



WOMEN AND PUBLIC SECTOR PRECARITY

CAUSES, CONDITIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

BY LEAH LEVAC AND YURIKO COWPER-SMITH



Acknowledgements

CRIAW acknowledges its presence and work on Indigenous Territories. We respectfully recognize the legacy of colonization upon Indigenous Peoples.

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This paper is part of the *Changing Public Services: Women and Intersectional Analysis* project, led by the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIA W-ICREF). The CPS project is generously funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and through donations from the project's union partners, including PSAC, CUPE, CUPW, CAUT, and CLC.

This paper was produced with funding from CUPE, PSAC, CLC, and Mitacs

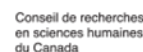


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Executive Summary

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. This paper contributes to filling this gap by bringing together existing research on the conditions of job precarity and its impacts on women working in the public sector. The review demonstrates that precarious public sector work means decreased income, benefits, and job security. 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, though they have also been tracked in science and technology fields and elsewhere. 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, LGBTTTQ 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. The effects of job precarity also cascade down to citizens; end-users experience declines in the quality and availability of services, and increased concerns about the accountability and safety of services. When users are themselves precariously employed, more problems follow. Future work should focus on ways to resist, stem and reverse the trend towards precarity across all public sectors, and on more fully understanding the experiences of marginalized women as precarious public sector workers.

Introduction

This paper provides an overview of what research tells us about women's experiences with precarious public sector work. There is a well-established trend towards precarious employment in the private sector (see for example, Lewchuck et al., 2015, Lewchuck et al., 2014, Lewchuck et al., 2013; Vosko, 2010), and we know that women are disproportionately negatively affected. While research on private sector precarity is fairly extensive, we know less about women's experiences with precarious employment in the public sector. Drawing on existing literature, our goal is to begin answering the questions:

What does precarious employment look like in the public sector?

How are the conditions of precarity impacting women, particularly historically disadvantaged and marginalized women, including racialized women, Indigenous¹ women, women with disabilities, and LGBTTQ women?

We start with a definition of the public sector, and then offer a description of the conditions of precarious work in the public sector. We define both the public sector and precarity as evolving concepts, and note that the public sector is also evolving as an institution. We examine and use several definitions of precarity to guide our work because there is no single accepted definition. However, when we describe the key conditions of precarity in the public sector, we focus on low and unreliable wages and benefits, and limited or lack of job security. These features, while not fully able to capture the dynamic nature of precarious work and its consequences, are consistent across definitions of precarity in both the private and public sector. Before we elaborate on the effects of public sector precarity on women workers, we discuss the term, 'marginalized women', which we use throughout the paper to help draw attention to the fact that not all women experience precarity in the same way, and that socioeconomic and structural systems such as sexism, ableism, homo/transphobia, colonialism, and racism continue to play a role in shaping women's lives and experiences.

Our review of the consequences of public sector precarity for women finds that their general working conditions; their health and safety; their homes, families and communities; and their rights as workers are all negatively impacted. Our review also uncovered effects of public sector precarity on users of public services. Considering the experiences of both workers and users

¹ In this paper, we use the World Health Organization's understanding of *Indigenous*, which includes peoples who: "Identify themselves and are recognized and accepted by their community as indigenous; demonstrate historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies; have strong links to territories and surrounding natural resources; have distinct social, economic or political systems; maintain distinct languages, cultures and beliefs; form non-dominant groups of society; and resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities" (WHO, 2007). In Canada, the Indigenous population is often referred to as Aboriginal peoples, who, according to the 1982 Constitution Act, includes First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.

makes it clear that all citizens stand to lose if public sector precarity continues. Finally, we explore the causes of the move towards a precarious public sector, and suggest important areas for future research.

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). Data from the Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer (OCHRO) of the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat demonstrates that Canada's four employment equity designated groups (Aboriginal peoples, people with disabilities, visible minority (racialized) groups, and women) continue to be present in the federal public service at rates that exceed their workforce availability (according to the 2006 census) (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2015). This is important for recognizing the critical role of public sector work in achieving broader equity commitments. In 2013, women held 55 per cent of federal public service jobs (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2015). As of 2010, the public sector in Canada incorporated a larger percentage of women than men in the urban, intermediate-urban, and rural workforce (Walsh et al., 2015), and has historically 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" (McInturff & Tulloch, 2014, p. 6). Further, as Agocs (2012) writes, "women, Aboriginal people and persons with disabilities benefit from more access to employment and career development in the public sector" (p. 7) as compared to the private sector. For women, the public sector has therefore been an important source of employment access, stable work, and upward mobility (Ross & Savage, 2013).

Second, the work of unions, the Public Service Commission (PSC, 2011), and others in maintaining and promoting the public sector as an important employment equalizer for women is at risk. Despite the important work of the PSC, and of public sector unions, in demanding employment equity and resisting precarious work conditions for members, and despite the relatively high and consistent rates of unionization in the public sector (Statistics Canada, 2013), public sector employment is shrinking, and working conditions are declining. Drawing on her dissertation, Findlay's (2015) new book, *Femocratic Administration: Gender, Governance, and Democracy in Ontario*, explains that public sector downsizing eliminates 'good jobs' for women, and diminishes the quality of jobs that remain.

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 (McInturff, 2014; Premji et al., 2014; Vosko et al., 2009). They are also more likely to hold multiple jobs (McInturff, 2014). 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 (Block & Galabuzi, 2011; McInturff, 2014; Statistics Canada, 2011). In precarious private sector work arrangements, researchers find that, "racialized processes

stereotype workers and their skill sets, organize their work, [and] determine their access to and exclusion from certain types of jobs..." (Sangha et al., 2012, p. 286). This seems to be the case in the public sector as well, where women, and racialized women, are over-represented in term positions and in lower salary categories, and concentrated in certain sectors and positions. Both racialized and non-racialized women are over-represented in public service sectors such as health, education and social services (Block et al., 2014; McInturff, 2014).

A summary of results from the 2014 Public Service Employee Survey highlights that eight per cent of respondents have experienced discrimination in the past two years (most often due to sex, age, race, national or ethnic origin, disability, and/or family status) (Treasury Board Secretariat of Canada, 2015, p. 19), and that workers are less likely today to believe that their "department or agency works hard to create a workplace that prevents discrimination" than they were in 2011 (Ibid.). The Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) conducted an online membership poll in January 2015, which revealed that 13 per cent of members were precarious or vulnerable. French speakers, older and younger workers, post-graduates, visible minorities, and members with disabilities reported higher rates of precarity and vulnerability. This corroborates both our concern about the experiences of marginalized women, and suggests that the situation may be deteriorating.

Research confirms the importance of recognizing the gendered nature of labour, and the situation of marginalized women. Fuller and Vosko (2008) note that, "in particular, working in the public sector was less advantageous for contract workers and female agency employees [than for full-time workers]. This finding is particularly troubling given that contract workers are over-represented in this sector" (p. 48). A Parliament of Canada report (2013) finds that women in the federal public service "remain concentrated in administrative support jobs, generally hold lower-paying jobs than men and are over-represented in term appointments" (Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights, 2013, p. 4). They are also more likely to hold positions that are more susceptible to restructuring because their jobs are caught in the government's efforts to create 'spaces of flexibility' within the public service (Ilcan et al., 2007). Baines (2008) exemplifies this notion in a study of marginalized and First Nations social service sector workers, since "many First Nations workers and workers of colour are employed in ethnically specific [social service] programs or agencies. Ethnically specific programs and diversity strategies are often the first to get cut during periods of downsizing and restructuring" (p. 126).

Comparable research about the experiences of women with disabilities working in the public sector is not available. However, research about disability and employment more broadly finds that women with disabilities have lower levels of employment and fewer annual work hours (Galarneau & Radulescu, 2009) than women (and men) without disabilities, and are also "slightly more likely than other women to be their household's main income recipient" (Ibid., p. 7). Further, longer periods of disability create significant earning gaps between those with disabilities and those without (Ibid.). Overall, they are no more likely to have access to health and pension benefits, or to be protected by a union and collective agreement. Together, this



suggests that women with disabilities working in the public sector are likely facing challenges similar to those noted above.

