



# MIND THE GAP

**The Post-COVID Gender Gap in Canada's Cities**

CUI Insights: A Conversation Primer | June 2021



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## CANADIAN URBAN INSTITUTE

[CUI is Canada's Urban Institute](#). We are a national platform where policy makers, urban professionals, civic and business leaders, community activists and academics can learn, share and collaborate with one another from coast to coast to coast. Through research, engagement and storytelling, our mission is to support vibrant, equitable, livable and resilient cities in Canada.

## LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

CUI is committed to reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. We acknowledge and respect that our programs are delivered on the territory of many Indigenous Peoples. CUI is headquartered in the City of Toronto, the traditional territory of many Nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands.

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report draws on survey data provided in-kind by Advanis, based on a sample of more than 180,000 Canadians during the pandemic. CUI gratefully acknowledges this contribution and extends thanks to [Advanis](#) for collecting detailed urban-level, racial and ethnic data from the beginning of the pandemic, which is unfortunately not as common in Canada as it should be. Other data sources are referenced throughout.

The cover photo is by [Francesco Mariani](#) titled "Front Line Heroes" (under Creative Commons licence CC BY-NC-ND 2.0), of a mural by [Gosia Komorski](#) (*Frontline Heroes Tribute*, November 2020) located at Dundas Street West and Bloor Street West in Toronto.

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"The people affected most were people of colour and immigrants and all of the people affected most were women.

We're staring down the barrel of an economic depression — and probably a mental depression, too — of a scale we haven't seen in a long time.

**There is no recovery without a she-covery."**

– Economist **Armine Yalnizyan**,  
[CUI CityTalk](#) (July 14, 2020)

More than 19 million women and girls call Canada home. Although gains have been made, they do not enjoy an equal quality of life. Women continue to earn less than men, and are more likely to experience violence, poverty and homelessness. The gap is even greater for Indigenous, Black and racialized women and girls, and those who are part of other equity-seeking groups.

**This was true before the COVID pandemic, and it's even more true today. The COVID pandemic has widened the gender gap in cities across Canada.**

Early in the pandemic, experts began ringing the alarm bells about the highly gendered impacts of the pandemic. Terms like '*she-cession*' and '*she-covey*' became part of the mainstream nomenclature. Collectively, we became aware of the gendered impacts of the pandemic: the overrepresentation of women in healthcare and service occupations, where they faced greater health and safety risks; the enormous unpaid workload, mostly borne by women, of children learning at home; the heightened threat to women and girls experiencing domestic violence during lockdowns and stay-at-home orders.

We also learned about the highly gendered economic impacts. One year into the pandemic, the Statistics Canada Labour Force Survey revealed that:

- Almost half a million Canadian women who initially lost their jobs during the pandemic had yet to return, including 100,000 women who completely exited the labour force (compared to fewer than 10,000 men);
- Twelve times as many mothers with school aged children left their jobs, compared to fathers with school aged children; and
- Young (Gen-Z) women make up 2.5% of the Canadian labour force but account for 17% of the total decline in employment during the pandemic.
- All of these impacts were experienced more profoundly by racialized women. The highest drop in unemployment rate, for example, was experienced by university-educated immigrant women.



Indeed, the consequences of COVID have been severe: a catastrophic loss of life; millions facing illness, including those impacted by a reduction of services available within the healthcare system; global economic contractions and significant employment loss; and mass disruption, uncertainty and chaos. There are gender dimensions to each of these consequences. Some are more obvious and easier to track, like infection rates and job losses; others are less obvious and more difficult to identify.

The World Economic Forum's 2021 [Global Gender Gap Report](#) states the global gender gap has "increased by a generation" over the past year. The report estimates that it will now take 136 years for women to reach parity in terms of economic opportunity, political power, education and health — an increase of 36 years from the 2020 report.

**We have reached a point of crisis. COVID has deepened the gender gap around the world and in Canada — and, has added obstacles to achieving gender equality which will linger in COVID's wake.**

This report provides a snapshot of some of these obstacles, based on a survey of more than 180,000 Canadians conducted and provided in-kind by [Advanis](#). It takes an intentionally intersectional look, including moving beyond the typical binary reporting of gender data.<sup>1</sup> We focus on the less obvious gendered impacts of the pandemic — like more sleepless nights, heightened concern about COVID impacts on others, and greater anxiety around returns to work and school — because they may be important considerations for policy makers and community leaders alike as we emerge from the pandemic.

