
Leading the Settlement SHEcovery:

Advancing an intersectional pandemic recovery by investing in women-serving-women-led organizations in Ontario's refugee-and-immigrant-serving sector.

OCASI Women's Caucus Research Report

Authors: Dr. Salina Abji, Ashley Major, Roshni Khemraj

OCASI PD Conference, 22 October 2021.





Research Purpose

To study the impacts of COVID-19 on women's organizations in Ontario's refugee-and-immigrant-serving sector:

- Identify promising practices
- Analyze key issues and challenges
- Understand what organizations need to build capacity and resiliency.

What we did

- Reviewed 150 sources as part of an environmental scan
- Consulted with 23 women's caucus member organizations as part of a qualitative study



Research
Report
Highlights

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May 3, 2021





Findings Outline

Part I: Environmental Scan

- Existing research on the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on Ontario's diverse communities and service organizations in settlement and women's services.
- Impacts on women-serving-women-led (WSWL) settlement organizations: A key research gap.
- Calls for an intersectional SHEcovery from COVID-19.

Part II: Qualitative Study

- Pandemic response at the intersections: Demonstrating the vital role of women-serving-women-led organizations in Ontario's settlement sector.
- "This was already a crisis": How pre-existing systemic inequities prolonged and deepened the COVID-19 crisis for women-serving-women-led settlement organizations.
- Towards a settlement SHEcovery: Advancing an intersectional pandemic recovery in Ontario with women-serving-women-led organizations at the forefront of systems change.

Environmental Scan I

- Disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on equity-seeking groups by race, gender, immigration status and other factors.
- Data from June 2020 showed that newcomers, immigrants and refugees made up 43.5% of cases, when only 25% of ON pop.
- Black women in Toronto totaled 16% of cases, when only 5% of TO's population
- Women, especially minorities and immigrant women, were more likely to work in front-line service + healthcare positions = heightened risk.
- But, heavy job losses for other women. 1.5 million women in Canada lost their jobs in first two months of pandemic
- Women shouldered eldercare + childcare
- Shadow pandemic of GBV, non-status women particularly vulnerable



