



**BC · CB**

Public Service Alliance of Canada  
Alliance de la Fonction publique du Canada

COVID-19 and Women – Survey Report  
Winter 2020

## Background

The PSAC B.C. Regional Council Women's Coordinator, Kelly Sidhu, with input from her Alternate and the BC Regional Women's Committee (RWC) chairs, initiated a survey to capture and document the current challenges facing members that identify as women, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Information was gathered with the intention that the responses would be used to support members and capture women's perspectives.

The survey required participants to indicate their geographic area (of B.C.) as well as the option to respond anonymously. Those who identified themselves were entered into a draw, where one woman (randomly drawn) had \$200 donated in their name to a women's rights organization in their geographic area.

The PSAC Privacy Policy was followed and only PSAC staff have access to member's identifying information.

## The Survey

This survey was launched at the beginning of November 2020 for one month. It was to capture a snapshot from women who had experienced the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for more than six months, (serious COVID-19 impacts struck B.C. in March 2020). The survey was launched to provide women with an opportunity to share their experiences briefly or in-depth. Women could answer the survey quickly and focus on only providing quantitative responses such as a yes/no answer or provide more information by adding their own stories into the survey. With this intention, the survey length was kept concise to address areas of stronger impact including, Home Life, Violence, Work Life, Health, and the Union.

## Responses

Close to 200 self-identified PSAC women from across British Columbia responded to our survey. Informal survey analysis indicates that a notable portion of respondents are not currently active in the Union. The fact that these women decided to engage in our survey was gratifying. We have successfully added 55 women to our various Regional Women's Committee (RWC) contact lists! Other respondents were either already involved in their RWC or did not request further information at this time.

The summaries below depict both the overall experiences of women whilst highlighting question-related stories/comments. Some impacts had more questions than others did, which has resulted in some detailed summaries.

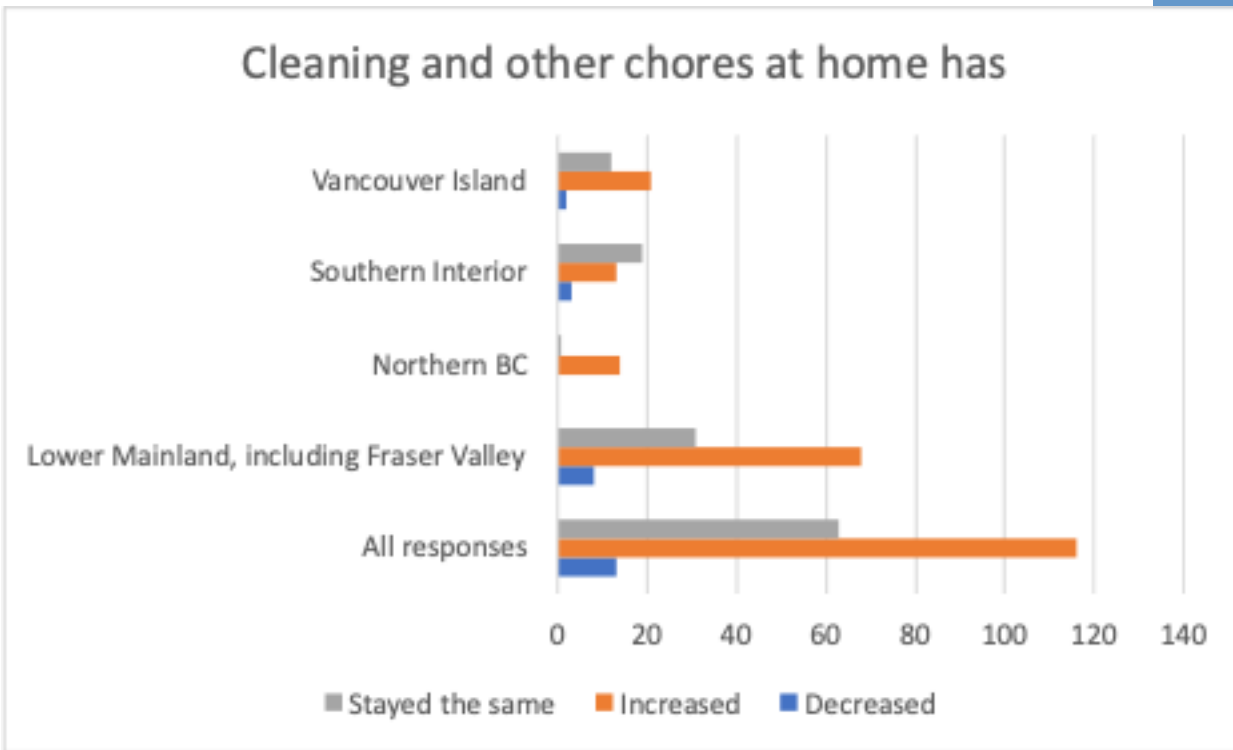
## Responses by Area

### Home Life

Home Life included seven questions that included responsibilities with cooking, grocery shopping, cleaning and other chores; expectations from their partner; impacts on childcare; education of children; and finances.