This report was prepared as a conversation primer. On **Thursday, June 24, 2021**, the Canadian Urban Institute and the Pay Equity Commission of Ontario are hosting two discussions about addressing the post-COVID gender gap in

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<sup>1</sup> This report includes three gender categories: female-identifying, male-identifying, and those who identified as gender non-binary. The sample size of the third category is considerably smaller (n=879) but the data suggests that this group has faced a significantly different COVID experience. For this reason, and because gender is too often presented in binary terms, we have disaggregated this data throughout the report.

Canada's cities. We know conversations about addressing gender inequality are occurring in communities across the country.

This report does not pretend to have all of the answers but instead aims to explore good questions. The COVID pandemic has widened gender gaps in our cities — and we can't wait 136 years to close them.

Addressing gender inequality must be a part of our recovery efforts, and a part of our "new normal." Paying careful attention to where we see gaps emerging, in obvious and less obvious places, is an important place to start.

# The COVID Gender Gap – A Snapshot

COVID is widening the gender gap in Canada's cities. In a survey of more than 180,000 Canadians during the pandemic, female-identifying individuals report ...

84%

Report feeling some sense of despair, or "I don't know when this will end" – an eight-point increase over men

1.5x

More likely to report feeling impacted by the situation of someone close to them (child, elderly relative)

1.5x

More likely to be concerned about going back to work away from home or children returning to school

29%

Feeling concerned about their job being automated after COVID

89%

Report some or strictly practicing social distancing, 7-points higher than male-identifying respondents

1.7x

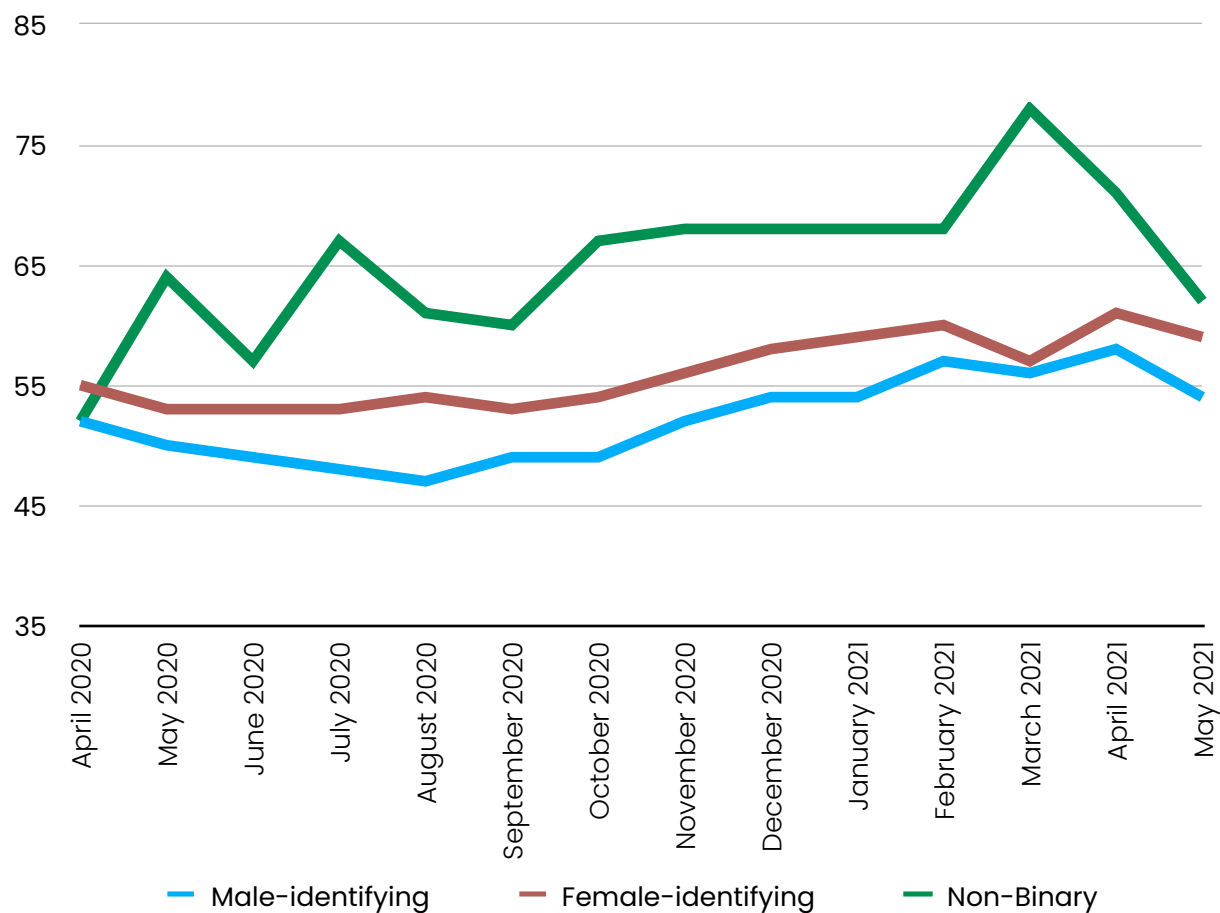
More likely to report having experienced "moments of great anxiety or panic" during the pandemic

