First and foremost, we hope you and your loved ones are healthy and safe as we all work together to stop the spread of COVID-19. We are grateful for all the essential service providers that continue to ensure our access to the products and services that we need. We recognize that these are challenging times, and it is more important than ever that we stay socially connected in this era of physical distancing.

The operations of governments at all levels have changed dramatically over the past few weeks. COVID-19 has shifted the focus of the governments from traditional election cycles to immediate day to day response scenarios. We are cognizant government relations will function differently in the months ahead, and this means the NCWC must be prepared to be even more diligent in promoting our policies and our priorities to provide the strong tapestry of supports for women, children, and families across Canada.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold, we are acutely aware the current crisis will amplify existing gender, racial, economic and political inequalities. Those most impacted will be the marginalized - women, LGBTIQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, the elderly, the poor, and the displaced. The current crisis is likely to have a distinct and disproportionate impact on women, whether it is due to the increasing risk of gender-based violence, lack of access to necessary sexual and reproductive healthcare, greater caregiving responsibilities, losing employment or working without adequate protective equipment.

Still, women continue to lead efforts to protect and serve their communities, as leaders and policy makers, healthcare professionals, caregivers, and as workers supporting essential infrastructure. **Over half of all female workers (56%)** are employed in occupations involving the “5 Cs”: caring, clerical, catering, cashiering and cleaning. These are mostly poorly paid workers, and they are standing between us and catastrophic illness and economic depression. They are precisely the people who are directly involved in containing the pandemic by providing needed care and support.

Our primary care and long-term care systems are **staffed largely by women**. Women represent over 90% of nurses, 75% of respiratory therapists, and 80% of those working in medical labs. Up to 90% of the Personal Support Workers (PSWs) who do the lion’s share of work in long-term care homes and home care work in the community are women. Over two-thirds of people who clean and disinfect our hospitals, our schools, and our office buildings are women. Two decades of austerity measures in health care and community services have left us ill prepared to respond. PSWs are often asked to provide essential home care services without proper training or safety equipment. We ask hospitals to address the needs of patients struck down with the virus with **fewer nurses** and **fewer beds per population** than a decade ago.

These same women will go home to start their second shift, providing care and support for their families, with the added worry they may be bringing the virus with them. The latest evidence suggests that the disease is **most easily spread between family members** who are in frequent contact with one another.

Other women **work in sectors** like accommodation and food services, financial services, retail, cleaning services, education and community services, many in low-wage, precarious positions. Again, these types of jobs carry a high risk of exposure to the infection. They are also least likely to offer important protections such as paid sick leave or health benefits, and they are more likely to offer only part-time or irregular hours. Only 19% of workers in accommodation and food services and 37% of retail workers had access to paid leave in 2019.
The link between economic recession and increased rates of gender-based domestic and intimate partner violence has been documented in Canada and around the world.

A home is not a safe place for many women and children. In Canada, the pandemic will hit people facing intersecting forms of discrimination the hardest: Indigenous women, racialized women, newcomers, women with disabilities, lone parents. Women who can least afford care will be at greatest risk. They will also have the greatest difficulty recovering after the crisis.

The following support programs have been identified in Prime Minister Trudeau’s daily updates.

- Support programs for workers (Emergency Care and Emergency Support Benefits)
- Temporary Canada Child Benefit increases
- GST relief
- Moratorium on repayment of student loans
- Doubling the funding of the Reaching Home program for homeless individuals
- Increased funding for shelters
- An Indigenous community support fund
- Extended deadline for those who have a CRA payment
- Business supports including tax deferrals and wage subsidy

This is an excellent start, but there is much more that needs to be done! If our response to the COVID-19 outbreak is to be effective, and not reproduce or perpetuate inequality, we need to ensure the issues that impact vulnerable people and communities are not shoved aside. To address the current pandemic, we must take gender into account.

The NCWC is Canada’s oldest advocacy network, and our rich tradition and history will assist well as we will continue to work tirelessly to ensure the needs of women, children and families will not go unmet.

Our Resolutions Convenor, Jane Cowell, and her Committee have extended the dates for Emergent Resolutions to August 15. As this dynamic fluid situation unfolds, each of us has an obligation to examine our policies, prepare pertinent update, and propose new policies to mitigate any exacerbation of existing gender, social, and economic fault lines.

Yes, these are indeed difficult times; but this will not destroy us; we will come out of it stronger and more committed to caring for each other and working together to improve societal conditions in our communities, our provinces, and our country.

References:

- Statistics Canada
- Ontario Health Coalition
- Lancet Journals: Infectious Diseases
- NGOWG WPS (NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security)
- Canadian Society of Association Executives
- Canadian Centre for Policy Alternative
- CBC News; CTV News; Global News
- Newspaper articles (Saskatoon Star Phoenix, Calgary Herald, Globe and Mail, The Guardian)