

JANUARY 2024

A PARADOX IN COVID-19 PANDEMIC RECOVERY

Increased precarity of women hotel workers in British Columbia

Alice Mūrage, Stefanie Machado, Alexandra Selinger,
Michelle Travis, and Julia Smith

A paradox in COVID-19 pandemic recovery

Increased precarity of women hotel workers in British Columbia

Executive summary 3

Introduction 7

Industry characteristics and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic 9

Methodology 17

Demographics of project participants 17

Results 19

Pandemic's economic impacts offloaded onto workers 19

A choice between safety and livelihoods in the first year of the pandemic 24

High workloads and the labour shortage paradox 26

Health impacts of heavy workloads 31

Case study 1: Seeking redress for high workload through WorkSafeBC 36

Value and strength through communities of care 37

Conclusion 42

Recommendations 43

Notes 47



CCPA
CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
CENTRE CANADIEN
de POLITIQUES ALTERNATIVES



BEYOND
RECOVERY | TOWARD A
GENDER-JUST
ECONOMY

ISBN 978-1-77125-672-8

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives is an independent policy research organization. This report has been subjected to peer review and meets the research standards of the Centre. The opinions and recommendations in this report, and any errors, are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the funders of this report.

Acknowledgements

This project was made possible through a partnership with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, UNITE HERE Local 40, and Simon Fraser University's Pacific Institute on Pathogens, Pandemics and Society. Alicia Massie assisted in analysing data by Statistics Canada and WorkSafeBC which provided important context to our research. Special thanks to the CCPA team for sharing their perspectives throughout the project: Shannon Daub, Katherine Scott, Bill Kilgannon, Iglia Ivanova and Véronique Sioufi.

Beyond Recovery: Priorities for supporting women and the economy

A paradox in COVID-19 pandemic recovery is part of a larger project, Beyond Recovery, which is working to support and advance a gender-just recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The project's goals are to document and analyze women's experiences, with a particular focus on those of marginalized women in hard-hit sectors, and to provide evidence-based policy proposals to ensure those who are most impacted in this pandemic are front and centre in Canada's post-pandemic future.

This project has been funded in part by Women and Gender Equality Canada.



Women and Gender
Equality Canada

Femmes et Égalité
des genres Canada



About the authors

Alice Mûrage, Alexandra Selinger and Julia Smith are researchers with the Pacific Institute on Pathogens, Pandemics and Society (PIPPS) and the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University. Julia Smith leads PIPPS' Health and Social Inequities Theme, which aims to identify health and social inequities associated with infectious disease events and assist in identifying promising policy approaches to prevent or reduce risk of social and economic inequities in future pandemics. Michelle Travis is the research director of UNITE HERE Local 40, a union representing workers throughout B.C., most of whom work in the accommodation and food services sector. Stefanie Machado is a post-doctoral fellow with the Centre for Gender and Sexual Health Equality and contributed as a research assistant on this project.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THIS REPORT DOCUMENTS THE experiences of women hotel workers—a group of women who have been deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic but rarely represented in media, research or policy debates. It draws on focus groups and interviews with 27 women hotel workers in B.C., the majority of whom are immigrant and racialized women. Their lived experiences illustrate how pandemic responses initiated changes in the hotel sector that interacted with pre-existing inequities, challenging labour conditions and a devaluing of care work. This has led to ongoing negative effects on their health and livelihoods, with little regard for their contributions to hospitality and tourism industries, which represent a significant source of national revenue. Their lived experience further points to how industry leaders and policy-makers might better support the empowerment of women hotel workers, thus contributing to gender equity and more resilient hospitality and tourism sectors.

All women hotel workers engaged in this project spoke of employment and financial loss due to pandemic closures and travel restrictions. Some were subsequently terminated, while others returned to an increasingly precarious work environment. Loss of income and employment over the course of the pandemic, particularly in 2020, translated into moderate to extreme financial hardship for women hotel workers. Workers narrated their struggles meeting basic needs, pointing to increased food and housing insecurity. Health-related expenditures created additional financial pressure for workers whose employment had been terminated and consequently lost their extended health benefits. Within a context of

high inflation and rising housing costs, this caused significant negative social and health effects on women workers.

Many employers did not ensure safe workplaces for returning workers. During the first year of the pandemic and subsequent waves, workers described being fearful of contracting COVID-19 due to a lack of personal protective equipment supplies and inconsistent implementation of public health guidelines. Concurrently, they reported increased harassment and abuse from customers and a lack of support from managers and employers. Workers expressed an awareness that their devaluation emanated both from their occupation and their identity as racialized and immigrant women.