# Gender + the COVID experience

Our COVID experiences have depended on who we are and where we live.

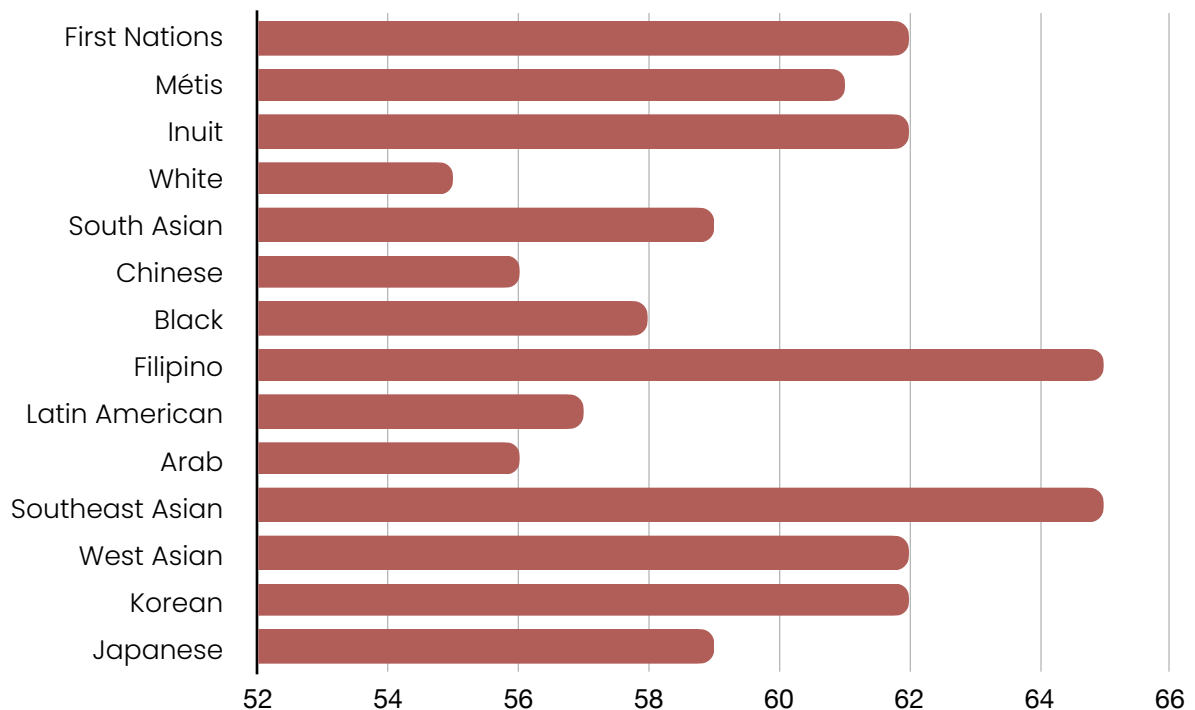
When asked about the impact of the pandemic on one’s own household, more than half of Canadians report a major impact. Overall this number has increased slightly as the pandemic has continued on, only starting to drop off in May 2021. As illustrated in **Chart 1**, female-identify and non-binary respondents are more likely to indicate a major impact -- and this has been true every month of the pandemic thus far.