Overall, cooking at home, grocery shopping, and cleaning and other chore responsibilities have generally increased for women across B.C.





This chart validates the concern that a lot of the “unseen” labour in maintaining daily needs for the home are still borne by women and actually increased at this time for the majority of respondents. The overwhelming majority of our respondents shared that they were able to work from home at the onset of the pandemic. Doubly concerning was not only that the increasing home needs were being handled by the women in the household, but that the expectation was that it was still the women’s responsibility to pick up this additional work even as they were working from home.

*“As I am now home my family expect that even though I am working I will contribute throughout the day to meal preparation.”*

*“As my family sees I am here more often they expect that I will be able to do some cleaning jobs throughout the day even though they understand that I am working. It is a difficult balance to remind family gently that it isn't possible to do everything.”*

Women were also grappling with work pressures while facing the expectations of home needs. More on this will be shared under the Work Life area.

*“I get surveilled by [the online platform we use at work]. Your computer turns yellow when inactive and all your team members and boss and anyone can see. So I find it hard to step away for a moment to food prep or relax or informally make up for [it through] unpaid overtime or overexerting myself.”*

Some women reported that the time saved commuting naturally fell to household duties. Women stated that their commute time was actually a chance to “have a breather” as they transitioned from work to home life; this was a window for themselves that they somewhat “miss.”

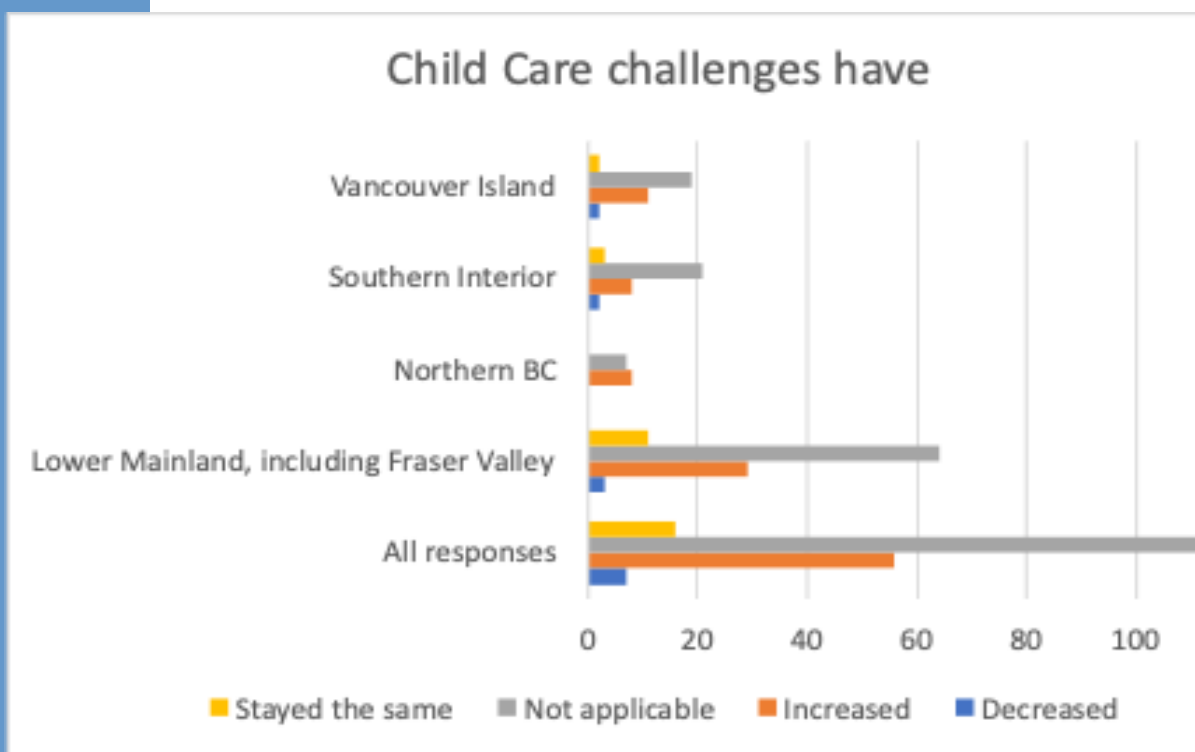
Many women are immune-compromised, and/or had family members who were immune-compromised which resulted in increased costs during the pandemic. An

example provided was with groceries; shopping online and then having groceries delivered or have pre-arranged time slots for curbside pick-up. Those without transportation faced an additional dilemma such as shopping for more items and/or in bulk and incur additional costs (such as taxi fares), or shop more frequently and risk exposures that are more possible.