Further, employer strategies to cut costs—including through reducing cleaning services, increasing flexibilization of labour, and understaffing—increased precarity of workers and already heavy workloads. Meanwhile, staffing shortages due to understaffing, low pay, and challenging working conditions further increased workloads. Employers downloaded pandemic risks onto their workers through labour flexibilization strategies, which translated into increased on-call work. Women hotel workers narrated that they were expected to come into work on short notice. Due to the unpredictable work scheduling and consequent unreliable income, some workers were forced to take on other jobs to supplement their income. Workers' narratives make clear that labour shortages reported by the hotel industry are, at least partly, self-induced for the purposes of cutting hotel operating costs.

Women hotel workers described how increased precarity and high workloads negatively affected their physical and mental health. Workers took disability leave because of work-related physical injuries and some suffered re-injury due to persistent unsafe work conditions. Increased workloads meant that workers, in a rush to finish assigned tasks during their shift, were less likely to use support equipment, such as props for kneeling when cleaning bathtubs. Workers were forced to make the impossible choice between their safety and their livelihoods. The industry is on a trajectory to drive more workers away from the sector unless steps are taken to meaningfully improve working conditions. Strategies initially adopted to cushion the industry from pandemic losses persist, even as revenue levels recover.

In the face of precarity, before and during the pandemic, workers drew together for validation and strength from each other, creating communities of care in their workplace. They shared how co-workers became akin to family. The women hotel workers narrated a myriad of scenarios where they drew strength from each other when they felt

disposable, and devalued and unappreciated by their employers and managers. As union members, many of them participated in labour actions during the pandemic, including protests and strikes, to win back their job, to secure stronger workload protections, and to push back against industry efforts to roll back wages and lower working conditions standards. They put a spotlight on an industry that treats workers like they are disposable, where employers do not respect or support unionization of their workers.

The report makes the following recommendations to safeguard workers' rights:

Secure recall rights: Governments should safeguard workers' right to recall in case of layoff during health or other emergencies. This can be done by providing protection through the *Employment Standards Act* and other policies or guidance. Both levels of government should enforce recall as a condition for extending emergency benefits to employers who furlough or lay off workers.

Address income insecurity: The accommodation and food services sector and hotel industry employers should provide their workers full-time employment with regular work schedules and abandon cost-minimizing strategies that contribute to income insecurity among workers. Where scheduling changes are necessary, employers should provide workers with reasonable advanced notice. The provincial government should protect workers from income precarity by introducing a predictive scheduling regulation that limits on-call scheduling.

Enable affordability: The provincial government should work towards increasing the minimum wage to a living wage so that salaries better align with actual cost of living. The federal government should support retirement security by further enhancing the Canada Pension Plan (to reduce reliance on private savings) and income support for low-income seniors through increases to the GIS top-up for both single seniors and couples. The accommodation and food services sector and hotel industry employers should commit to becoming certified living wage employers and to reduce the gender wage gap. Employers should further provide benefits that reduce the financial burden of workers, including transit subsidies.

Safeguard workers' rights: Employers in the accommodation and food services sector and hotel industry should establish safe and manageable workloads in collaboration with workers and unions, to be actively monitored and updated. Employers should further ensure workers receive periodic training on work safety, including the use of ergonomic measures and tools and taking breaks between tasks. Employers should

fulfil their responsibility of ensuring all workers are aware of their rights, including the right to safe workplaces, to take breaks, to unionize, and to seek redress where their rights are not upheld. The provincial government should improve enforcement of work safety employment standards.

Safeguard workers' health and well-being: In addition to the above recommendations to ensure safe and manageable workloads and offering periodic safety trainings, the accommodation and food services sector and hotel industry employers should provide all workers—full-time and part-time—with extended health benefits that include physiotherapy treatment and mental health support. Further, the industry and employers should implement permanent employer-paid sick leave for all workers to supplement the government's paid sick leave for workers who might not qualify for disability leave benefits.

INTRODUCTION

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAD unprecedented impacts on the livelihood of Canadians and the country's economy. In particular, during and following the March 2020 economic shutdown, women, racialized workers, and immigrant workers were disproportionately impacted by loss of employment and income.¹ In the first two months, the drastic employment loss among women was noted to be at "a level not seen in over 40 years."² Women were pushed out of the labour market due to both layoffs and demands of unmet caregiving needs following closures of childcare and educational facilities.³ While women made up 47 per cent of all workers in Canada in 2020, they accounted for 63 per cent of employment loss.⁴ By December 2020, there were 90,000 fewer women in the labour market compared to February 2020.⁵ The pandemic thus highlighted the vulnerability of women workers to economic downturns resulting from health emergencies because of their occupations in the labour market (gendered care and service work), their conditions of work (precarious part-time, temporary, or contract work), and their roles in the home (gendered unpaid care work).