**Chart 1: Percentage (%) of respondents reporting a major impact of the pandemic on their household, by month**





**Chart 2: Percentage (%) of female-identifying respondents reporting a major impact of the pandemic on their household, by racial or ethnic group**

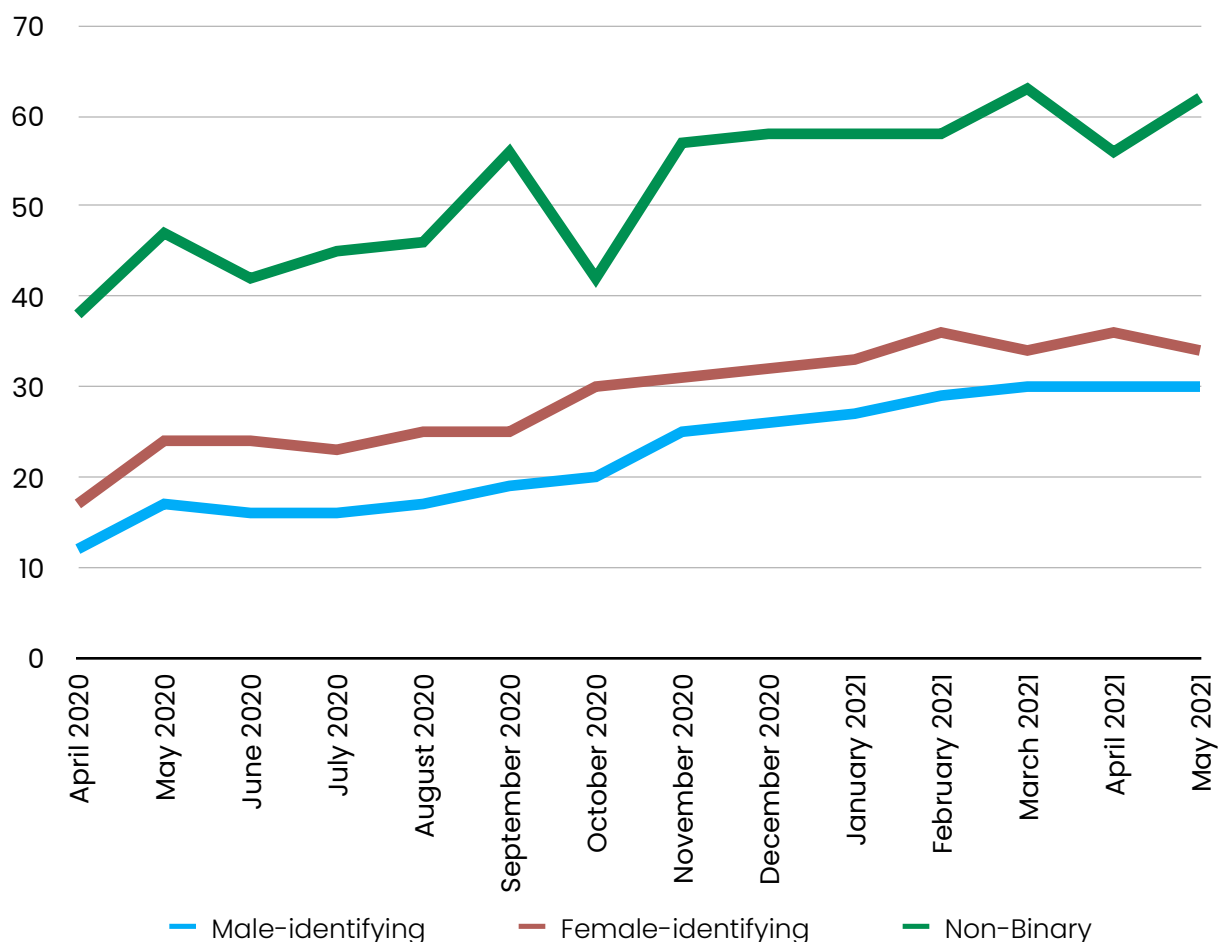


Among female-identifying respondents, there is variation by ethnic and racial group, as illustrated in **Chart 2**. White women are the least likely to report a major impact on their household; Filipino and Southeast Asian respondents are most likely to report a major impact.

