

Deep Dish 10: COVID's Impact on Food Retail through a Gender-based Analysis Lens

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The effects of Covid-19 on the retail food environment have been felt across the Province, however equity-deserving communities who face systemic inequities, effects are being felt in unique ways. Gender-based analysis of the effects of Covid-19 and the retail food environment can contribute to the understanding of the risks these inequalities pose to the vast number of individuals representing equity-deserving communities participating in the food retail economy. In Ontario, women are consistently over-represented in low wage front-line jobs, holding nearly 60% of minimum wage jobs (Ontario Pay Equity, 2021). These are the jobs that are bearing the brunt of the economic losses brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic (CBC, 2021). Women's low earnings are especially a concern for 82% of lone-parent families headed by females. Further, the rate of low-income is consistently higher for female-headed lone-families than for those headed by males (Ontario Pay Equity, 2021).

Insert picture here: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/young-bartenders-preparing-coffee-with-coffee-machine-6205642/>

The FRESHER research team has spent months interviewing participants in the retail food environment across Southern Ontario to determine how Covid is affecting them, and how they are fighting back. Of those interviewed where personal information was disclosed, the number of women interviewed was almost double the number of men interviewed.

Some women who were interviewed discussed their struggle to maintain economic stability while caring for their children. One cafe owner noted that she was struggling to stay afloat due to the loss of revenue brought on by the pandemic. Even with the help of government grants, she struggled to cover expenses on top of taking care of her children.

The struggle to take care of children during the pandemic has significantly affected single mothers. One employer interviewed expressed specific concern for the single mothers employed at her restaurant. She mentioned that these women would be in dire straights if they were to be laid off – Food Hospitality employee from Waterloo. Lost wages can be detrimental for single mothers struggling to pay for food and housing for their children. An interviewee mentioned her concerns for housing for single mothers stating, “It's not my jurisdiction, but I really took it to heart to fight for people who are getting evicted and to allow them to eat or stay in their homes or provide them an alternative situation that they can be in, because a lot of them are women. A lot of them were single moms with children, multiple children. It was really stressful to even fall asleep knowing that someone is in that situation so I'm happy to say that, as much as we had a lot of stuff going on, we were able to rise to the occasion and serve the community in the best way that we could.” - Extra sectoral stakeholder from London.

Insert picture here: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/young-female-working-on-cash-register-3801422/>

When discussing support that has been received during the pandemic, interviewees mention receiving support from provisions of PPE, CERB for laid off workers, and government support for business owners. Despite the noted gendered effects, no interviewee mentioned any actions being taken by the government to specifically counter these effects. Although there are supports available through family support centers and crisis services, along with governmental funding available for low income workers and families with young children, the inequalities women face in the food retail environment have not been eliminated. When government supports are not enough, it appears that the responsibility of supporting women in the food retail economy has fallen on those within the industry including employers and individuals involved in the regulatory process to do their best to support women and single mothers. Perhaps governments should consider additional interventions to support these groups.

Related Links

Pandemic job losses threaten to leave women behind permanently, RBC warns:
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/longterm-female-unemployment-1.5935882>

Ontario Pay Equity: <https://www.payequity.gov.on.ca/en/Pages/default.aspx>