Definitions and Concepts

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, Ross and Savage (2013) define the public sector 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 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. As discussed in more detail below, precarious work is embedded in an ongoing process of public sector restructuring, which includes, among other factors, the privatization and downloading of public services, efforts to create a more flexible workforce, and the persistence of new public management strategies. We point this out as a reminder that the creation of precarious work arrangements is a process that has been underway for some time.

The Law Commission of Ontario (2012) suggests that precarious work is “characterized by lack of continuity, low wages, lack of benefits and possibly greater risk of injury and ill health.... Measures of precariousness are level of earnings, level of employer-provided benefits, degree of regulatory protection and degree of control or influence within the labour process” (p. 19). Sargeant and Giovannone (2011), citing Rodgers and Rodgers (1989), define precarity as including a combination of: “low level of certainty over the continuity of employment; low individual and collective control over work (working conditions, income, working hours); low level of protection (social protection, protection against unemployment, or against discrimination); [and] insufficient income or economic vulnerability” (p. 3). Sargeant and Giovannone (2011) add that employment precarity is often associated with non-standard forms of work (i.e., part-time, contract-based), and with positions that include working from home and holding multiple positions at one time (p. 3). Vosko (2006) suggests 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 in this paper because it underlines that the consequences of precarious public sector work might be invisible and/or especially problematic for some women.

The Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario (PEPSO) project created an *Employment Precarity Index* to define people as being in precarious, vulnerable, stable, or secure employment arrangements (Lewchuck et al., 2013). The index includes 10 questions about the length and form of employment, employment rights, number of employers, predictability of schedule, availability of non-paid sick days, consistency in earnings, and benefits. This approach suggests that different combinations of these poor work conditions combine to create precarious employment.

Standing (2011) takes a different approach, and suggests that the pervasiveness of poor work conditions has created ‘the precariat’, an emerging class of people who share a lack of access to labour related security. According to Standing (2011), labour related security includes security in seven areas:

- ▶ labour market (earning possibilities),
- ▶ employment (protection against wrongful termination)
- ▶ job (probability of job retention),



- ▶ work (health, safety, and other policies surrounding well-being),
- ▶ skill reproduction (growth opportunities),
- ▶ income (adequate salary), and
- ▶ representation (collective bargaining and union recognition channels) (pp. 10-11).

He suggests that people who are part of the precariat can be described as having a 'truncated' status as workers (Ibid.). We are cautious about the idea of 'the precariat' because of the possibility that it can be interpreted as a deficit of a group of people, rather than a structural deficit. However, this idea seems to have some resonance particularly with young people, whose hopes of holding secure employment are severely compromised by the growth of precarious work across sectors. Indeed, the long-term consequences of facing a lifetime of precarious work are of serious concern.

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

Rather than using one single definition, all of these ideas inform our approach to understanding job precarity in the public sector.

However, when presenting our findings, we focus on two general conditions that are common across definitions of precarious work: **low income and benefits; and high job insecurity.**

Who are historically disadvantaged and marginalized women?

In this paper, we are concerned about the consequences of precarious work for women, and also 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.

Iris Marion Young (1990) discusses oppression by referring to vast and deep structural injustices that some groups suffer, and notes that this suffering can come about even as the result of unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people. She explains that things that are part of average everyday life, including social interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of government and the market contribute to oppression.

Inequities are further perpetuated by a political context that continues to make women's unique and collective experiences invisible, in part by experiences. As a result, women's sexual orientation, dis/ability, ethnicity, gender identity, race, class, age, status as mothers, and other identities and positions can affect their experiences and contribute to their marginalization, both as individuals, and collectively.

We rely on the term 'marginalized women', recognizing that some – including members of our own research team – are critical of it, either because it implies a universal experience of particular 'groups' (i.e., racialized women), or because it does not go far enough to acknowledge the deep historical injustices faced by some women. Still, we think it is important to consider these identities and positions since individually and in combination, they can have distinct workplace ramifications. For instance, research shows that trans workers are more likely than the average worker to be underemployed and to hold precarious and informal sector jobs (Bauer et al., 2011; Grant et al., 2011).

Union representatives and LGB workers in the British public sector suggest that, "new initiatives and ongoing changes in the structure of organizations delivering public services...have made the integration of equality issues more difficult" (Colgan & Wright, 2011, p. 556); for example, "reorganizations continually require [LGB workers] to go through the coming out process again with each new set of colleagues" (Ibid., p. 557). These and other findings lead to the conclusion that equality regarding sexual orientation in the British public sector environment seems to have encountered recent setbacks (Ibid.).

As another example, Block et al., (2014) show that across all sectors, "racialized Ontarians have a prevalence of low-income that is 73 per cent higher than for non-racialized Ontarians" (p. 12). Understanding the experiences of racialized women in particular is also important, because, "despite higher levels of education, their qualifications are frequently discounted and they are more likely than other women to be found in low-skill occupations and insecure employment" (Galabuzi, 2004 in Evans, 2009, p. 48). In Canada, it is also fundamental to identify and explore the differentiated experiences of Aboriginal women; "not only has the legacy of colonialism left Aboriginal peoples disproportionately ranked among the poorest of Canadians...disturbing levels of income inequality persist as well" (Wilson & Macdonald, 2010, p. 3).

Finally, women with disabilities can face discrimination-related barriers to the workplace (Government of Canada, 2015), and employers' capacity to accommodate women with complex episodic disabilities is limited (Vickman & Light, 2010).

When women's experiences with precarious work are considered in general, the potentially unique experiences of historically disadvantaged and marginalized women, as individuals and collectively, are often overlooked. This is why we pay particular attention to their experiences in this paper. To do this, we use an intersectional lens (Hankivsky et al., 2012). An intersectional lens recognizes that a person's "identity is formed by interlocking and mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality" (Nash, 2008, p. 3), and also that social systems, such as racism, colonialism, heterosexism, ableism, and sexism continue to shape peoples'



lives. By using a gendered and intersectional lens, we explore how women's experiences might vary because of how and where they are situated in society; for example, how a woman's experience with being racialized might change her public sector work experiences in general, and her experiences with precarious work specifically. Our focus on historically disadvantaged and marginalized women points out that people's experiences are affected by systems that give them different access to social and economic power, and also that this differential access has persisted over generations. Our interest in the experiences of marginalized women means that along with looking for research on the effects of precarious employment on women in general, we looked for research about the experiences with precarious work of Indigenous women, racialized women, women with disabilities, younger and older women, and LGBTTQ women.

By using a gendered and intersectional lens, we explore how women's experiences might vary because of how and where they are situated in society.

Findings

In this section, we focus on the definition and consequences of precarious public sector employment for women. While maintaining this focus, we recognize that in addition to creating new experiences of marginalization for some women, precarity often adds to, or exaggerates, ongoing experiences of marginalization for others. Our literature review included a primarily electronic search of academic and community literature. We placed an emphasis on research conducted since 2000, even though the trend towards precarity has been underway for several decades. For a complete explanation of our research method, see [Appendix 1](#) (page 36).

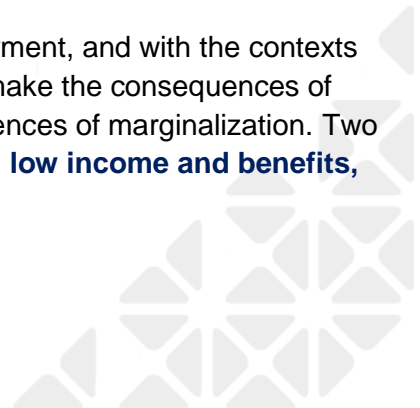
Our findings are laid out in two key parts.

