

Women and Public Sector Precarity: Causes, Conditions and Consequences

FACT SHEET 1: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The struggle for gender equity in the public sector has been underway for decades. Today, critical gains made are under threat as precarity spreads across the public sector; a spread that is partly a result of the widespread adoption of neoliberal ideas and practices, especially over the last thirty years. Research demonstrates the shift towards precarity, and highlights a number of serious consequences of this shift; however, we do not fully understand the look and consequences of public sector precarity for all women.

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC SECTOR?

There are many perspectives on the 'public sector'. Both the concept and its institutions are evolving. **One way of defining the public sector is by the functions that it performs.** The problem with using a functional definition is that most functions performed by government are also performed by the private sector. For example, the provision of health care, education and other public services is shared between the public and private sectors. The extent to which the private or public sector supplies services in these areas varies considerably across provinces. Other definitions hinge on ownership or control of assets, with differing conclusions depending on the framework – legal, accounting, political or other – applied. Funding source is another way to distinguish between the public and private sectors, but again here, there are grey zones of semi-private and semi-public.

Under a narrow definition, the public sector is the central government. However, privatization, outsourcing, and other changes have affected not only how citizens understand and access government services, but also how these services are funded, administered and delivered. In turn, this has made defining the 'public sector' and 'public sector workers' more complicated.

Using a broader definition, the public sector can be defined as the sector of the political system concerned with the provision, production, distribution and allocation of public goods and services. The public sector, from this perspective, includes public (direct

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provision by government) and para-public (publicly-funded) services. In this definition, public sector workers include those working directly or indirectly for federal, provincial/territorial, municipal and Aboriginal governments; those working in organizations such as schools, hospitals, universities, and Crown corporations that are primarily funded by government; and even those working in non-profit agencies like child care centres, which provide public services but are primarily funded through user fees.

This broader concept of the 'public sector' is important because it is often in the space between the narrower and broader definitions of the public sector where precarious work is most obvious and growing. While acknowledging this broader definition, the literature presented here still focuses primarily on services provided directly by government, and on public service areas that are notable because of their high risk of becoming privatized (e.g., hospital support services, where significant privatization has already occurred).

WHAT IS PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT?

Precarious work is also an evolving concept with definitional issues.

The Law Commission of Ontario suggests that precarious work is "characterized by lack of continuity, low wages, lack of benefits and possibly greater risk of injury and ill health." Precarity has also been defined as including a combination of vulnerabilities which include but are not limited to: a

lack of certainty about employment; a lack of control over the work environment or details of the employment such as hours or income; a lack of basic human rights protection from discrimination and unemployment; and an insufficient income in order to be able to live above the threshold of poverty. It has been suggested that dimensions of labour market insecurity, work conditions, the social context of specific occupations, and workers' social locations further characterize or inform women workers' experiences with precarity. This point is especially important because it underlines that the consequences of precarious public sector work might be invisible and/or especially problematic for some women.

We focus on two general conditions that are common across definitions of precarious work: **low income and benefits; and high job insecurity.**

OVERVIEW OF FACT SHEETS IN THIS SERIES

- Fact Sheet 1: *Introduction and overview of precarious employment*
- Fact Sheet 2: *An intersectional analysis of women and precarity*
- Fact Sheet 3: *The conditions of precarity in the public sector*
- Fact Sheet 4: *The impacts of precarity on women workers*
- Fact Sheet 5: *The impacts of precarity on health*
- Fact Sheet 6: *The impacts of precarity on public service users*
- Fact Sheet 7: *Neoliberalism and resistance to precarious working conditions*

By using a gendered and intersectional lens, this fact sheet series explores how women's experiences might vary because of how and where they are situated in society

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