Environmental Scan II

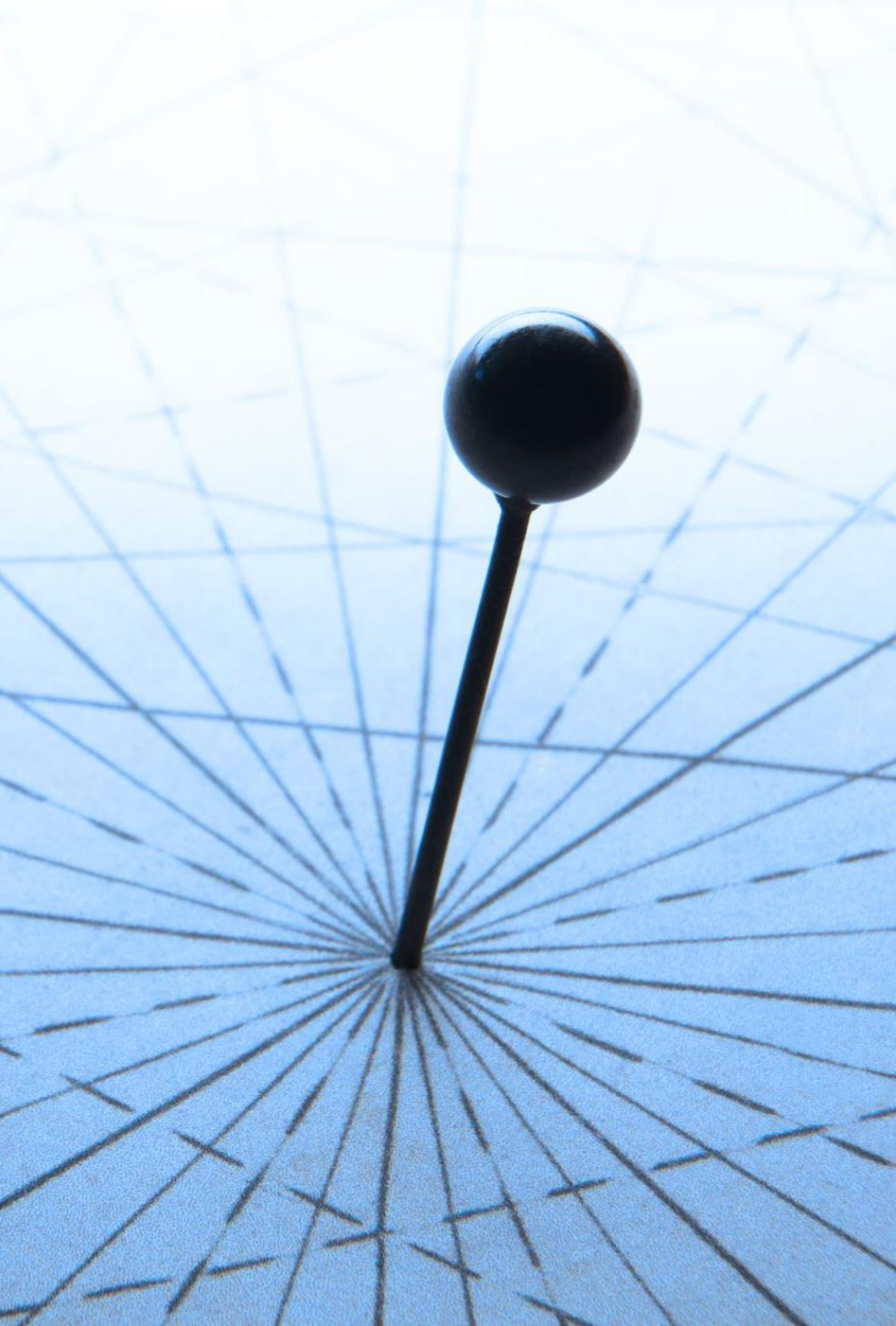
- Less research examining the impacts on *service organizations* themselves.
- Mostly on GBV sector studies: “triple-burden” of Covid, unpaid care work and risk of financial devastation for the sector after decades of under-investment.
- Research examining women’s organizations in the *settlement* sector was a critical missing gap.
 - Yet we know these organizations are a life-line and comprised of a largely racialized, immigrant, and female workforce.
 - Indeed, the Women’s Caucus exemplifies the significant role of these organizations in advocating for systems change.



Qualitative Study

- Focus groups and interviews with 23 organizations representing 61% of the Women's Caucus membership.
- Good distribution by region, primary population(s) served, and organization size.
- Most participants were executive directors or management-level.





Finding I: The vital role played by WSWL settlement organizations

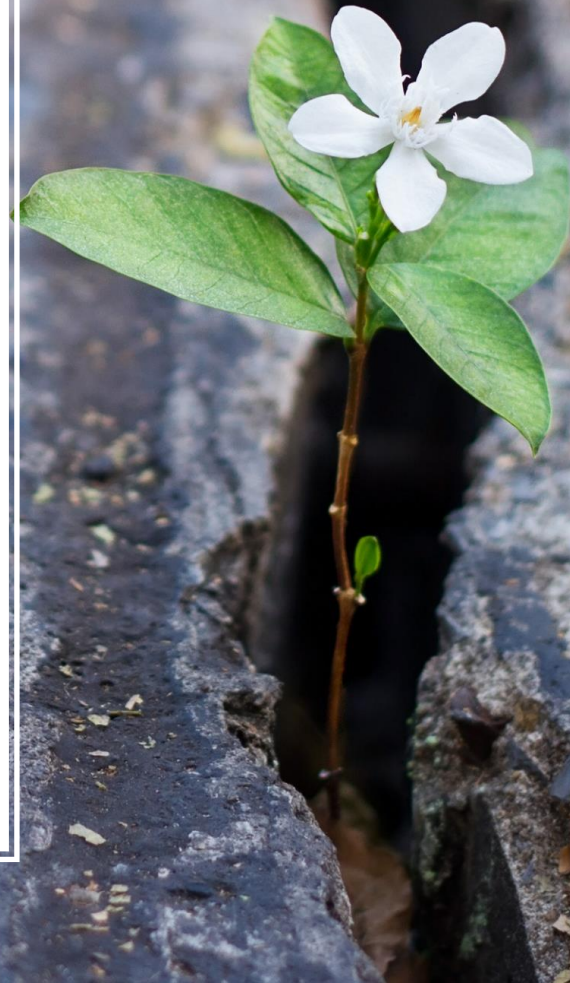
Pandemic Response at the Intersections

- Quickly pivoted operations in response to COVID-19 public health measures
- Used their specialized knowledge to respond to critical gaps in public health measures
 - Analysis of systemic barriers and intersectional needs
 - Networks and relationships of care
 - Lived experience