While the survey asked specifically about expectations from their partner, women's responses also included expectations from other family members in the household. Some women reported that because they had a partner that is a frontline worker, household duties would fall onto the woman given their partner's work dynamics are high risk. In cases where a family member was laid off, home duties became a shared responsibility. For those who were single parents or had elderly parents living with them, expectations increased from both their children and/or their parents simply because they saw the women at home (despite working requirements.)

## Child Care

For those facing childcare challenges, 70% reported increased needs due to these unforeseen "times we are in."



Challenges were particularly difficult during the onset of the pandemic when schools were closed. For women who had the responsibilities of grocery and having their children in their care, some were forced to make hard choices on what was best to keep their children safe.

*"At first I left my kids in the car alone while I waited in line and grocery shopped. It was very stressful and scary as I had never done that before. I had to get a second cell phone. It felt safer than leaving them home alone."*

Women expressed challenges at getting paid leave from their employer even when they had their children with them at home full-time. Or, once they were



granted special leave, feared it was going to be taken away. Women are facing the difficulties of contributing a full productive workday whilst simultaneously caring for children.

*"At [my work] they denied me any [special leave] whatsoever. They said I could work from home and care for seven-year-old twins who would normally be in school. There was no childcare initially."*

*"Childcare was closed from mid-March to August - and in August there was no room for non-essential workers. I was unable to find alternative child care even though I was expected to be working full-time hours from home."*

*"We have lost both of our childcare centres. One is closed permanently and the other is closed indefinitely due to COVID. There is no other childcare options around for us now."*

In addition, given health restrictions, accessing other childcare was not an option for many women. Daycares had additional restrictions that meant keeping kids home more often than before.

*"I send my toddler to daycare twice a week. If she is sick, she used to be able to attend, and now she has to stay home. So I'm paying for a few unused days."*

Limited childcare options were preventing women who wanted to return to work, from doing so.

*"I am on maternity/parental leave. I'd like to return to work, but there are no childcare options for my 15-month-old. The option right now is to stay home and take a huge financial hit or hire a nanny which would mean both parents trying to work from home with both kids and nanny in the house if we can even find someone suitable to come in. No good option and VERY stressful."*

## Home Schooling

Having children at home full-time also meant the additional responsibility of helping with school learning. For families with children that need more learning support, school learning challenges were amplified.

*"My kids need more of my time for parenting and helping with their homework."*

*"My son is a special need's kid so it was very hard to a full-time job and look after him when he was at virtual learning."*

*"I have two special needs kids. When schools were closed, I was expected to have them both at home and facilitate online learning for them."*

*"Teaching created such friction, frustration, anger, madness, anxiety, fear, depression, feelings of hopelessness. Concerned child isn't getting the instruction she needs and will suffer for it over time."*

One improvement suggested by a respondent was that we ask a question regarding women's experiences with elder care. We appreciate women sharing their stories voluntarily and acknowledge that many are currently part of the

“sandwich” generation where they are caring for both children and their elderly parents at the same time.

## **Financial Impacts:**

An almost equal number of women said their concerns about personal finances have stayed the same or increased, and only a small portion said they had decreased. Some women were impacted significantly, as household income decreased to one income “overnight.” With a combination of increased grocery expenses and childcare challenges, the survey revealed that over half of the women were financially impacted by the pandemic.

*“I’m always careful of my money but now I’m making choices about what bills I can pay, sometimes I go without to make sure my child is adequately cared for.”*

For some members, working from home saw as “evening out” of expenses as reduced costs from working from home were matched with increased food costs being at home and/or having children at home with them and less eating out to reduce possible exposure to COVID.

For a few, their financial situations improved somewhat because of reduced commuting costs (gas, parking, etc.) and appreciate their job is unionized.

*“My finances have not changed as I am lucky to be in a union.”*

Two overarching commonalities were about rising costs and concerns about their economic security in the long-term.

*“Everything is more expensive which is hard on a single income.”*

*“Although discretionary spending is less, feeling nervous about the long-term economic impact created by this time has increased, both for access to items, closing of small businesses (affecting employment), and the debt load the government has placed on us...”*

*“As mentioned above I may not be able to return to work because there are no childcare spaces here for my daughter. Huge financial burden.”*

## **Violence in the Home**

The survey revealed an increase in violence in the home during the pandemic. While we did not ask women to expand on their response, some women chose to express their experiences (with violence at home) through some of the other questions asked in the survey.

Sadly, we did have a small percentage of women respond facing domestic violence at this time.

One woman shared her experience of having to leave her home in the middle of the pandemic because of domestic violence, which directly affects her financial situation.

