



**City for All Women Initiative (CAWI)**  
**Initiative : une ville pour toutes les femmes (IVTF)**  
*Promoting an inclusive and women-friendly Ottawa that respects diversity*  
*Pour qu'Ottawa soit respectueuse de la diversité, inclusive et accueillante pour les femmes*  
[www.cawi-ivtf.org](http://www.cawi-ivtf.org)

## Open Letter Calling for a Gendered Response to COVID-19

Dear Mayor Watson and Members of City Council,

The City for All Women Initiative (CAWI) is increasingly concerned about the lack of an Equity and Inclusion Lens in the City's emergency responses to COVID-19. While the City has taken various positive steps, such as including diverse voices in emergency response planning, women continue to fall through the cracks.

The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women, and particularly women experiencing socio-economic marginalization, is well-documented in research [from Canada](#) and [around the world](#). In these unprecedented circumstances, CAWI urges the City to apply an intersectional gender Equity and Inclusion Lens to all phases of planning and implementation of the City's emergency response. This will ensure that any emergency response takes into consideration the full diversity of women, men, and gender-diverse people.

We propose the following steps to help women whose vulnerabilities have worsened during COVID-19:

### Implement Emergency Measures for Women experiencing Gender-Based Violence

We are hearing of an increase in domestic violence exacerbated by isolation measures. With the Violence Against Women (VAW) sector functioning at capacity, our community partners fear that women and children in crisis will not have anywhere to go for a long time.

- *While helplines and providing a first point-of-contact are critical, CAWI calls on the City to create an Action Plan to protect women at increased risk of domestic violence. Specifically:*
  - *coordinate a multi-stakeholder response to the increased risk of gender-based violence*
  - *work across departments and organizations to identify core needs*
  - *adequately house the overflow of women fleeing violence*

### Ensure safe, adequate, and secure access to housing and other critical needs of women experiencing homelessness

The City laudably declared a housing crisis earlier this year – now more than ever it is clear that **housing is healthcare**. We consistently hear from women that COVID-19 has led to job losses, financial difficulties, and reduced capacity for rent, food, medicine, and other essential services. Moreover, women are [disproportionately affected by hidden homelessness](#) putting them at a greater risk of exposure to COVID-19.

- *CAWI calls on the City to adequately house individuals experiencing addictions and/or homelessness in safe spaces where they can practice physical distancing and access critical services.*
- *We urge the City to follow the [example set by Toronto](#) and acquire hotels and rental buildings to house the homeless population.*
- *We call on the City to offer critical services such as public handwashing stations, food and medicine services, and testing services for individuals experiencing homelessness in Ottawa.*
- *We urge the City to take a gendered look at critical service delivery; for instance, ensuring sex trade workers have continued access to supports such as food and pregnancy tests.*

It is important that critical services be built in community organizations and frontline service workers, [rather than police and law enforcement agencies](#) as that might deter individuals, particularly racialized individuals, from accessing these services.

### **Recognize the Gendered Division of Labour and Support Women in Precarious Jobs**

We are hearing from personal support workers, cashiers, and cleaners – all disproportionately women – with low wages and no benefits who are now deemed essential. Women also continue to shoulder a larger burden of care for their families, making them particularly vulnerable. Self-isolation and social distancing recommendations place care-givers, housing, and neighbourhoods at the forefront of Ottawa's public health campaign to combat COVID-19. This highlights the importance of community-level planning for a city that takes care work seriously, both in the short- and long-term.

- *CAWI calls on the City to invest in critical services such as mental health resources and childcare supports, particularly for single mothers and women who provide essential services in our communities.*
- *We call on the City to follow examples set by [Edmonton](#) and [other municipalities](#) across Canada and provide free and accessible transit for those who continue to rely on public transit to commute to work and fulfil their caregiving responsibilities in their family.*
- *We ask the City to take an equitable approach to recreation, considering how public green space may be safely made available for people without access to the outdoors, and [supporting calls](#) for the Province to include community gardens, which feed vulnerable families, among essential services.*

### **Provide Equitable Access to Information and Services**

We hear from women living on low-income or experiencing homelessness who have limited access to updated information, compounded by language barriers and the lack of access to phone, internet, or computer. As information changes daily, access to trustworthy information is essential.

- *We call on the City to improve access to information online and through radio, TV, print, and bus ads, for example, and to make information available in multiple languages for diverse language speakers.*

We have seen some great leadership in gender equality from the City, but more needs to be done. The City of Ottawa's response to the COVID-19 crisis pivots around the key pillars of a resilient, equitable, and inclusive city. We encourage the city to recognize the importance of these pillars and to fully integrate them into all aspects of the new Official Plan and its related policies. We urge you to work with other levels of government to ensure a basic standard of living for all. We need to work together to ensure that these measures are not just applied during situations of crisis, but that our long-depleted social infrastructure gets much needed investment and growth so that pandemics and other crises do not have such a strong impact on our society in the future.

We look forward to working with you on this.

Sincerely,



Valerie Stam (Executive Director)

with Khulud Baig (Community Engagement Coordinator) and the CAWI Board of Directors: Sado Ibrahim, Anita James, Kelsey Lemon, Jenny Gullen, Delores Peltier-Corkey, Valérie Assoi, Andrea Balfour, Patricia Harewood, Jill Wigle, Pascasie Minani, and Zainab Muse.