrounds, and respond to racial, cultural and linguistic diversity as well as the realities of the rural-urban divide [34].
- Mentorship opportunities for women are especially needed in fields of STEM, sports, and trades where there are fewer female role models and support systems to help women advance in these careers.

02. Increase scholarship opportunities to support the educational attainment of girls and young women.

- Invest in scholarships for women across various post-secondary qualifications.
- Funding should be allocated, in part, to digital technology and tools, including high speed internet, to support young women and girls from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Increase the availability of scholarships that are focused on socioeconomic need, remote geographical location, and intersecting identity markers.

03. Provide comprehensive education on gender equality across educational levels

- Provide comprehensive education on gender equality that addresses gender norms, values, and behaviours, and the harms of inequality.
 - Education must begin in primary school and be reinforced at secondary and post-secondary levels.
 - Education on menstrual health is critical to eliminate the stigma associated with menstruation.

- Provide education on labour rights for women that presents resources, knowledge, and practical skills to navigate the workplace, including how to negotiate salary, address discrimination and sexual harassment, etc.

04. Expand Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) frameworks and policies

- Protect and expand DEI frameworks and policies:
 - Ensure mandatory diversity training programs for employers and employees.
 - Provide employers and employees with the tools to identify and correct internal biases that are negatively impacting the workplace.
- DEI policies should focus on shifting norms in the workplace with respect to maternity and parental leave, offer remote work opportunities to support women's re-entry into the workforce, and provide gender-neutral parental leaves.
- Offer practical resources and emotional support to returning mothers to ensure a smoother transition to the workforce after an extended leave.
- Policies must respond to multiple forms of marginalization that women experience, and must recognize that girls and young women experience gender discrimination in and through race, class, ability, and other vectors of social power and identity. In the Canadian labour market, wide disparities exist between white, Canadian-born women in terms of earnings, employment, and promotion when compared with Indigenous, racialized, disabled, and immigrant women [35, 36]



Conclusion

This report makes clear a pressing need for reinvigorated action to achieve gender equality for women and girls in all of their diversity. The evidence and lived experience captured in this report point to recurring themes concerning gender equality and employment, including the burden of unpaid care work and domestic labour, gender segregation in the workforce and a lack of mentors for young women; rising unemployment and precarious work, which negatively impacts working conditions; persistent wage gaps and disproportionate rates of workplace sexual harassment, especially for young women; and gender-based barriers in academic and sport settings.



Call to Action

We acknowledge the complexity of the response required to address these myriad challenges related to gender equality, however, we believe it is critical to do so.

We call upon the Government of Canada, as the lead on the SDGs, to **work with partners at provincial and territorial levels, and with young women and girls directly** to create opportunities to achieve gender equality by 2030.

We urge the Government of Canada to **put girls and young women at the centre of solutions for gender equality and to empower them as co-creators** of a vibrant present and future that sees them as **equal and active participants** in all aspects of society.

Notes

1. This report uses 'girl' to refer to female-identifying persons under 18 years of age. 'Young woman' refers to female-identifying individuals aged 19 to 24 years. Although not immediately reflected in this report, there is growing recognition that 'sex' and 'gender' are conceptually unique categories. 'Sex' is assigned at birth based often on biological characteristics, and 'gender' is a social category with implications for social value and power. Transgender and nonbinary people - whose gender identity and expression (i.e. man, woman, masculine, feminine) differs from the biological sex assigned at birth (i.e. male, female) - experience particular forms of discrimination in access to work and employment. See EGALE Canada, 2024, "Working for Change: Understanding the employment experiences of Two Spirit, trans, and nonbinary people in Canada."
2. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Second edition, Polity Press, 2020).
3. United Nations Children's Fund, "Girl Goals: What has changed for girls? Adolescent girls' rights over 30 years." UN Women and Plan International. 2025.
4. International Labour Organization, "What is Decent Work?"
5. United Nations Children's Fund, "Girl Goals", 2025, 32.
6. Melissa Moyser, "Measuring and Analyzing the Gender Pay Gap: A Conceptual and Methodological Overview" (Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 45200002, 2019), 5.
7. United Nations Children's Fund, "Girl Goals", 2025, 31.
8. Labour Market Information Council, "Finding Their Path: What Youth Not In Employment, Education or Training (NEET) Want" (Report no 17, 2019).
9. Woodgate et al. (2025, 2) note that there is no standardized definition of 'precarious employment' but that the International Labour Organization "defines precarious employment using terms such as 'low pay', 'lack of benefits', 'uncertainty' and 'ambiguous'" terms of work.
10. United Nations Children's Fund, "Girl Goals", 2025, 32.
11. Girl Guides Canada, "Girls on the Job: Realities in Canada" (2019), 6-7.
12. Girl Guides Canada, "Girls on the Job" (2019), 9-10.
13. United Nations Children's Fund, "Girl Goals", 2025, 23.
14. Society for Women in Science and Technology, "Creating an inclusive STEM future", 2024.
15. World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2023", 7-8.
16. Jaclyn Layton, Genevieve Latour, and Katherine Wall, "Youth not in employment, education or training: Recent trends" (Statistics Canada, 2025), 4.
17. Katherine Scott, "Work in progress: Women in Canada's changing post-pandemic labour market" (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2024), 7.
18. Rene Morissette, "Youth employment in Canada" (Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 42-28-0001, 2021), 8.
19. Jaclyn Layton et al., "Youth not in employment", 2025, 3.

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20. Statistics Canada, "Labour Force Survey, May 2025". (The Daily, Catalogue no. 11-001-X, 2025), 6-7.
21. Rene Morissette, "Youth employment in Canada", 2021, 17.
22. Girl Guides Canada, "Girls on the Job: Realities in Canada", 2019, 10.
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26. Girl Guides Canada, "Girls on the Job" (2019), 11.
27. Statistics Canada. In 2020, one in four women and one in six men reported having experienced inappropriate sexualized behaviours at work in the previous year. (The Daily, 2021).
28. Statistics Canada, "Gender Results Framework", 2024, 6-7.
29. Plan International Canada, Girls in Canada: Perceptions of gender equality, leadership and stereotypes, 2019.
30. Girl Guides Canada, Girls on the Job: Realities in Canada (2019), 8.
31. Canadian Women's Foundation, Resetting Normal: Gender, Intersectionality and Leadership, 2021.
32. Menstrual absenteeism related to stigma, pain, and other factors is a global problem: United Nations Children's Fund (2025, 24) reports that nearly 18 percent of girls aged 15–19 in low and middle-income countries missed school, work or social activities during their last period.
33. CBC News, "Gen Z is facing the worst young unemployment rate in decades. Here's how it's different." <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/youth-unemployment-rate-1.7549979>
34. Statistics Canada notes that the more remote a community is, the lower the proportions of women to have high school and postsecondary education completion are. Portrait of Women by the Relative Remoteness of their communities, Series 2: Educational Attainment <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/45-20-0002/452000022022001-eng.htm>
35. Katherine Scott, Work in progress: Women in Canada's changing post-pandemic labour market, 2024, 52.
36. Scott notes that "Indigenous, racialized, disabled and immigrant women have worse labour market outcomes, including lower employment and lower earnings, than their non-Indigenous, non-racialized, non-disabled, Canadian-born peers" (2024, 6).

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Breaking Barriers:

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**Institute of the
Blessed Virgin Mary**

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