Many of these dynamics are a continuation of pre-pandemic gender norms that systemically devalue women's paid and unpaid care work. Care work, broadly conceptualized, is work that contributes to the health, well-being or development of other people and includes both nurturance 'hands on' caregiving and reproductive labour including cleaning, cooking, and other non-relational tasks.⁶ Employment of women workers in Canada parallels traditional gender roles, with their greatest participation in the health care and social assistance, educational services, and accommodation and food services sectors. They are also predominantly employed in occupations involving caring, clerical, catering, cashiering, and cleaning;⁷ occupations that are typically

low paying. Even within these occupation groups, men earn more than women in almost every group, including in traditionally female occupations: On average, women in Canada earn 89 cents for every dollar earned by men among workers aged 25 to 54 years.⁸ Women are also more likely to be employed in precarious work (part-time, temporary, and low paying).

While media and policy discussions on the gendered effects of COVID-19 highlighted the experiences of women health care workers and those dealing with care burdens while working from home, less attention was paid to those in the private sector, front-facing service industries who, in addition to facing the challenges of employment loss and increased care burden, also contended with ongoing structural inequities related to precarious work and discrimination. Many workers in the service sector are racialized, immigrant, and migrant workers who face additional barriers in the labour market related to educational requirements and systemic and inter-personal racism.⁹ Such women are more likely to be employed in part-time, short-tenure and low-income jobs, which were disproportionately affected by the pandemic.¹⁰ Within sectors, occupational hierarchies are characterized by gender disparities and disparities associated with immigration status and race or ethnicity. White women advancing in the occupational hierarchies were, and continue to be, replaced by immigrant, and often racialized, women in most devalued care work, such as custodial and food service roles.¹¹

As the government and industry leaders reflect on lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic experiences and strategize on resilience and preparedness for future pandemics and economic downturns, it is important that the voices and experiences of all women workers, particularly those facing multiple inequities and who are most affected, are placed at the centre of policy discussion. This report documents the experiences of women hotel workers—a group of women deeply affected by the pandemic but rarely represented in media, research or policy debates. Reflecting the demographics of the workforce, this report is based on research primarily with immigrant and racialized women who are unionized and whose occupations are gendered and low paying. Their lived experiences illustrate how the pandemic response initiated changes in the hotel sector that interacted with pre-existing inequities, challenging labour conditions and a devaluing of care work to have ongoing negative effects on their health and livelihood, with little regard for their contributions to hospitality and tourism sectors, which represent a significant source of national revenue. They highlighted the significance of having a union in their workplace. Their lived experience further

points to how industry leaders and policymakers might better support the empowerment of women hotel workers, thus contributing to gender equity and more resilient hospitality and tourism sector.

INDUSTRY CHARACTERISTICS AND IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The accommodation and food services (AFS) sector is an important contributor to the economy and labour market in Canada and the province of British Columbia (B.C.). Business in the sector is intertwined with tourism and hospitality activities; it caters to the accommodation, nutritional, and entertainment needs of travellers. Tourism is a major driver of B.C.'s economy. In 2019, for instance, tourism was a larger contributor to the province's GDP than primary resource sectors, such as mining and oil and gas extraction.¹² Despite the pandemic, it has remained a top contributor.¹³ A third of tourism revenue in 2019 was derived from the AFS sector: accommodation room revenues alone generated \$3.2 billion across the province.¹⁴ The sector is also an important employer: It represents over five per cent and nearly seven per cent of the employment share in Canada and British Columbia, respectively.¹⁵

The AFS sector comprises two related but distinct subsectors: accommodation services as well as food services and drinking places. The accommodation services subsector is classified into three industry groups: traveller accommodation, recreational vehicle (RV) parks and recreational camps, and rooming and boarding houses. This research project is particularly concerned with experiences of workers under the traveller accommodation industry group, which include establishments providing short-term accommodation for travellers and others, such as hotels, resorts, motels, casino hotels, and cabins.¹⁶ Industry characteristics below will highlight data related to the AFS sector in general, the accommodation services subsector (representing 14 per cent of all employment in the AFS sector), and the traveller accommodation industry group (representing 86 per cent of all employment in the accommodation services subsector).