What are these household impacts? They vary widely depending on the household. Sometimes the impacts are economic, such as a job loss; sometimes they are about the wellbeing of those in the household. Gender gaps emerge across the board.

When asked about the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of the household, 64% non-binary and 46% female-identifying report a major impact – compared to 39% male-identifying individuals. Importantly, a significant gender gap also emerges when Canadians assess their own mental health.

**Chart 3: Percentage (%) of respondents reporting low assessments (“fair” or “poor”) of their own mental health, by month**

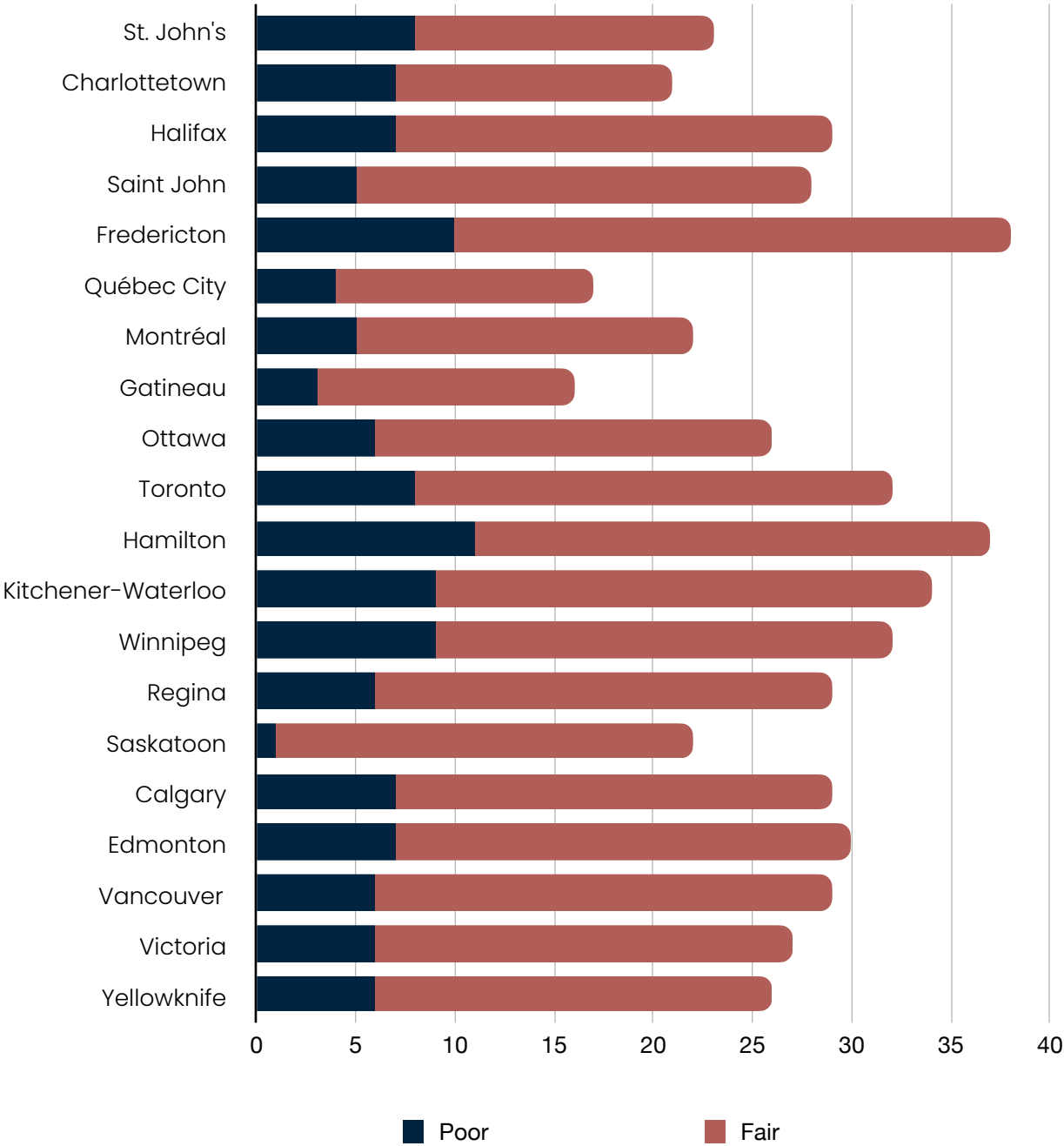