We begin with a more detailed description of the conditions of precarious employment in the public sector, including factors related to: *income and benefits*; and *job security*. These are not the only factors associated with precarious work, but they are prominent in the literature, and are of significant concern. Next, we consider the impacts of these conditions on women workers': *general working environments*; *health and safety*; *homes, families, and communities*; and *rights as workers*. We then consider how public service users – you and I – are impacted by a precarious public sector.

We go on to highlight the socioeconomic and political context that enables, or even encourages, precarity. This section of the paper provides an important reminder that precarious work does not exist in isolation. Instead, it is part of a larger movement of public sector restructuring, which includes downloading responsibilities from one jurisdiction to another, and to the community sector; the privatization of services; the introduction of new public management and other managerial processes; and other changes. This socioeconomic and political context is also important when thinking about the evolving definition and structure of the public sector, because experiences of public sector precarity can easily become overlooked when the affected services and jobs are moved out of the public sector, for example, through downloading and privatization. We close with a few examples of successful efforts to resist precarity, and with recommendations for future research.

What does precarity look like in the public sector?

We are concerned both with the conditions of precarious employment, and with the contexts that push workers into precarious employment, which together make the consequences of precarious work more severe, and/or compound ongoing experiences of marginalization. Two key conditions of precarious employment in the public sector are **low income and benefits, and limited job security**.



Low income and benefits

Low and/or fluctuating incomes (Lewchuck et al., 2013), 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, long-term disability, sick leave and other benefits.

Smith, Kosny and Mustard (2009) use data from the Canadian Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics to suggest that women, recent immigrants, younger workers, part-time workers, and non-unionized workers are less likely to receive employer or workers' compensation benefits when they are off work for more than one week due to a workplace related injury or illness. While they note some limited incidence of reporting absences of over a week (e.g., of recent immigrants), they speculate that lack of reporting is likely a result of these workers' often-precarious situations.

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 (number of hours worked in a specific time period) (Vosko, 2011). These conditions can come about for a variety of reasons, including as a result of the privatization of public services, which includes shifting public services to the community sector (for example, by contracting service delivery to not-for-profit organizations), where workers are often paid low wages. This is one of the many reasons that public sector unions have long worked to resist public service outsourcing in particular, and precarious work arrangements more generally.

Some studies have documented the effects of privatization and public service restructuring on wages. Stinson (2004) underscores that, "the move to sub-contract cleaning, laundry and food services in certain health regions caused the wages to drop drastically from the highest in Canada to the bottom for comparable unionized jobs.... [These dynamics affect] mainly women workers, many of whom are immigrant women of colour" (p. 20). More specifically, a study about healthcare workers found that, "contracting out effectively wiped out more than 30 years of pay-equity gains for British Columbian women in health housekeeping jobs" (Stinson et al., 2005, p. 11); all women involved in the study experienced income insecurity following the public sector restructuring. The authors highlight that "96 per cent of participants said the job's income was inadequate for their family needs...78 per cent had incomes below the LICO poverty line; [and] 42 per cent had at least one other paid job, to help make ends meet" (Stinson et al., 2005, p. 18). As described elsewhere "when the jobs were contracted out (in BC), the hospital housekeepers' wages were cut from almost \$20 an hour to \$10.50 an hour, and workers lost pension benefits, paid parental leave, long-term disability benefits and other protections that had been part of their collective agreement" (Armstrong et al., 2009, p. 5).

A more recent study demonstrates that after five or six years, 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 (Zuberi & Ptashnik, 2011).

Nyerere and Stienstra (2009) examine the literature on the impacts of privatization on persons with disabilities. While they find little data on employment precarity for persons with disabilities in Canada, they note that concern for public sector workers with disabilities is growing. More specifically, PSAC and CUPE note that their members with disabilities are concerned not only about the changing job environment and the erosion of access to appropriate wages and health benefits, but also about their experiences as public service users (Ibid.). These concerns have materialized elsewhere; studies from the United States suggest that workers with disabilities have suffered job and wage losses as a result of the contracting-out of public services (Ibid.).

CUPE has measured the trend towards more precarious employment in school boards in British Columbia (Malcolmson, 2014), documenting how clerical staff, who are overwhelmingly female, (98 per cent of those surveyed) face increasing workloads without an increase in work hours, due to “relentless budgetary pressure leading to reductions in available staff time” (Malcolmson, 2014, p. 22). In short, women are pressured to take on unpaid work as a means of completing assigned tasks.

The line between volunteer work and paid work in the social service sector is also becoming blurred. Baines (2008) highlights that for some workers, volunteer work, such as developing new services and workshops, is becoming an expectation. This happens in the context of a “taken-for-granted assumption that everyone does unpaid work all the time” (p. 128). Baines’ (2008) ethnographic study finds that this phenomenon especially impacts racialized women and First Nations women (Baines, 2008, p. 129); and also that 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.

These studies show how precarious employment tends to suppress wages and increase unpaid work.

In another study, Dryden and Stanford (2012) warn against the privatization of municipal cleaning services in the City of Toronto, reminding us that such a shift will “impose dramatic costs on cleaners, especially women, new Canadians, and racialized workers – whose labour market options are more limited to start with... [and will put] a double burden on women cleaners, since they will experience both a substantial reduction in overall pay, and an increase in the gender pay gap which suppresses their earnings” (p. 6). These studies show how precarious employment tends to suppress wages and increase unpaid work. The research available also suggests that racialized and First Nations’ female workers are likely to be disproportionately affected.

Precarious workers are also less likely to receive employer-paid prescription drug coverage, dental care and other health services (Lewchuck et al., 2014). In one study, Lewchuck et al., (2014) finds that, “less than ten per cent of workers in precarious employment report receiving supplemental dental, health or vision benefits and only 14 per cent report receiving a company pension plan” (p. 56).

In the social services sector, Baines (2004) also demonstrates that wages and benefits are declining. She reveals that, “full-time, permanent employment with reasonable wages and benefits has been displaced by contract, part-time, casual and temporary work with little job security and few benefits” (p. 280-281). One of the ways that this happens is that, “many agencies no longer pay by the hour, but by the client. If clients miss appointments, workers do not get paid” (Baines, 2004, p. 281).

Declining pay, benefits and pensions have a greater effect on women. A recent Wellesley Institute report by Barnes and Roche (2015) notes that, “this downward shift in wages may fuel greater inequities by disproportionately affecting more vulnerable populations, such as women and immigrants” (p. 1). Shayka et al. (2013) demonstrate that 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 (e.g., prescription medicine, dental care), and leisure activities. Income irregularity can [also] lead to debt dependence...” (p. 10).

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. A quarter of households using food banks in the Toronto area have at least one household member in the labour force (Lightman et al. 2008; Tinglin & Wilson, 2013). Of employed food bank users, 62 per cent were precariously employed, highlighting the fact that precarious work is not enough to ensure an adequate standard of living. The effects of precarious work on homes, families, and communities are discussed in more detail below. What is important to note at this point is that there is a range of evidence to suggest that low income and benefits characterize precarious public sector work.

High job insecurity

Job insecurity is another feature of precarious work. Lewchuck et al. (2013) document how 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.

Numerous studies have documented growing job insecurity across the public sector in Canada. Health care is one of the largest segments of the public sector and has seen a significant erosion of job security. The most dramatic shift remains the privatization of 8,500 unionized health care jobs in British Columbia between 2003 and 2005 (Jansen & Murphy, 2009; Stinson et al., 2005; Zuberi & Ptashnick, 2011). The government and employers cut wages by 40 per cent, eliminated pensions and benefits and removed job security language from collective agreements (later ruled a violation of human rights law by the Supreme Court of Canada). Across Canada, health care jobs, especially in home care, residential long-term care and support services, are made increasingly precarious by privatization, cuts and restructuring (David et al., 2005; Jansen & Murphy, 2009, 2009a).

Baines (2004) has documented the growth of ‘flexibility’ and employment precarity in the social services sector, where “agencies have moved to a medley of contingent work forms including temporary, contract, casual, crisis and various forms of part-time. Solo shifts, in which only one paid staff member is on duty, and thin shifts in which very few paid staff are employed, often in scattered sites (buildings that may be geographically distant from one another), and split shifts in which workers report to work for an hour or two in the early morning and a few more in the evening, are replacing the old norm of full-time, permanent staff working regular shifts” (p. 272).