It was a time of huge learning. Just *huge* learning. And I think you never know, when someone kind of drops you in the middle of the Sahara, or in the middle of the jungle, what you can do until you're there. So, you look around and you think, "Oh, I had a flashlight!" "Oh, I had a penknife!" "I know how to tie a Slipknot!" And I think this was our version of having to really protect our clients' access to health on the drop of a dime, because for many we are the one-stop shop.

Finding II: Pre-existing systemic inequities intensified impacts of COVID-19

- Like other social service organizations in Ontario, member organizations experienced direct impacts on organizational capacity and staff mental health
- However, pre-existing systemic inequities prolonged and deepened the COVID-19 crisis for WSWL settlement organizations:
 - Direct impacts on staff from equity-seeking groups
 - Vicarious impacts of care work with vulnerable communities
 - Systemic inequities in funding allocation, lack of GBA+ analysis, pay inequity and succession planning concerns.



The women who I started with 40 years ago are still here, you know? We're all getting older. It's different this time. It's not "this too shall pass with this government ...". This definitely has a different tone to it. Even the men in our sector are worried – they're not stressing as much as the women – but they're saying, "Is this going to be sustainable for us in the long run? We're tired!" So, our resiliency has its limits. It's like recycling: you can only recycle aluminum so many times before it starts to become brittle and fall apart. I think that's what can happen to the sector. You keep breaking it so much that it's going to fall apart. It's not easy to put back together. That's what scares me.



Finding III: Need for a settlement SHEcovery

- Hope and optimism
- Fear of austerity
- To build systemic resiliency, WSWL settlement organizations want their voices to be heard and to have decision-making power in redesigning systems to align with the rights of the most vulnerable, for the collective good of all.



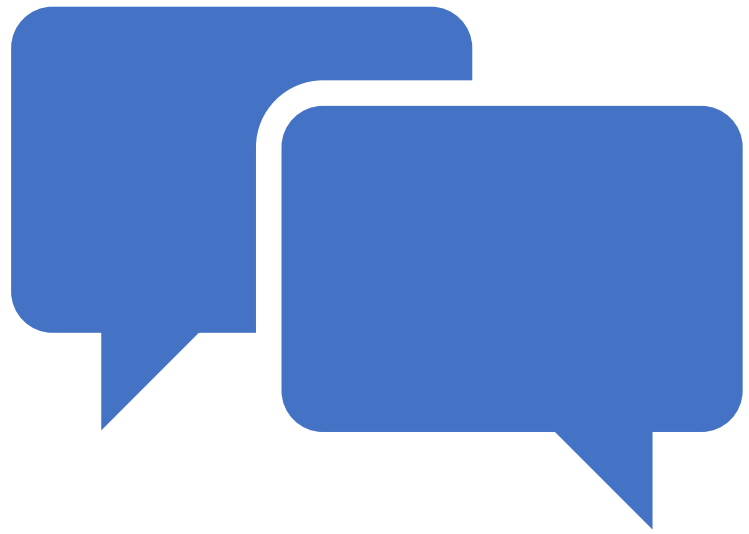
Implications for government funders, policy-makers and sector leaders I

- Recognize and support the specialized knowledge of WSWL organizations
- Where calls for proposals are focused on improving women's social and economic empowerment, give weight to women's organizations that primarily serve women
- Create meaningful opportunities to lead and participate in decision-making

A blue 3D letter 'A' is positioned on a light blue background with a grid of thin, dark blue lines. The letter is slightly tilted and casts a soft shadow on the surface below it.

Implications for funders, policy-makers and sector leaders II

- Build systemic resilience through long-term investments and core operational funding.
- Create policies that build the long-term capacity of women's organizations, including HR, technological and administrative infrastructure supports.
- Invest in women's leadership and succession planning; investigate and address inequities in funding allocation and salaries; use a GBA+ lens to adapt and transform how services are organized.



Pause for Questions or Comments

Discussion will follow the next
presentation

Thank you