Self-reported mental health assessments have worsened over the course of the pandemic. As illustrated in **Chart 3**, the gender gap is clear. Female-identifying individuals have worse self-reported mental health than male-identifying individuals – and non-binary individuals report considerably worse assessments of their own mental health.

In April 2020, 19% of all female-identifying respondents reported their mental health to be “excellent” and 33% reported it to be “very good.” By May 2021, these numbers dropped to 12% and 22% respectively.

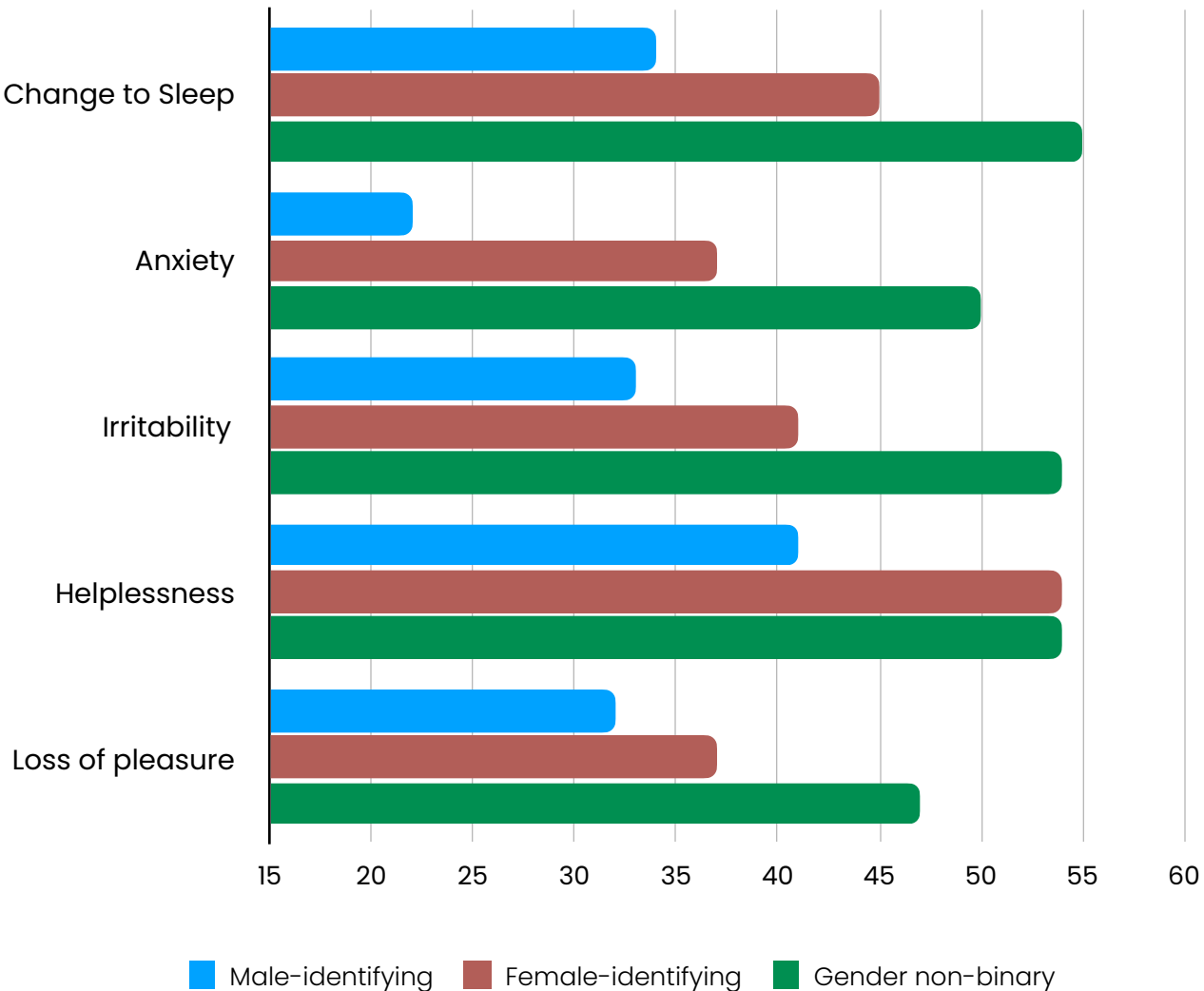
There are some important differences by community as well. Overall, 29% of female-identifying urban dwellers report worse (“fair” or “poor”) self-evaluated mental health scores compared to rural residents (24%). **Chart 4** presents these scores for a sample of 20 Canadian cities.