Post-secondary education is another sector where precarity has expanded rapidly. Recognizing that the experiences of contingency differ within these groups, Hughes and Bell (2015) define “contingent academic workers” to include “term employees, sessional lecturers, stipend instructors, part-time instructors, per-course teachers, contract academics, or simply adjuncts” (p. 2). They emphasize that “the most precarious class of contingent academics” are those who teach “on an individual course basis” (p. 2). Many of these contract workers contend with “disjointed and uncertain employment contracts, wages that frequently fall below minimum wage if accounted on an hourly basis, and [a lack of] employer-sponsored benefits. They also lack control or influence over the process of hiring, evaluation, discipline and termination” (p. 3). This phenomenon is also evidenced by Field et al. (2014), who have documented the marginalization of part-time faculty within the university community, by pointing out that “they do not have the many advantages offered to full-time faculty members, including tenure and job security, sabbaticals, opportunities to advance, ... library privileges, offices and access to grants” (p. 12).

In the United States, the Coalition on the Academic Workforce (2012) finds that part-time faculty members are mostly women, and make up the fastest-growing and largest section of the academic workforce. A study by the Higher Education Council of Ontario (Field et al., 2014) determines that, in Canada, women make up a larger proportion of lower-level, non-permanent employees. In their effort to better understand the presence of racialized faculty in a sample of Canadian universities, Henry et al. (2012) illustrate “how intersecting elements of identity [visible minority status and gender] inform the location from where racialized women are situated within the Canadian academy” (p. 10). Coupled with the courageous acknowledgement by some universities of the “systemic practices that disadvantage identifiable groups of students, staff and faculty” (Antone et al., 2010, p. 2), it thus seems likely that racialized women are more susceptible to being precariously employed in the academy.

As noted earlier, there is also evidence of the growth of precarious employment in school boards (Malcolmson, 2014). The budgetary pressures that lead school boards to “intensify the labour of office and clerical workers [who are overwhelmingly women], to call on fewer staff to do more, and to leave workers to contend with increased workload pressure and the problems it entails” (p. 27) are also signs of precarity. In British Columbia, education assistants, who are overwhelmingly women, volunteer an average of two hours per week, a result of, “the bell-to-bell organization of EA work that sees an average of 26 hours of remunerated work per week and offers no real opportunity for EAs to plan, prepare, meet or collaborate within their paid work schedule” (Malcolmson, 2008, p. 1).

Precarity also seems to be growing in the municipal sector. In 2012, despite opposition (Dryden & Stanford, 2012), the City of Toronto began contracting out cleaning and housekeeping services. Employees who held full-time positions were sometimes cut back to part-time; others were laid off completely (Barnes & Roche, 2015). For those who were able to retain part-time positions, their salaries and benefits were decreased, and their schedules became inconsistent. Restructuring measures at the Toronto Public Library (TPL) also represent a shift towards more precarious work.

Private firms that win contracts for outsourcing are exempt from government hiring or pay practices, creating increased possibilities for precarious work arrangements and worker exploitation.

In the library sector, Rao (2012) notes that, “the 2012 budget eliminated another 107 librarian and support worker positions, leading to a total of 307 staff positions cut from the Toronto Public Library system since amalgamation in 1998 at the same time as demand for Library services was increasing rapidly. Between 1992 and 2012, Toronto’s libraries lost 532 staff and are expected to deliver quality service with 24% fewer staff” (p. 22). Data before this time suggests that women and racialized workers have borne the brunt of these cuts. A 2009 survey by the Toronto Public Library Workers’

Union found that 51 per cent of its members were working part-time and split shifts, many taking on two or three jobs to make ends meet (O’Reilly, 2014). And as noted by Khosla (2014), three quarters of TPL staff members are women, and few qualify for benefits. In a more recent presentation, O’Reilly (2015) draws on 2008-2012 data from the Canadian Urban Libraries Council to point to persistent rates of part-time work amidst declining positions overall. She also notes that racialized workers are over-represented in low wage library jobs. Drawing on unpublished 2010-2011 data gathered from library workers, O’Reilly goes on to point out that racialized workers make up 50 per cent of the Toronto public libraries’ bargaining unit, suggesting that the precarious nature of municipal library work is heavily borne by marginalized workers.

The federal public service has also seen a sharp rise in job insecurity in recent years. Stinson (2010) notes that from 1997 to 2007, “as temporary work (both full-time and part-time) with little or no job security replaced secure, permanent positions (both full- and part-time)” (p. 94) in the public service, precarious work greatly increased. Macdonald (2011) studied outsourcing in federal government departments and found an 80 per cent ballooning of the “shadow public service”, workers who are hired primarily as temporary staff on contracts with private firms, to perform public sector work such as information technology and management consultation. Private firms that win contracts for outsourcing are exempt from government hiring or pay practices, creating increased possibilities for precarious work arrangements and worker exploitation. Evidence suggests that these contracted service arrangements are becoming increasingly entrenched; “outsourced contractors are no longer short-term or specialized – they are increasingly employed for years on a contract basis” (Macdonald, 2011, p. 6). These trends compromise secure employment, and in turn, public sector workers.

A study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives Nova Scotia notes that, “the Department of Fisheries and Oceans faces significant cuts at a time when workers are already reporting heavy workloads and high turnover affecting their ability to do the work” (Bourgeois et al., 2012, p. 40). More recently, between March 2012 and March 2015, over 24,000 members of the Public Service Alliance of Canada received ‘affected notices’ that they could lose their jobs (Public Service Alliance of Canada, 2015). Many of the people affected were core public sector workers, such as those at the Treasury Board. A 2012 CBC report noted that as part of this wave, “1,600 employees with Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), the department responsible for...employment insurance...old age security...and the Canada Pension Plan” were among those affected (CBC News, 2012 September). RCMP employees and information technology specialists were also among those affected.

Data from the 2011 Public Service Employee Survey indicates that 55 per cent of core public sector workers are women, while 11.3 per cent are racialized, 4.7 per cent are Aboriginal, and 5.6 per cent are people with disabilities (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2013). Findings from the same survey indicate that rates of discrimination are highest based on age and sex, national or ethnic origin, race, family status, mental or physical disability, and colour (Ibid.). Targeted discrimination, coupled with the stress of receiving – or being surrounded by those receiving – affected notices, likely exaggerates insecurity in the lives of women and other marginalized workers.

Temporary Foreign Workers (TFWs) face unique job insecurity. The number of migrant workers and TFWs increased significantly worldwide starting in the 1990s (Pupo & Thomas, 2009). Here in Canada, “the number of foreign workers entering on temporary work permits grew by 71 per cent between 2004 and 2008, from 112,719 to 193,061” (Alboim cited in Pupo & Thomas, 2009, p. 152). Taylor et al. (2009) point out that one of the main reasons why TFWs are an important source of labour in Canada is because “the costs of education and training of workers are borne by source countries” (Alburo & Abella 2002 cited in Taylor et al., 2012, p. 96). Furthermore, TFWs tend to use services and benefits less. Even though “most basic employment protections afforded permanent residents are nominally extended to workers under the TFW programme... significant barriers exist for foreign workers who attempt to utilise such protections, rendering them ‘inaccessible’ in any practical way” (Taylor et al., 2012, p. 100). In Taylor et al.’s (2012) study, focused on nurses in Alberta recruited through the TFW program, participants found their positions tenuous. In addition to the already noted aspects of precarity, they were burdened with a lack of labour mobility, a loss of status from their home countries, language barriers, “complex immigration rules, [an] onerous registration process and temporary residency status” (Taylor et al., 2012, p. 104).

