Women and Public Sector Precarity: Causes, Conditions and Consequences

FACT SHEET 4: THE IMPACTS OF PRECARITY ON WOMEN WORKERS

The consequences of precarious public sector work are wide-ranging and interconnected. As noted above, these conditions have come about in the context of a broader shift in public services. The conditions of precarious employment have particularly profound impacts on **women's: general working conditions; health and safety; homes, families, and communities; and rights as workers**.

GENERAL WORKING CONDITIONS

Precarious work creates poor working conditions for women. For instance, "interruptions of work", "accelerated work pace" and "workplace noise" emerge as primary sources of stress in [elementary and secondary school] office environments."

Restructuring and privatization of social services undermines work conditions in at least two ways:

- ▶ workers reported experiencing increased isolation and depersonalization of their roles, and a shift in duties from providing caring services to completing functional, less personal tasks.

- ▶ part-time, casual and temporary workers seeking full-time employment, often tolerate work-related coercion because they want to retain their employment, no matter how precarious. Some work an equal number of paid and unpaid hours at the same agency. They do so because they feel it is an expectation of the job, and that failing to do so would draw negative attention towards them in a highly competitive job market.

A link between pressures of precarious environments (increases in workloads, lower pay, understaffing) and poor working conditions is also evident in the long-term care sector, where understaffing has had a tremendous impact on the workplace. Employees often feel pressured to complete tasks faster, which diminishes their ability to provide social-emotional care. Workers describe feeling frustrated, inadequate, and exhausted under these time-constrained conditions.

WORKERS' RIGHTS

Along with the multiple negative impacts already discussed, precarious work environments – which often suffer from low rates of unionization – contribute to an overall erosion of workers' rights. Workers in contract, temporary, involuntary part-time,

This is the fourth 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-precarity-fact-sheet-series

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

and otherwise insecure positions are often reluctant to raise health and safety and other workplace concerns, for fear of losing hours, training or promotion opportunities, and even their jobs. Their scattered hours and work sites also present challenges to organizing and enforcing their rights.

Women suffer the brunt of these attacks on unions because historically, women's rights, and the rights of marginalized women specifically, have suffered more severely. **Without labour protections afforded by unions, the conditions and consequences of precarity are likely to be expanded and exaggerated.** Marginalized women have gained protections in collective agreements through duty to accommodate, anti-discrimination and harassment language, and employment equity provisions.

Along with important protections afforded to workers, unions advance gender equality society-wide. Unions have worked closely with other civil society organizations to improve everyone's access to parental leave, health insurance, pensions, minimum wages, and anti-violence and other measures. Civil society movements advocating for women, LGBT, peoples with disabilities and young workers rights have pushed the understanding of human rights and equality to a more nuanced intersectional analysis of identities and associations. As users of public services and as beneficiaries of union strength, women's interests as users and providers are inseparable.

However, neoliberalism may also be eroding unions' abilities to focus on issues through a gender or intersectional lens, and on the unique experiences of marginalized women. Illcan notes there is a worsening trend of excluding part-time workers in collective agreements and that it noticeably impinges on female employees. Further, the sidelining of equality concerns can have other consequences. For example, austerity policies may find their way into internal union practices in response to the current crisis around labour force restructuring and a decline in union membership, and women's equality issues can be sidelined as a result.

Historically and today, unions, and women's participation in unions, have positively affected the work environment. The lower rates of unionization associated with precarious employment are eroding workplace standards now, and will continue to do so into the future. The fact that the federal *Employment Equity Act* requires the public service to track employment equity in the core public administration means that as public sector jobs are eliminated, our knowledge about the employment trends for marginalized women is at risk. The movement of public sector jobs into the private sector – where unionization is less common – is thus a significant concern with regards to workers' rights.

Poor work environments – where structural changes and working conditions hinder workers' opportunities to undertake important aspects of their jobs – lead to a host of other consequences, including a wide range of health and safety concerns.

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