**Chart 4: Percentage (%) of female-identifying respondents reporting lower (“fair” or “poor”) own mental health, by city**



The heightened stress of the pandemic has translated into very real day-to-day impacts, as captured in **Chart 5**. A gender gap is evident when asked about feeling “moments of great anxiety or panic,” “feeling more irritable or having moments or anger that you did not have before,” “feeling helpless towards the situation” and a “loss of interest and pleasure in daily activities.” For example, 45% of female-identifying respondents report some change in the quality or duration of their sleep during the pandemic – compared to 34% of male-identifying respondents. The number is even higher for gender non-binary respondents at 55%.

**Chart 5: Percentage (%) of female-identifying respondents reporting changes in sleep or feelings during the pandemic, by gender category**



# Questions for Consideration

- What do we know today about gender and COVID — and **what don't we know?** What information do policy and decision makers need to be able to fully understand the gendered impacts of the pandemic?
- How can we integrate **intersectional lenses** into how we pursue recovery and the “new normal” — and what kinds of information, expertise and/or lived experience do we need to understand in order to do this?
- Many communities have endured **added layers of trauma** through horrific incidents which have also occurred during the pandemic. Addressing multiple forms of oppression is an essential part of addressing gender inequality. How can we pursue trauma-informed approaches, and what does this look like at the local level?
- The **communities where we live** have a profound impact on our quality of life — but the local level of government is often overlooked in discussions about addressing gender gaps in Canada. What can community leaders do to address gender inequality? What institutional, economic, political and social changes are needed at the local level?
- What are the most promising **big ideas** or policy changes that are being tried elsewhere — in other communities, in other cultures, in other countries — that local leaders in Canada should be considering?
- How can we **rise to this moment** and lead change when (and let's be honest here) it's been a long, hard year and we're all just so darn tired?

## Critical Conversations

What must communities across Canada do to not only recover the progress we have lost, but emerge from COVID with a renewed commitment to gender equality? What kind of leadership will be needed — from governments, from the private sector, from civil society — to meaningfully address the gender gap in communities across the country as we emerge from this global crisis?

**Join us on Thursday, June 24, 2021 for two important conversations on these critical questions, hosted jointly by the Canadian Urban Institute and the Pay Equity Commission of Ontario. These conversations have been made possible through the generous support of [Libro Credit Union](#).**



### Addressing Canada's Post-COVID Gender Gap

This first event sets a strong context, providing a close and personal look at the gender gap in Canada from multiple perspectives. This panel takes an intersectional look at what we know today, and what decision makers need to be most concerned about as we recover from the pandemic.

**11:30–12:30pm EST || [Register here](#)**



### Big Ideas to Close the Gap

What are the big ideas and specific policy actions that will be needed to close Canada's gender gap? This series of rapid-fire provocations provides a summary of what advocates, experts and policy makers in Canada should explore to improve the wellbeing of women and girls across the country.

**1:00–2:30pm EST || [Register here](#)**





**“Women, work and equity are at the core of innovation, inclusive prosperity and the way forward out of this recession.** As Canada’s gender gap widens with this pandemic, we must ask critical questions about what communities across Canada can and *must* do to close our gender gap.”

– Ontario Pay Equity  
Commissioner **Kadie Ward**



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