In a survey of nearly 3,000 members across regions and sectors, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE, 2015a) found that precarious employment is on the rise, and equality-seeking groups are more likely to find themselves in precarious work arrangements. Precarious members were concentrated in permanent part-time, casual, on-call, or contract employment positions. But even seven per cent of those with permanent full-time work fell into this category.

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 (Ibid., p. 2). Earlier research by CUPE (2013) tracked the rise in part-time employment specifically, from 30.6 per cent of the membership in 2004 to 32.2 per cent in 2012.

Precarious public sector work often means low income, limited benefits, and a high degree of insecurity. Precarious work, which results from shifts in the organization and delivery of public services, including through privatization, is becoming entrenched across jurisdictions, and has been documented across fields, and especially in health, education, library, social service, waste management, and technology related fields. The research documented above shows that precarious work in the public sector is having unique impacts on women in general, and on racialized women in particular (Antone et al., 2010; Baines, 2008; O'Reilly, 2015; Stinson, 2004; Taylor et al., 2012). The next section presents a more detailed discussion of the effects of precarious work on women workers specifically, and society more generally.

What are the consequences of precarious public sector work for women?

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** (including discrimination, violence and harassment); **homes, families, and communities; and rights as workers**.

General working conditions

The general effect of precarious work on women is that it creates poor working conditions. For instance, "interruptions of work", "accelerated work pace" and "workplace noise" emerge as primary sources of stress in [elementary and secondary school] office environments" (Malcolmson, 2014, p. 22).

Baines (2004) shows how the restructuring and privatization of social services undermines work conditions in at least two ways. First, 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. She writes that "one of the strongest findings in this study was the prevalent sense of regret, or even mourning, over the loss of caring relationships with clients...Most workers were aware of the impact of new forms of work organization and blamed standardization and new technologies for removing the opportunity to build helping relationships with clients" (Baines, 2004, p. 278). Second, Baines (2004) finds that part-time, casual and temporary workers seeking full-time employment, and at least wanting to retain their existing employment, no matter how precarious, often experience work-related coercion; 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. Indeed, the study noted that, “the contingent workforce is particularly vulnerable to this form of extending the working day. One Alberta immigrant aid worker, who was paid for 20 hours work per week, reported that the part-time workers in her agency felt that, “it [was] an expectation that you [would] be there 40 hours per week” (Baines, 2004, p. 281-282).

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 eliminates their ability to provide social-emotional care. Workers describe feeling frustrated, inadequate, and exhausted under these time-constrained conditions (Jansen & Murphy, 2009, p. 38).

Precarious work environments create unique challenges for women with complex, episodic disabilities, defined as, “fluctuating mental health issues that coexist with...[changing] physical health conditions, [affected by] changing bodily experiences, life circumstances, and physical environments” (adapted from Vick & Lightman, 2010, p. 71). In their study on barriers to employment for women with complex, episodic disabilities, Vick and Lightman (2010) find that women’s ‘precarious bodies’ and emotional struggles, along with institutional and employer misunderstandings, combine to keep women with disabilities out of work, noting that, precarious “jobs that demand flexibility from workers offer little flexibility in return and exclude bodies with differing work capacities” (Ibid., p. 77). The creation of generally poor working conditions means that even when precise features of precarity are not met for an individual woman worker, her wellbeing can suffer as a consequence of the more general erosion of quality work environments.

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.

Health and safety

The relationship between precarious work and poor health and safety has been widely documented. Tompa et al. (2007) note that, “stress is the principle pathway between precarious employment experiences and health” (p. 214). In this pathway, they include direct relationships between stress and poor psychological and physiological health; factors such as decreased job satisfaction and its long-term consequences; and unhealthy behaviours used as coping mechanisms (Ibid.). Material deprivation and “exposure to physical hazards in the work environment” (Ibid., p. 216) are other key ways that precarious work leads to poor health. A ‘social determinants of health’ perspective is an appropriate way of thinking about the health and safety consequences of precarious work. This perspective – which is now a widely accepted way of understanding health and wellbeing (see for example PHAC, 2011) – highlights the understanding that peoples’ health and wellbeing is shaped by a number of social and

structural issues that are often beyond one's control. Income and social status, and employment and working conditions, are two of the 12 recognized determinants of health in Canada (PHAC, 2011).

Benach et al. (2014) observe more specifically that, "precarious employment is now considered a social determinant of health and an employment condition affecting the health of workers, families, and communities" (p. 230). Reading and Wein (2009) also discuss employment and

A 'social determinants of health' perspective is an appropriate way of thinking about the health and safety consequences of precarious work.

income as a proximal social determinant of health for Aboriginal people, noting that colonialism and systemic discrimination continue to contribute to low rates of labour force participation and high rates of unemployment across Indigenous groups.

Broadly, health-related effects of job precarity include psychological ill-health; increases in body mass index (BMI), blood pressure, and cholesterol; and presenteeism (working while ill) (Benach et al., 2014). Mental stress, depression, lack of sleep, loss of self-esteem, digestive problems, cardio-vascular illnesses, chronic muscular skeletal pain and diabetes can also occur (Premji et al., 2014). Stress is a particularly common consequence for women (Ibid.). Across the public sector, **harassment and aggression; emotional and psychological effects; and physical injuries** have been documented as well.

Harassment and aggression

Public sector budget cuts, restructuring, and adoption of private sector managerial methods have led to work intensification and higher rates of harassment (Ironsides & Seifert, 2003). Australian research documents the pervasiveness of bullying in the public sector and points to neoliberal management reforms as contributing to the problem (Hutchison & Jackson, 2015). The link between precarity and harassment has been documented. For example:

- ▶ Job insecurity is strongly linked to an increased risk of bullying in a number of studies (Baillien & De Witte, 2009; Roscigno, Lopez, & Hodson, 2006, cited in Einarsen et al., 2011, p. 234).
- ▶ The use of part-time workers has been found to be among the strongest predictors of aggression in the workplace (Baron & Neuman, 1996 cited in Einarsen et al., 2011, p. 235).
- ▶ Performance-based reward systems, one aspect of business-inspired 'new public management', have been associated with increased harassment (Einarsen et al., 2011, p. 234). In colleges and universities, globalization and government downloading have created pressure-vessel situations where bullying is regarded as commonplace (Lewis & Gunn, 2007).

Marginalized workers are, on average, exposed to more harassment than socially advantaged groups, with labour stratification likely playing a significant role (CUPE, 2014). In a number of studies on workplace harassment, women; LGBT, racialized, Aboriginal, and immigrant workers; and workers with disabilities report disproportionately high levels of harassment (CUPE, 2014, p. 4). A recent study of the public service in the United Kingdom suggests that gender and ethnic minority representativeness help to foster a more inclusive work environment and guard against harassment and bullying (Andrews & Ashworth, 2015). This suggests that not only does precarity contribute directly to bullying, but also that the potential loss of diversity associated with precarity also erodes inclusion in the workplace. The higher rates of harassment against women, immigrant and racialized workers may partly reflect their over-representation in high-risk and insecure occupations, such as health, education and social services (CUPE, 2014, p. 5).

Stress, exhaustion, anxiety and psychological effects

Public sector workers are also subject to a range of emotional and psychological effects. Burke and Greenglass (2001) point to government restructuring and downsizing in healthcare as a factor contributing to increased stress, emotional exhaustion and psychological burnout among nurses in Canada. They document how anxiety, insecurity, and anger, for example, increased during restructuring (Ibid.). Feelings of isolation, competition and distrust are common, and exaggerated by unpredictable assignments, frequent interruptions, and under-staffing (Stinson et al., 2005). Further:

- ▶ women in precarious work describe their working conditions as tense, hectic, exhausting, and stressful; note that the environment is characterized by strained employee-supervisor relationships; and report emotional effects including distress, depression, anger, and frustration (Stinson et al., 2005);
- ▶ workers performing contracted-out hospital services in British Columbia report increased stress, susceptibility to injury, and sickness (Zuberi & Ptashnik, 2011);
- ▶ public sector job precarity across income ranges can add to psychological health-related impacts (Lewchuck et al., 2013); and
- ▶ social service workers report experiencing, “regret, or even mourning, over the loss of caring relationships with clients....Social service workers in many non-profit and public agencies felt they had become brokers...[and performers of] assembly-line work” (Baines, 2004, p. 278).