*“Being forced to flee my home meant I had to move to a new place. Rent is extremely high as were emergency moving costs therefore I am on a tight*



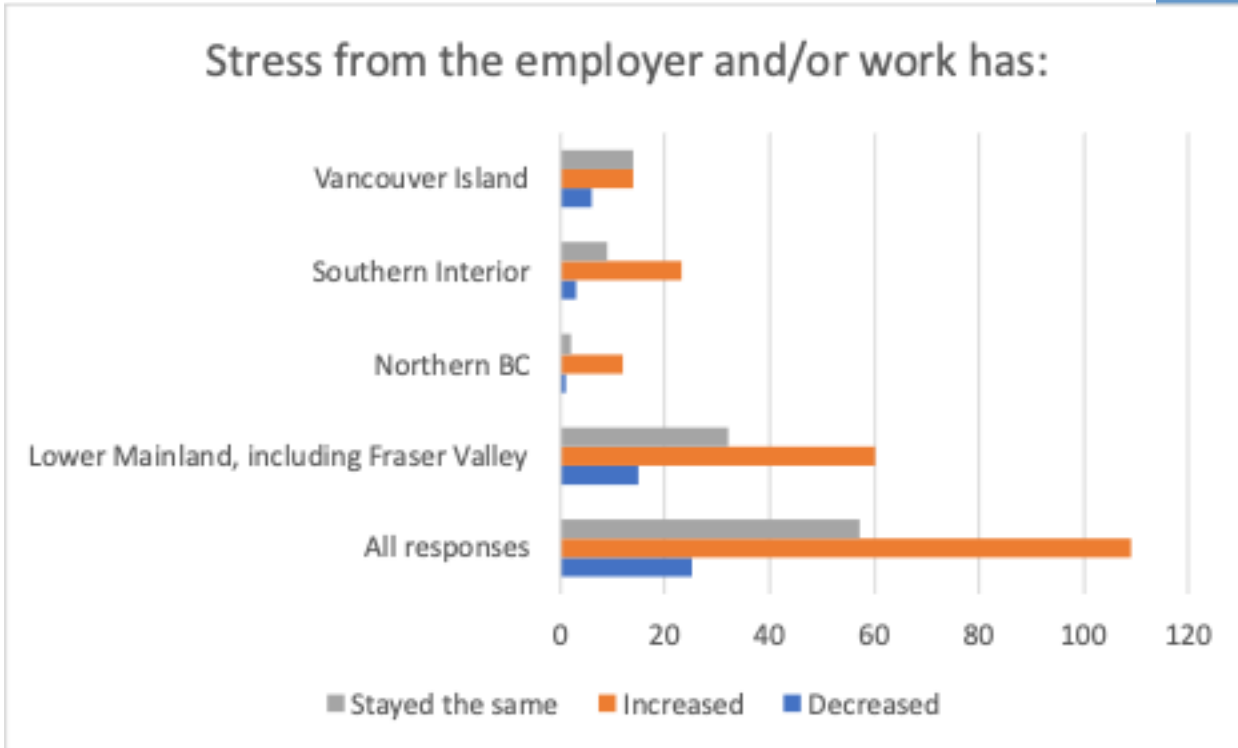
budget.”

Our second question asked if any respondents wanted more information on community resources to assist them or their children. Responses may appear similar in number but often women who answered yes to more community resources were not the same women who identified they were experiencing violence in the home at this time. This could mean a variety of things and we do not want to speculate without more information. It is important to share that if any woman identified that they were experiencing violence and requested community resources, we had a staff person who was monitoring responses as they came in who would have put them in contact with appropriate resources in their communities. Continuing to provide information and resources will be important going forward.

The survey asked respondents if they were interested in PSAC’s education opportunities regarding domestic violence as a workplace issue. As a result of the survey, almost 30% of respondents have been provided further information regarding PSAC’s education program. The survey goal is to highlight what our members need at this time, during and because of the pandemic. Education and awareness around domestic violence at home is among the top priorities for women.

**Work Life**

Women’s stress levels from their Employer and/or workload, feeling disconnected from colleagues, and potential physical pains and/or discomforts from working at home and continuous changes were all key areas in this part of the survey.



*“Constant changes in direction, no decrease in caseloads and changes in technology plus months waiting for ergo equipment increased stress.”*

*“Constantly changing priorities. Expecting us to resume on-site during a*



pandemic.”

