

Women and Public Sector Precarity: Causes, Conditions and Consequences

FACT SHEET 2: INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN AND PRECARIETY

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. **The consequences of job precarity include generally poor working conditions; increases in health and safety issues (including discrimination, violence and harassment); impacts on homes, families, and communities; and reductions in workers' rights.** These consequences are most often found in women-dominated sectors, such as healthcare and social services. The experiences of racialized women are sometimes considered in isolation, and research findings suggest that they often experience particular negative impacts because of their realities as racialized women. However, Indigenous women, women with disabilities, LGTTQ women and others who are often marginalized, and whose experiences may be shaped differently by policies and social structures, are often invisible in the existing literature about the impacts of public sector precarity on women. This is a serious oversight that deserves attention, in part because these women may experience disproportionate impacts.

WHAT IS INTERSECTIONALITY?

Intersectionality takes into account how different kinds of discrimination work together. First used by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the principles of intersectionality have been present in Black feminist thought for centuries, as a way of understanding the complexities of Black women's lives. Indigenous understandings of connectedness and 'all my relations' share many links with intersectionality.

The diagram above provides a way to think about intersectionality, with the innermost circle representing a person's unique circumstances. The next circle from the inside represents aspects of identity. The following circle from the inside represents different types of discrimination/isms/attitudes that impact identity. The outermost circle represents larger forces and structures that work together to reinforce exclusion. Note: it is impossible to name every discrimination, identity or structure. These are just examples to help give a sense of what intersectionality is.



Adapted by the Violence Against Women Learning Network from Everyone Belongs: A Toolkit for Applying Intersectionality by Joanna Simpson, CRIA W, 2009.

MARGINALIZATION

In our research, we are concerned about the consequences of precarious work for women, and particularly for ‘marginalized women’, a term we use as a short form for the more inclusive term ‘historically disadvantaged and marginalized women’. This term acknowledges the ongoing consequences of the history of colonization, especially for Indigenous women, along with the experiences of all women who face systemic, structural discrimination and inequities in a number of social and economic domains. These inequities are created and enforced by racism, classism, sexism, colonialism, heterosexism, ableism, neoliberalism, transphobia, family structure, and other social systems. We think about these ‘isms’ as systems of oppression, which means that people are marginalized and suffer from everyday practices that exclude them because of their individual and collective identities and positions.

WHY AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO PRECARIETY MATTERS

We focus on the experiences of women, including historically disadvantaged and marginalized women, in public sector work for three reasons.

First, the public sector is a large employer of women and other designated equity seeking groups (Aboriginal people, people with disabilities, and visible

minority (racialized) groups). In 2013, women held 55 per cent of federal public service jobs. Historically, the public sector has provided better pay and working conditions for women and racialized workers due to “higher rates of unionization, family leave benefits, and the legislated monitoring and regulation of pay equity”. Further, “women, Aboriginal people and persons with disabilities benefit from more access to employment and career development in the public sector” as compared to the private sector.

Second, the work of unions, the Public Service Commission, and others in maintaining and promoting the public sector as an important employment equalizer for women is at risk. Despite the relatively high and consistent rates of unionization in the public sector, public sector employment is shrinking, and working conditions are declining.

Third, women, particularly historically disadvantaged and marginalized women, are likely to be most affected by precarity in the labour market. Women are over-represented in part-time and precarious work across all sectors. They are also more likely to hold multiple jobs. Immigrant and racialized women are even more likely to be living with low income, and continue to form a large percentage of those who are unemployed, performing part-time work, or working in other precarious situations. These three reasons work to explain why an intersectional approach is needed in order to understand why women, and specifically racialized women, are over-represented in term positions and in lower salary categories, and concentrated in certain sectors and positions.

Precarious work is characterized by employment that is low-paid, little or no benefits and with high job insecurity.

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