These are not isolated incidents. Overall, precarity has contributed to “a decrease in morale and an increase in mental health concerns within the public service” (Bourgeois et al., 2012, p. 7). Bourgeois and his colleagues go on to note that, “job cuts and the Workforce Adjustment Process [have] increased tension within offices and negatively impacted job performance. Rumours and speculation about job losses and office closures have also increased stress for federal government employees and their families. Calls to departmental employee assistance

program crisis lines have increased significantly since *affected* notices began being issued in April and [as of August, 2012], health claims filed by public servants for mental health issues were 13 per cent higher than in 2011” (Ibid., p. 31).

Finally, as noted earlier, moves to precarity can affect the health and wellbeing of all workers, even those whose jobs are secure. Outside postal workers, including letter carriers, mail service couriers and assistants to the letter carrier supervisor, have reported particularly serious health consequences since Canada Post’s *Postal Transformation*, which began in Winnipeg in 2010 (Beach & Forer, 2014). The *Postal Transformation* project, meant to modernize Canada Post, included changes for part-time and casual workers such as, “reduced hours of work and inconsistent scheduled days of work... [and] changes to the shift start-times to very early (4am) or end-times (finishing at midnight or later)” (Ibid., p. 34). These and other changes have created serious consequences for both full-time and part-time inside and outside women workers, who report large increases in levels of fatigue, stress, anxiety, and irritability (Ibid., p. 34).

Physical injuries

Finally, there is also evidence to suggest that physical injuries can result from precarious work environments. In long-term care, the increase in privatization of residential long-term care and for-profit nursing homes is linked to, “higher reported rates of disability and time off work due to musculoskeletal injuries, more cases needing medical attention, and more fear of job repercussions for reporting a work-related injury or accident” (Jansen & Murphy, 2009, p. 45). Elsewhere, Jansen and Murphy (2009a) suggest that increases in healthcare associated infections are resulting at least in part because public sector cleaning and other support services are being devalued, including through staff cuts and contracting out. Since the introduction of *Postal Transformation*, the frequency and severity of workplace injuries have increased for both full-time and part-time women workers at Canada Post; a situation that seems particularly adversely affected by forced overtime (Beach & Forer, 2014, pp. 35-36).

Overall, it is evident that serious mental and physical health repercussions are associated with precarious public sector work. The research highlighted above demonstrates that precarious public sector workers are at heightened risk of harassment, bullying, stress, and injury, and also that women and women-dominated sectors are at the forefront of bearing these consequences.

Home, family, and community

Precarious work environments also affect “household well-being and community connections” (Lewchuck et al., 2013, p. 5). The Law Commission of Ontario (2012) emphasizes that the effect of precarious work on women’s health and safety spreads negative impacts beyond workers onto families, children and communities, and the Access Alliance (2013) suggests that “precarious employment conditions can severely strain and damage family relationships and communication” (Shakya et al., 2013, p. 10). Damages occur when individuals and families are deprived of time and resources. Women in particular have to juggle increased responsibilities

because they continue to bear disproportionate childcare and household responsibilities (see for example, Stinson et al., 2005; Clement & Vosko, 2003). When exploring the effects of precarity beyond the individual, research also finds that:

- ▶ “substandard wages, inadequate hours of work, nonexistent benefits, and job insecurity translate into deprivations for...families: a falling standard of living, with little money for tuition, recreation, lessons, or holidays. The need to supplement income with a second or third job created obstacles to spending time with children, spouses, parents, and friends” (Stinson et al., 2005, p. 30);
- ▶ approximately 70 per cent of outside women workers at Canada Post report worsening relationships with their partners, children, and families and friends since the introduction of *Postal Transformation* (Beach & Forer, 2014);
- ▶ “the growth of precarious work has made educational decisions more precarious too. The uncertainty and unpredictability of future work opportunities make it hard for students to plan their educations...[and] may make parents less comfortable investing in their children’s education” (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 10); and
- ▶ women’s opportunities to spend time with friends, engage in community and volunteer activities, and send remittances abroad are increasingly and more profoundly impacted by precarious work (Stinson et al., 2005).

These findings, along with resulting food insecurity noted earlier (Lightman et al., 2008; Tinglin & Wilson, 2013), demonstrate that the effects of precarious public sector work can have immediate and long-term consequences for women and their homes, families, and communities.

Without labour protections afforded by unions, the conditions and consequences of precarity are likely to be expanded and exaggerated.

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, 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 (Lewchuk et al., 2015; Lewchuk et al., 2011). Their scattered hours and work sites also present challenges to organizing and enforcing their rights. Hughes and Bell (2015) note that, “finding and speaking with workers [for example, for the purpose of organizing union drives] is difficult for a workforce that does not have consistent working hours or centralized work or break locations” (p. 4-5). They make this observation about the university sector, but the same could apply to other precarious work environments.

Though not as dramatic as the decline in union density in the private sector (Eidlin, 2015), there

has nevertheless been a stall in union density in the public sector since the 1990s (Ibid.), and governments, both federally and in many provinces, have restricted union organizing, the right to strike and collective bargaining, particularly for public sector workers (Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action, 2015). Back-to-work legislation and other legislatively imposed constraints on collective bargaining and striking often roll back benefits and protections that women have won (Rollman, 2011). 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. Further:

- ▶ Unionized women in Canada earn on average \$6.89 per hour more than non-unionized workers (Canadian Labour Congress, 2013), and even when controlling for age, education, rates of unionization, and other factors that influence wages, women working in the public sector earn an average of \$3.15 more than women in the private sector (Tiagi, 2010).
- ▶ Unionized women have on the whole superior sick leave, job security, maternity leave, health and safety and other benefits and entitlements than the minimums provided by labour standards and other laws (Stinson, 2006).
- ▶ Unionized women can file grievances, organize workplace actions and otherwise mobilize to enforce their collective agreement rights. Unionized women can also use the grievance and arbitration system to enforce human rights legislation, and can be supported in this process by their unions, who typically represent members at human rights commissions/tribunals. This is likely to be of particular benefit to marginalized women; vigilance is required for women whose rights may be violated because of their experiences with racism, colonialism, heterosexism and other systems of power.
- ▶ Unions offer a democratic institution where women gain a stronger "voice", expand their rights, and secure better working conditions (Schenk, 2014) by pooling resources and making decisions collectively - on grievances, bargaining, workplace actions, community campaigns, political action and other union activities.

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 (Behrens et al. 2014; Briskin et al. 2014). Civil society movements advocating "women's rights, LGBTI rights...the rights of peoples with disabilities...young worker's rights...[have] pushed the understanding of rights and equality to a more nuanced analysis of the intersectionality of identities and associations. This brought new influences into the labour movement to expand the rights agenda in negotiations in work places and in the broader society" (Khosla, 2014, p. 6). And, as we elaborate on below, women are also beneficiaries of union strength as users of public services; 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. Ilcan et al. (2007), citing Laporte (1998) document that, "in both the public and private sectors in Canada, there is a trend toward the exclusion of part-time worker provisions in collective agreements that noticeably impinge on female employees. For example, in 1988, 80 per cent of public sector agreements covering 89 per cent of workers contained a provision for part-time workers compared to 1998, where only 72 per cent of agreements covering 77 per cent of workers contained such provisions" (p. 83). 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 market restructuring and declining union membership" (Briskin et al., 2013 in Briskin, 2014, p. 228), 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. The consequences for women workers are outlined in detail above. Below, we consider the fact that precarious work conditions also impact public service users.

What are the impacts of precarious public sector work on public service users?

Besides eroding workers' health and safety; homes, families, and communities; and rights as workers, precarious work conditions create precarious public services by affecting: **quality and access**; and **accountability and safety** of services.

