

# Women and Public Sector Precarity: Causes, Conditions and Consequences

## FACT SHEET 3: CONDITIONS OF PRECARIETY IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

This factsheet includes a description of the conditions of precarious employment in the public sector, including factors related to: **income and benefits**; and **job security**. While maintaining this focus, we recognize that precarity can have other characteristics. We also recognize that creating new experiences of marginalization for some women, precarity often adds to, or exaggerates, ongoing experiences of marginalization for others.

## WHAT DOES PRECARIETY LOOK LIKE?

We are concerned both with the conditions of precarious employment, and with the contexts that push workers into precarious employment. Together, these make the consequences of precarious work more severe, and/or compound ongoing experiences of marginalization.

### LOW INCOME AND BENEFITS

Low and/or fluctuating incomes, which are especially problematic for single-income families (who are most often lone mothers), characterize precarious public sector work. So do limited – if any – employer-paid pension, health benefits, long-term disability, sick leave and other benefits.

Lower incomes and fewer benefits also mean that families cannot afford or are forced to make cut backs to important things like furniture, better accommodation, children's extracurricular activities, healthcare needs, and leisure activities. Income irregularity can also lead to debt dependence.

When precariously employed women are lone parents or have partners who also earn low or unreliable wages, the challenges of meeting even minimum standards of living extend from workers to their families.

Irregular and casual schedules, which can translate into fewer hours of work, also affect workers' access to employment insurance because they fail to qualify for the rigid program requirements. These conditions result from the privatization of public services, which includes shifting public services to the community sector where workers are often paid low wages.

This is the third of seven fact sheets on women and public sector precarity. All of the fact sheets are available at: <http://www.criaw-icref.ca/en/page/women-and-public-sector-precariety-fact-sheet-series>

CRIA-W-ICREF acknowledges its presence and work on Indigenous Territories. We respectfully recognize the legacy of colonization.

**PRECARIOUS WORK** is characterized by employment that is low-paid, little or no benefits and with high job insecurity

The consequences of this include persistent low wages, chronic understaffing leading to work intensification, lack of adequate training (e.g., regarding dealing with hazardous materials), and high turnover rates of both frontline workers and supervisors.

It is important to consider the impacts of privatization on people with disabilities, specifically the changing job environment and the erosion of access to appropriate wages and health benefits. These concerns have materialized elsewhere; workers with disabilities have suffered job and wage losses as a result of the contracting-out of public services.

**The line between volunteer work and paid work in the social service sector is also becoming blurred.** For some workers, volunteer work, such as developing new services and workshops, is becoming an expectation. This phenomenon especially impacts racialized women and First Nations women. Women employed on a part-time or temporary basis are compelled to work beyond their paid hours for fear of being overlooked when rare full-time opportunities arise. Women are also pressured to take on unpaid work as a means of completing assigned tasks.

## HIGH JOB INSECURITY

Job insecurity is another feature of precarious work. Employment precarity is marked by unpredictable, on-call, multiple and reduced work schedules,

fewer opportunities for upward mobility and training in the workplace, fear of loss of employment, higher scrutiny and on-the-job monitoring, and lower levels of unionization.

Growth of 'flexibility' and employment precarity has occurred in the social services sector. This means that **agencies have moved to a medley of contingent work forms including temporary, contract, casual, crisis and various forms of part-time.** Solo shifts and split shifts are replacing the old norm of full-time, permanent staff working regular shifts.

Post-secondary education is another sector where precarity has expanded rapidly, especially for those who teach on an individual course basis. These workers also lack control or influence over the process of hiring, evaluation, discipline and termination.

Marginalization of part-time faculty also occurs within the university community. They do not have the many advantages offered to full-time faculty members, including tenure and job security, research leaves, opportunities to advance, library privileges, offices and access to grants. Part-time faculty members are mostly women, and make up the fastest-growing and largest section of the academic workforce. In Canada, women make up a larger proportion of lower-level, non-permanent employees. It is likely that racialized women are more susceptible to being precariously employed in the academic community.

Compared to men, women were twice as likely to hold part-time permanent or casual jobs, more likely to work less than 30 hours a week with no benefits, and more likely to have their hours reduced.

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