*“I have been reassigned to 7 different positions with different business lines in the 7 months of COVID my brain is full of training and new information.”*

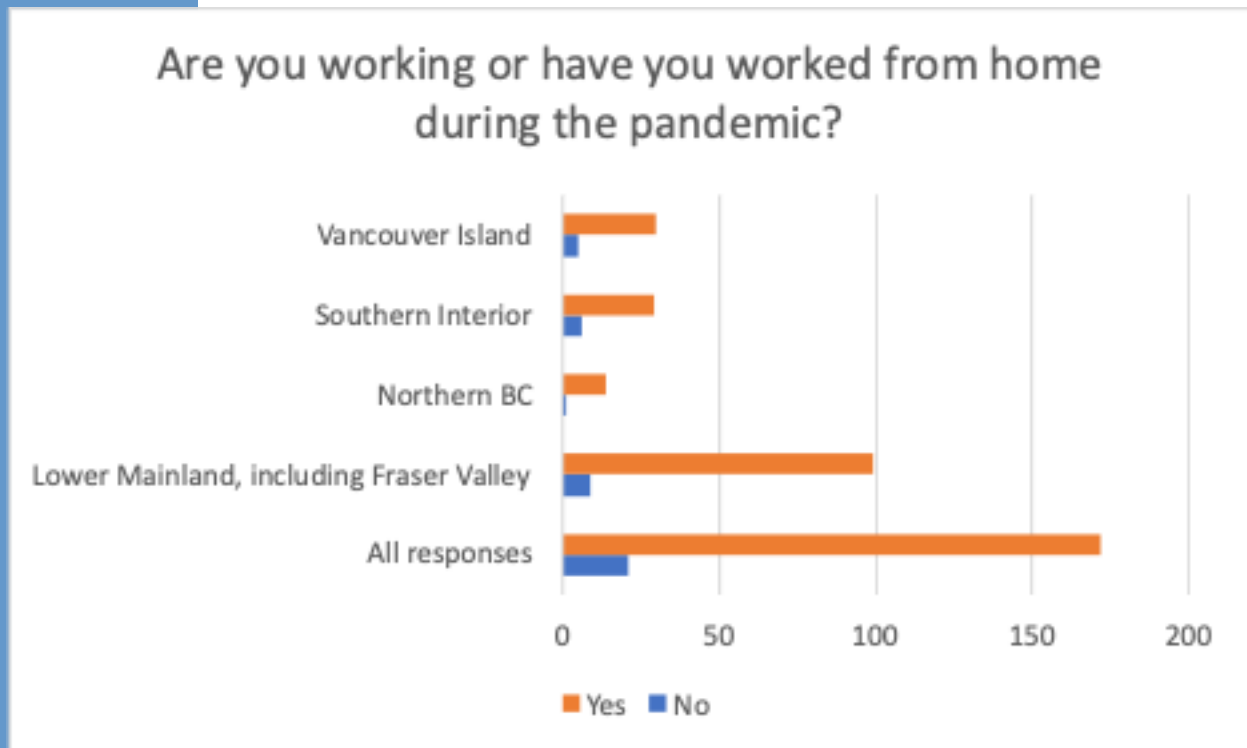
Challenges differ for those that continue to report onsite versus online from home.

*“1/2 of the office is working from home; I’m in the “in-office” group. So I’m still paying full price for things like lunches, parking while 1/2 the group is saving money. It’s frustrating.”*

*“Higher shipping volumes and increased workload. Employer's expectations always seem to be increasing. Also, as a union officer, I have more on my plate with member concerns.”*

## Working from Home

A vast majority of our respondents experienced working from home during the survey period.



In addition to the challenges experiences already shared in the Home Life section above, many women identified challenges with communication, technology, need for ergonomic equipment, and lengthy delays in approval/acquiring proper ergo equipment.

*“I don’t have the support I usually get from asking colleagues how to do things that are new to me. I feel the pressure to keep hours on files low but everything takes longer. I’m so frazzled trying to work without breaks while kids are at school.”*

*“I feel like my supervisor doesn't trust me at all. Questioning from her indicates that she thinks I am not working while at home. I feel she wants to rush me*





*back into the office full-time so that she can have herself and everyone else keep an eye on me."*

*"I have a medical accommodation which was NOT provided by my manager. I gave up and bought my own desk and chair. Other manager in the same area have shipped chairs and sit/stand desks to their employees but not my manager. My union rep wasn't helpful."*

*"I HAVE MORE WORK TO DO AT HOME THAN BEFORE. AND I WAS PROVIDED NO WORKING EQUIPMENT AT ALL. I USE MY OWN, CHAIR, DINNING TABLE, COMPUTER ETC..."*

*"Working longer hours, challenges with technology, difficulty meeting client expectations have increased anxiety-related symptoms."*

Many respondents were also either on special leave or a combination of special leave and working some hours from home.

*"I am constantly in fear of losing 699 time that allows me to keep myself and my family safe."*

*"I don't mind working at home when my children are at daycare, it's near impossible when they are home, I spent many late nights trying to get my work accomplished. I struggle with things like the VPN network that isn't fast enough to load my basic email."*

There was one positive exception to note:

My workplace has been handling the pandemic incredibly well. They've supported each member with work requirements reentering the workplace.

Once challenges such as childcare, communication, and technology were addressed or subsided, often women shared that they enjoyed working from home.