Declining quality and access

Loss of staff, lower budgets, and fewer resources raise concerns about quality and accessibility of services. For instance, a study about the privatization of ancillary public services shows that, "the claims of [privatization advocates] do not hold up to scrutiny. [Two] hospitals have recently terminated food-service contracts over issues of quality (serving day-old sandwiches, for example) and poor management. At [a hospital in Manitoba], staff formerly paid about \$2.00 for breakfast, while now they pay an on-site Tim Hortons franchise about \$8.00" (Antony et al., 2007, p. 21).

A study about federal public sector retrenchment in Atlantic Canada finds that the effects on rural communities (and therefore rural women) will be greater; rural communities rely on federal

services for boosting local economies, such as tourism, farming, fishing and forestry (Bourgeois et al., 2012). In other words, already underserved communities will bear large impacts as the government's role in ensuring equality of service across geographies declines. Generally, families, and especially women, will find it more difficult to receive adequate services, since, as Oxfam (2005) notes, "cutbacks to health care, and the failure of the government to implement child care and home care programs...have a disproportionate effect on women who are more likely to be caregivers in the family context" (p. 11). Hughes and Bell (2015) point out that casualization compromises academic freedom in universities, and Jansen and Murphy (2009, 2009a) tracked the impacts of privatization on quality and access in the health care sector. Nyerere and Stienstra (2009) look at the impacts from the perspective of one group of clients – persons with disabilities – and find a range of negative outcomes resulting from privatization in the United States, including for example, barriers to accessing necessary prescription drugs.

The connection between working conditions and learning/caring conditions are particularly strong when both staff and users face precarity. In a study of precarity in adult education, Seifert et al. (2007) found that the subjects most often taught by precarious instructors were literacy (99% precarious) and French as a second language (94% precarious) – courses critical to new immigrants. The researchers also documented the negative impacts of employment precarity on clients in special education and women's shelters.

Another challenge with quality and access relates to the diversity and representativeness of the workforce, which, as the above noted findings suggest, is at risk in the face of precarious work. As Agocs (2012) points out, a "reasonable hypothesis about representative bureaucracy is that the knowledge, skills and social networks that members of ethnocultural or racialized groups bring to their work as public servants can help them communicate more effectively with these communities and to provide more relevant, sensitive and appropriate service delivery..." (p. 2). In a study of LGB newcomers to Canada (O'Neill & Kia, 2012), the researchers found "a discrepancy...in the tendency for some [settlement] service providers to ascribe singular importance to either sexuality, or culture/race, as factors relevant to program development and service delivery... [as opposed to the] reality that most participating immigrants and refugees expressed service needs relevant to both dimensions of identity" (p. 52). Presumably, situations such as this are more easily mitigated when service providers reflect service users' diversity.

These two examples help to highlight yet another consequence of precarious work for public service users.

Declining accountability and safety

There has also been a focus on how increases in private sector practices and privatization measures in the public health and education systems have led to accountability and safety issues. Regarding long-term care facilities, Jansen and Murphy (2009) find that "privatization of long-term care, either entire facilities or services therein, weakens transparency and accountability and opens seniors' care to instability and displacements that are costly and harmful for residents, workers and the health care system" (p. 58). Their study provides insight

into the linkages between precarious work and negative consequences for public service users. They point out that, “the consequences of understaffing and privatization for residents are clear, documented by decades of research: poor health and lower quality of life. Reversing the downward spiral of funding cuts and privatization is the first step to improving quality” (Jansen & Murphy, 2009, p. 6). Gollust and Jacobson (2006) demonstrate that, “nearly half of local health department directors who privatized services reported an increase in the time their staff spent on administration and program management after privatizing those services” (p. 1736). They also point out, citing Keane et al. (2003), that, “local health department directors are concerned that privatization introduces a loss of control that impedes their ability to respond to emergencies and communicable disease out-breaks” (Gollust & Jacobson, 2006, p. 1736). These studies help to demonstrate that workers’ environments can play a significant role in the safety of clients and patients. They also point out that efficiency is not gained through privatization; instead, users may simply be faced with more risks.

Together, these examples reveal how government restructuring has created issues of quality, accessibility, accountability, and safety for public service users. When those users are themselves precariously employed, further problems ensue. For example, Evans (2007) points out that precariously employed lone mothers (and their families) are not well-served by Ontario’s workfare policies (rolled out under Ontario Works legislation in 1997), because the policies focus on work incentives and cost containment, while failing “to address the marginal nature of employment... [and ensuring that those] who remain on the [social assistance] caseload are increasingly likely to be those individuals who are at most disadvantage in the labour market” (p. 43). Vosko (2011) notes similar issues with the mismatch between the realities of a precarious labour market and employment insurance (EI) policies. For example, she highlights the difficulties faced especially by young workers and recent immigrants in accumulating sufficient work hours to qualify for EI, and points out that the “notable overarching finding is that EI’s requirements disfavor part-time workers” (p. 10). Overall, the effects of precarious work in the public sector are a problem for more than just workers. Citizens – and especially those who are themselves experiencing precarious employment conditions – also feel the consequences of precarious work because the quality and availability of services declines, and issues of representation, along with concerns about accountability and safety, emerge.



Why is this happening?

Given the wide-ranging negative consequences of public sector precarity, it is important to consider how this situation has come about. In short, we point to the widespread adoption of neoliberal ideas, models, and policies, which have been introduced into all levels of government across Canada.

Neoliberalism is an idea that critiques and transforms the Keynesian welfare state model. Neoliberalism is based on the belief that promoting and supporting market activity increases individual freedom. It generally favours mechanisms such as de-regulation, privatization, and limitations on public social programs, along with the reduction of powers of collective actors such as unions (Braedley & Luxton, 2010; Cohen & Pulkingham, 2009). Brodie (2008) argues that this restructuring has resulted in “a politics that seeks to reform and transform the irredeemably gendered subjects of the post-war welfare state into genderless and self-sufficient market actors” (p. 165). She argues that making gender (and, we would add, other identities and positions, such as ethnicity, race, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ability) invisible both within and through state policies, masks systemic and structural oppression.

The erosion of full-time, permanent public sector positions is especially problematic for women, who have historically enjoyed better access to equitable work and human rights protections in the public sector as compared to the private sector.

The new public management (NPM) framework is one example of a shift towards neoliberalism. NPM refers to a major restructuring of the state by shifting public services to external agencies or across jurisdictions, and by reducing public spending. Vosko (2006) reveals that NPM measures have deeply affected the organization of government and have helped to promote the idea of a ‘flexible workforce’ (p. 178). NPM “has built upon, reinforced, and extended the existing sex/gender division of labour in the Ontario public service” (Vosko, 2006, p. 179). This has happened essentially by pushing women into precarious positions where, “flexibility, particularly in the form of part-time and temporary employment, was a means of accommodating women’s increased labour market participation with the prevailing understanding that childcare [and other forms of caring work] was [still] predominantly a private responsibility to be performed by women in families” (Clement & Vosko, 2003, p. 195).

Over the past three decades in Canada, changes aligned with neoliberalism have included the “privatization of public enterprises, increased contracting, expansion of user charges and

expenditure restraint, [and a reduction of] the size of the public service and public payroll” (Aucoin, 1995 in Glor, 2001, p. 122).

In the 1980-90s, all levels of government reduced programme spending and number of programmes through outsourcing, and by creating public-private partnerships and alternative delivery mechanisms. These models can now be found in a variety of public services such as airport security, postal service, education, health, and home care (Ilcan, 2009). In a chapter on the rise of contingent (precarious) work, Fudge and Vosko (2003) describe changes during the same period: “the 1980s [brought] a phase of employment change marked by equality gains for women and minorities that were precipitated by equality rights legislation, but also by growing attacks on public sector collective bargaining, cuts to unemployment insurance, and the proliferation of contingent employment” (p. 184). They go on to discuss “developments in the 1990s, highlighting the state’s gradual retreat from equity policy...” (Ibid., p. 184). As noted above, part of the neoliberal strategy of weakening labour rights involves weakening unions, an approach that also has gendered impacts.

In summary, neoliberal reforms over the last several decades have fundamentally reorganized the public sector in Canada, including creating more precarious work and services. The erosion of full-time, permanent public sector positions is especially problematic for women, who have historically enjoyed better access to equitable work and human rights protections in the public sector as compared to the private sector. For marginalized women, including women with disabilities, racialized women, Aboriginal women, and LGBT women, secure public sector employment has been critical to broader equity gains. Neoliberal reforms put employment equity at risk.

Additionally, women are more likely to enter into precarious jobs because of ongoing imbalances in caregiving responsibilities. Precarious work conditions lead to concerns about the quality and safety of public services, and this in turn is especially problematic for precariously employed women, who have less access to good incomes, benefits, and job security.



Resistance

A future phase of this research should include efforts to better understand strategies and policies for resisting the turn towards, and entrenchment of, precarious employment. While the literature review that informed this paper did not include a focus on successful resistance and alternatives to growing precarity in the public sector, some valuable examples did emerge. For example, unions have bargained not only to limit the use of precarious workers, but also to gain rights and benefits for those who do end up in precarious work arrangements.

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), for example, has bargained for a number of clauses regarding the use of temporary workers (Canada Post and CUPW, 2015). In the past, efforts by CUPW and the Organization of Rural Route Mail Couriers (ORRMC) led to workers gaining employee status, the protections of a collective agreement, and access to the Canada Post Pension Plan (Pollack, 2004). CUPE has negotiated better health benefits for part time employees in several sectors (Clark, 2006), increased its bargaining focus on part-time workers generally (CUPE, 2013), and prioritized job security in a number of recent strikes (CUPE, 2015b; Dale & Jackson, 2012; Khosla, 2014).

More generally, unions active in the post-secondary sector, including the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT, 2015), are campaigning against the increasing casualization of academic work. The Public Service Alliance of Canada (2014) has provided leadership in the area of rights of LGBT workers. "As early as 1980, PSAC sought to have sexual orientation added to the no discrimination clause in collective agreements" (PSAC, 2014, p. 4).

In addition to bargaining, unions have used political action to advocate for precarious workers, often in coalition with community allies. A recent example is the Vote Child Care 2015 campaign, an effort by unions and the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada to make childcare a federal policy priority. Carson & Siemiatycki (2014) examined the *Justice and Dignity for Cleaners* campaign, launched in 2011. This campaign took place in Toronto in response to attempts to privatize municipal cleaners. It has been described as a success in part because of its ability to "challenge the logic of outsourcing, to elevate concerns over growing income inequality, [and] to valorize service sector workers" (p. 177).

In another coalition involving CUPE in Toronto, library workers and supporters successfully defended against service cuts and privatization, and improved job security for staff (Dale & Jackson, 2012; Khosla 2014). Through court action, and working in solidarity with other organizations, PSAC (2014) has been actively involved in winning gains and protections for LGBT workers, including having been active in the court case that led to the establishment of "sexual orientation as a prohibited ground for discrimination under Section 15 of the Charter" (p. 8). In Nova Scotia, CUPE partners with the Nova Scotia Citizens' Health Care Network to support the network's efforts to "protect, strengthen and extend public health care" (NSCHCN, 2015).

There is thus evidence that both unions and the general public are working to resist precarity in the public sector. However, a more thorough understanding of these efforts, including both successes and failures, is needed. Further, future research should look at successful bargaining and legislative strategies used in other countries. For example, workers in the UK are protected against unfair treatment on the grounds of being fixed-term or part-time workers (UK Government, 2015). This means that part-time workers should have access to the same pension opportunities and benefits, holidays, career development, pay rates, and so on as full-time workers (Ibid.). In Norway, part-time employees have rights such as having a preferential right to an extended post rather than having the employer create a new position (Hveding & Johansen, 2015).



Conclusion and Next Steps

Conditions that are commonly associated with precarious public sector work include low wages and benefits, and high job insecurity. Incidences of precarious work seem to be on the rise, and are often seen as 'normal' because of the widespread adoption of neoliberal ideas and policies. Toronto Dominion Bank economists predict an ongoing presence of precarious work, and affirm that precarious employment has negative consequences for the economy (DePratto & Bartlett, 2015).

We focused on the experiences of women because women seem to shoulder the largest impacts of a precarious public sector.

The consequences of precarious work in the public sector are severe, especially for women. The physical and mental health and safety of women workers are at risk, as are their families and communities, and their rights as workers. The corresponding declining rates of unionization – especially for part-time workers – are matters of concern because the rights of workers will continue to be compromised in the absence of a commitment to fair wages, job security, and good working conditions. We also see that the consequences of precarity in the public sector extend beyond workers' lives and into the lives

of public service users. This means that women, who are over-represented in more precarious segments of the public sector, and who continue to bear more unpaid caring responsibilities in society, face unique consequences as a result of being precariously employed, and as a result of public services becoming more precarious.

We focused on the experiences of women because women seem to shoulder the largest impacts of a precarious public sector. They make up the majority of public sector workers, and within the public sector, are disproportionately present in areas where precarity seems most prevalent. There is some evidence that racialized and immigrant women face particular impacts. While we expect that Indigenous women, women with disabilities, and LGBTTTQ women, among others, also suffer unique and challenging consequences associated with precarious work, their experiences are rarely uniquely considered in existing research. This is a serious oversight, and an important area for future research.

Future empirical research underway as part of the *Changing Public Services* project will examine shifting patterns of public sector employment and services in more detail. Further, a more detailed focus on the individual and collective experiences of groups of women, such as Aboriginal women, is critical. For example, while we have searched for research highlighting the experiences of Aboriginal women, and have tried to note some of the ongoing consequences of colonization, there is a need to more carefully consider how the very organization of public services, and Aboriginal peoples' broader exclusion from the labour market, impact Aboriginal women's experiences with public sector precarity.

Finally, we know that unions have been strong sites of resistance against public sector restructuring. Moving forward, there is a need for more research about successful strategies for resisting further – and reversing existing – moves towards precarity. Particularly, it is critical to understand resistance that also allows the correction and redress of historical disadvantages brought about by racism, sexism, colonialism, ableism, homo/transphobia, and other systems of oppression. Precarity undermines both the ‘public’ and the ‘service’ of Canadian public services.



Appendix 1: Research Method

The findings presented in this paper are based on a review of academic and community literature, with an emphasis on research conducted since 2000. This paper focuses on data since 2000, recognizing that the trend towards precarity has been underway for several decades.

Research was conducted using online search engines including: Primo (the aggregating literature database at the University of Guelph); Academic Search Premier; Google; the comparative perspectives on precarious employment database; and the gender and work database (both hosted by York University). We also used data from a group library containing the results of a systematic scoping review – conducted between 2013-2015 – of the impacts of public service (including employment) changes on women in Canada since 2008. This group library, housed in Zotero (zotero.org), was developed by members of the *Changing Public Services Research Network*, a SSHRC-funded collaboration of union, academic, and community groups interested in better understanding and responding to the consequences of public service changes, using a feminist intersectional and community engaged approach. The research conducted for this paper was funded through a Mitacs Accelerate Grant, with matching funds from the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, and the Canadian Labour Congress.

Members of the research team used keyword searches, combining search terms to describe employment precarity with search terms to capture the experiences of marginalized women. For example search terms included: “public sector”, “precarity”, “precarious”, “privatization”, “downsizing”, “retrenchment”, “government”; and “gender”, “young women”, “racialized”, “Indigenous women”, “disability”, “LGBTQ”, and “women”. The researchers attempted to limit the search to literature that strictly focused on the public sector, but limited findings resulted in the inclusion of some literature focused on other sectors (for example, in developing the above definition of *precarious work*, and in considering likely impacts based on similar experiences in the private sector).

In addition to revisions based on feedback from members of the *Changing Public Services Research Network*, both an academic and union team member formally reviewed the final version of this paper.

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