*"I love working from home. I feel I am more productive as there are no distractions. And I'm not as tired because I save time on commute which used to be 1.5 hours per day."*

*"I LOVE working from home. My office at work is in a basement so in our extensive winter months I go to work in the dark, am in florescent lights all day, and go home in the dark. My office at home has windows so I see DAYLIGHT. I am mentally healthier."*

## **Feeling disconnected**

It probably comes as no surprise that most respondents answered that they were feeling disconnected from colleagues. The limitations of technology, the lack of spontaneous conversations at the "water cooler" or in the lunchroom, and/or using breaks to take care of other needs such as childcare were some of the reasons shared.

*"I haven't spoken to another person at work in over 2 weeks. I have connected via email on work-related assignments only."*

*"I feel very lonely but I don't have time to participate in coffee break chats to stay connected as I don't have time to take breaks as otherwise, I won't get the main part of my hours done while kids are at school. My coffee breaks are to drop kids off."*

Ergonomics of working at home: For those working from home, we knew there



would be the possibility of pain or discomfort due to work injuries.

Many shared that the delays in getting proper ergonomic equipment (sometimes taking months) contributed and/or exacerbated injuries for workers.

*"Actually, yes! A lot [of pain and discomfort]. I volunteer to go back to the office specifically for ergonomic reasons."*

Women reported back stiffness; pain; incorrect sitting postures (due to not having access to anything better than a coffee table for a few months); eye soreness from staring and reading small screens; frequent and prolonged headaches; muscle tension; neck pain; wrist pain, and shoulder pain.

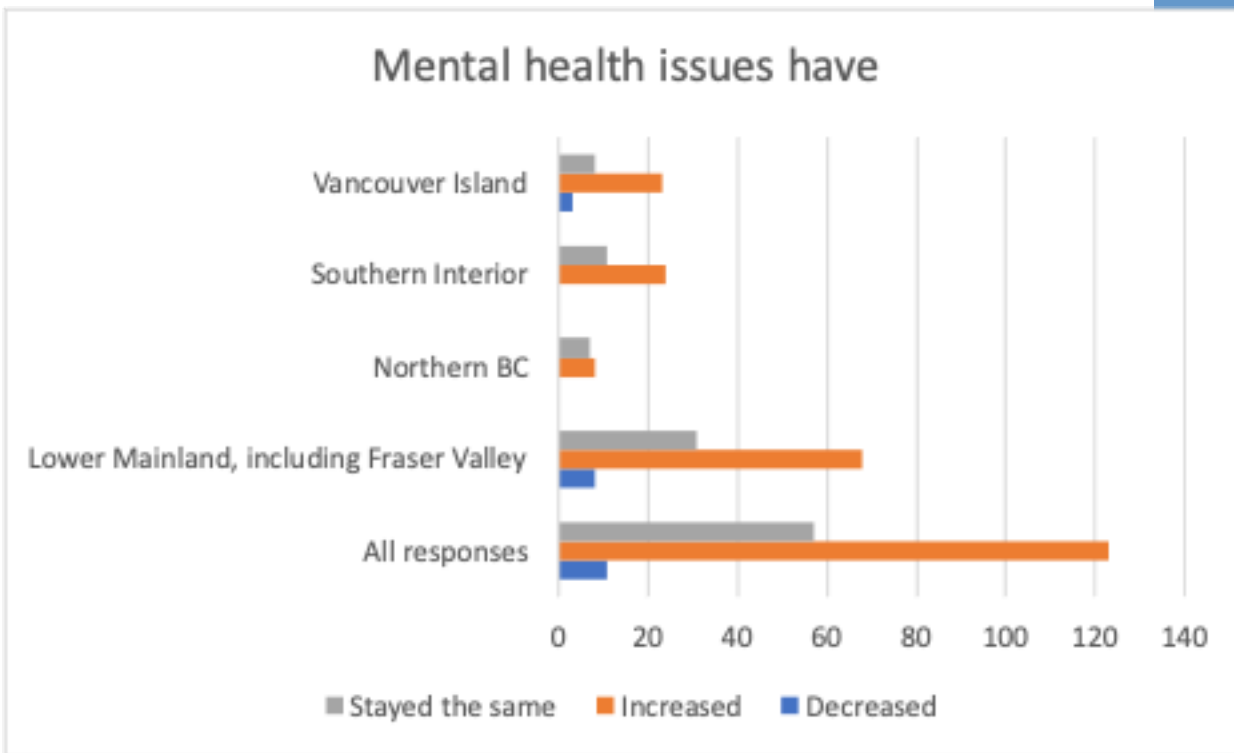
Some women purchased their own equipment for their safety and well-being, out of pocket expenses included laptop, standing desk, laptop stand, and keyboard.

## Health and Well-being

The pandemic continues to impact mental health, use of medications, weight fluctuations, increased experiences with racism, and feelings of isolation and lack of connection with family.

*"I would describe myself as someone with good mental health but lately I've started to feel detached, not interested in making an effort to keep in touch with people, as I literally have no time in my day anyway. It's just too exhausting to add anything more."*





This further compounded affects women were already dealing with in terms of pre-existing mental and physical health issues.

*"[Mental health issues have increased...] again with the worry about my daughter. [Also]...I have [an autoimmune disease and two other chronic diseases]. Stress does not help with any of these. And then being tired and dealing [with it] brings on bouts of depression. I try all day to be bright and cheerful for work people..."*

*"Already suffer from PTSD, pandemic added much more anxiety. Especially when I was out in public at stores."*

Being disconnected with family has had profound impacts on members, especially when grieving loved ones.

*"Cannot attend to ailing family members. Had two deaths in family. Could not properly be present for passing together."*

*"My circle is small, I am not hugging people. Also, family is currently dying and a few friends have had serious mental issues and I cannot really help because of COVID."*

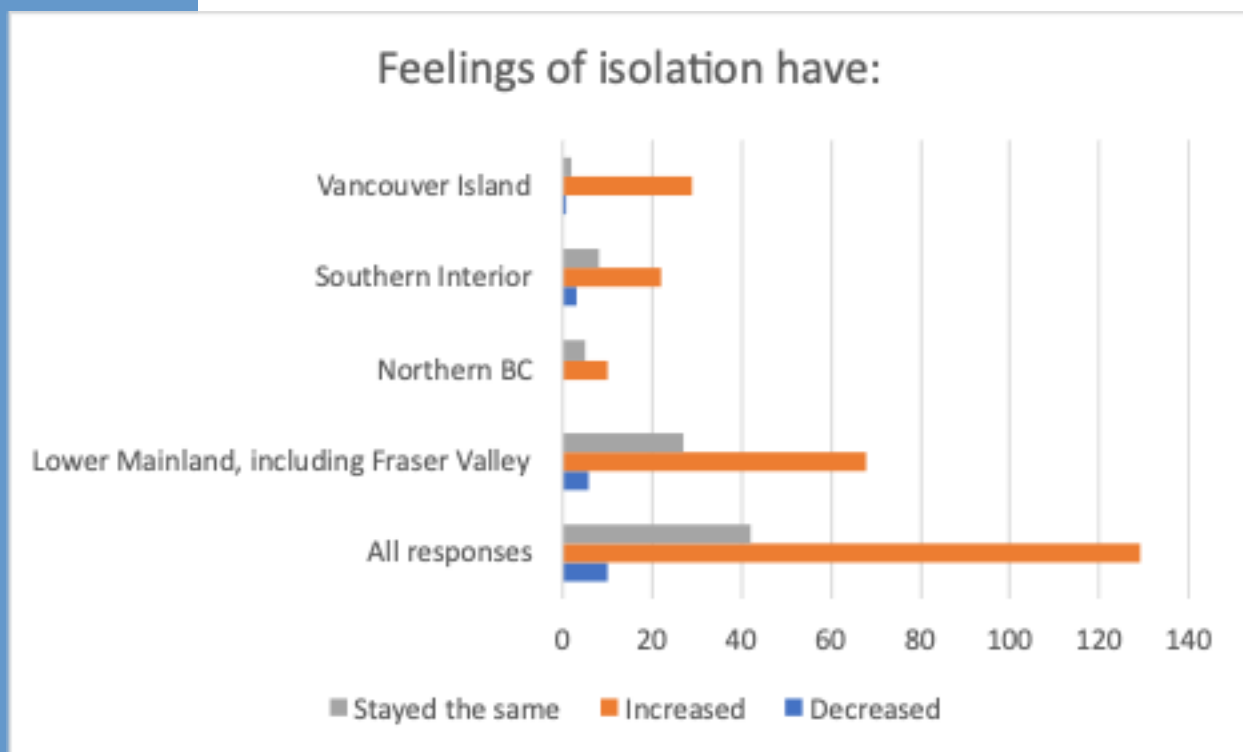
*"I come from a big family, I grew up with nine siblings! We lost our dad last year so I have been feeling disconnected from my siblings."*

Racism experienced and witnessed during the pandemic has been alarming for members.

*"As a white female of European descent, I have not experienced racism myself. However, friends have been impacted by increasingly blatant acts of racism in their work places during the pandemic."*

In B.C. the brunt of the racism has been toward Asians as media reported the pandemic as having originated in China and travelled the world causing havoc everywhere.

*"Taking mandatory anti-racism training at work has been a positive step. I appreciate the employer's efforts in promoting awareness of the issue."*



On isolation: *"85% of my time is just me."*

Women experienced exacerbated feelings of isolation, missing close friends, being able to travel, making spontaneous trips in the neighbourhood and with family.

As a result of this survey, we have identified that improving connectivity, communication, and mental health supports remains a top priority for women.

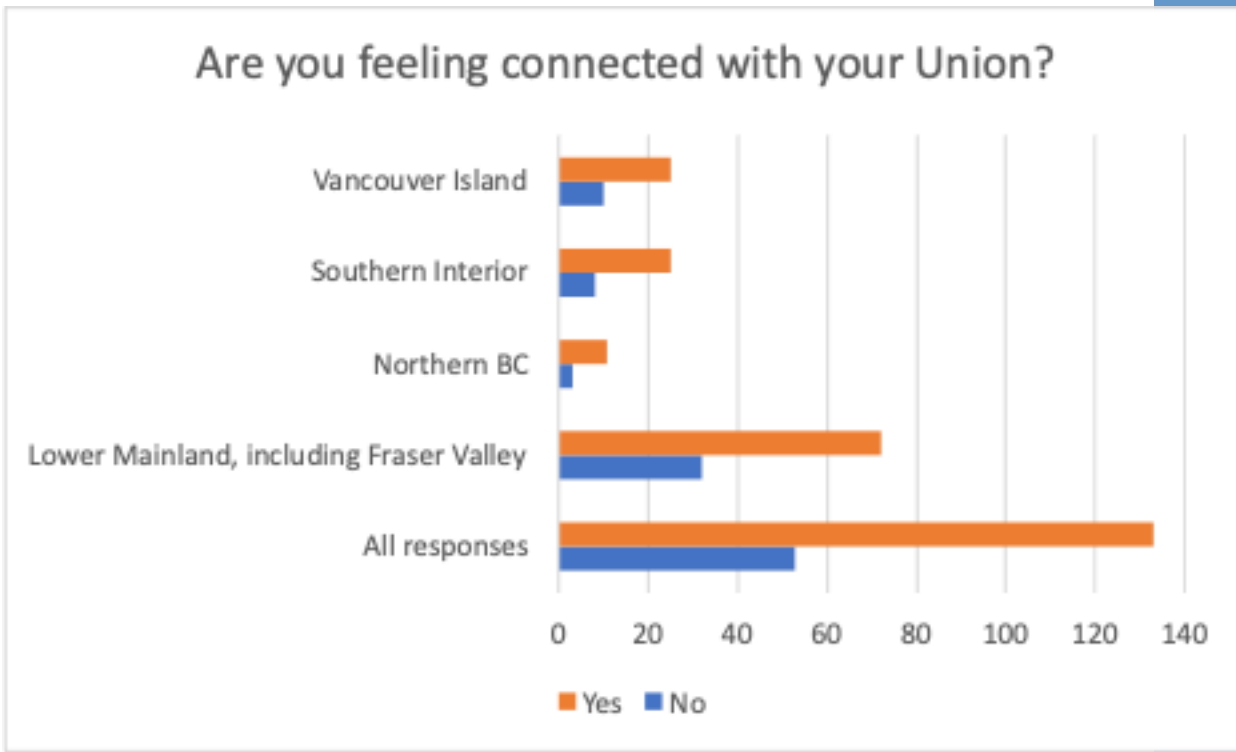
Union Life had four questions. We asked how connected women felt with their Union, if they wanted to know how the Union could support them, if they wanted more information on their geographic women's committee, and also any further suggestions for the survey or impacts that they wanted to share.

Responses on union connection and union support revealed a need for further support, especially at the "Component level." Members have reported needing union support with grievances, 699 leave and pay issues, however, the support at the local levels has been minimal and non-existent. In addition, women reported a need for more Union support around issues such as domestic violence and the Phoenix pay system issues.

Feedback from women includes requests for *"looking at impacts on career advancement of women given the other impacts of increased responsibility of "unseen" household labour."*

Women are requesting more survey questions for women on the front lines who are shouldering more at the workplace and at home, long-term affects of the pandemic, and the continuing struggle of accessing special leave at this time.





## Conclusion

While this survey was meant to be a snapshot in time and limited in length and content, there is much to be taken from both the quantitative and qualitative data that we've gathered. We will continue to work to use the experiences that our PSAC BC women have shared to help guide our women's program in the Region. We have shared the data broken down by geographic areas where our Regional Women's Committees operate and in hopes it will provide them with more data to help analyze and apply to their area.

In summary, the Winter 2020 survey has identified that women need their union in these very challenging times. As a result of this survey, going forward, as the Women's Coordinator, I recommend that as a region, the women's priorities continue to focus on the following:

Education and awareness around domestic violence at home, connectivity, communication and mental health supports as well as long-term impacts of the pandemic, and the continuing struggle of accessing special COVID-19 related leave.

Recommendations from respondents include highlighting family expectation to include ageing parents and seniors in the family.

Thank you to all the women who took part in the Winter 2020 survey, this invaluable contribution will help members across our region and potentially across the nation.

In Solidarity,  
 Kelly Sidhu, PSAC BC Regional Council Women's Co-ordinator