Labour characteristics¹⁷

Female, immigrant, part-time, and young (15-24 years) workers are overrepresented in the accommodation and food services (AFS) sector. Despite female workers representing 48 per cent of workers in Canada, they represented 56 per cent of workers in the AFS sector in 2022.

Table 1 Labour characteristics comparisons, Canada, 2022

	All sectors	AFS sector	Accommodation services subsector	Traveller accommodation industry group
Women workers	47.6%	55.7%	57.4%	57.8%
Immigrant workers	26.7%	32.5%	31.9%	36.0%
Part-time workers	16.8%	47.4%	23.9%	24.9%
Young workers (15-24 years)	13.3%	44.3%	*	*
Older workers (55 years and over)	21.6%	11.9%	25.5%	24.5%

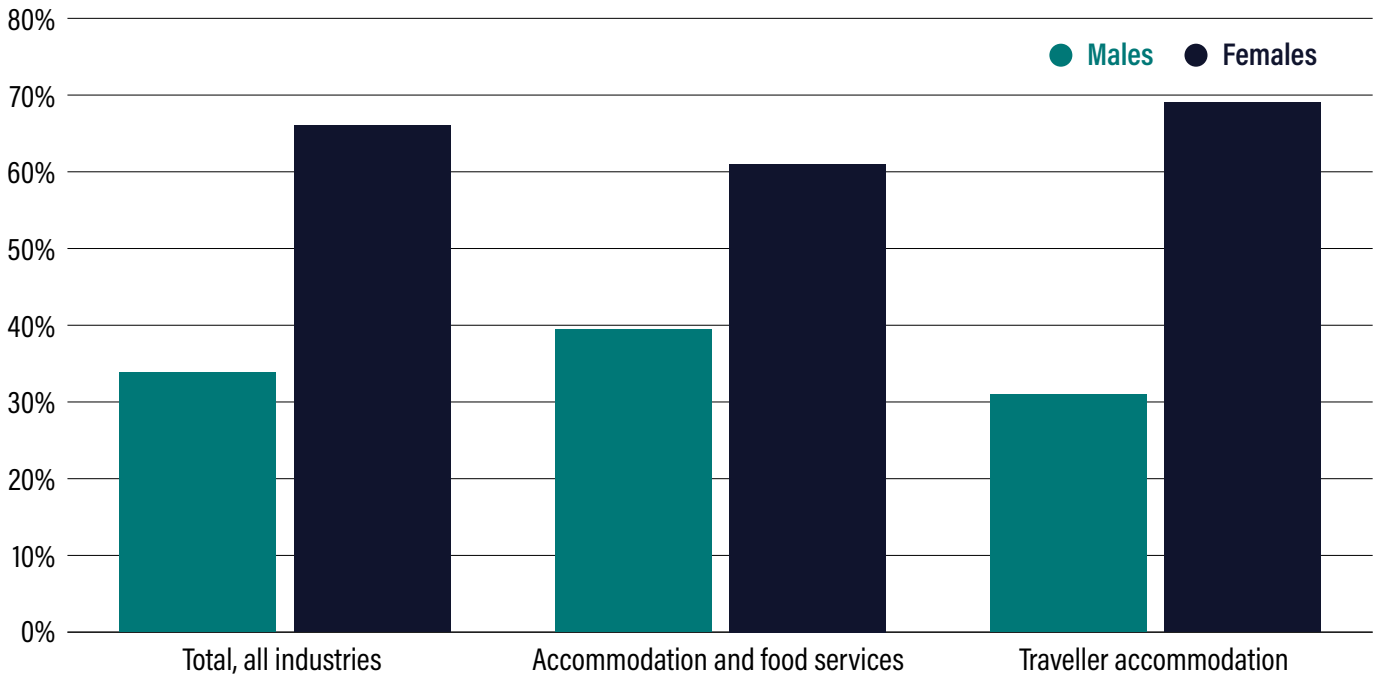
* Data not accessed. AFS: Accommodation and food services sector.

Source Statistics Canada, 2023, Table 0922_01: Employed population by industry, North American Industry Classifications (NAICS) 2017, type of work, immigrant status and period of immigration, wages, presence of children and age of youngest child, age and sex, Canada, annual average, 2019 and 2022 (persons x 1,000 unless otherwise stated) [custom order] and Statistics Canada, 2023, Table 14-10-0023-01—Labour force characteristics by industry, annual (x1000).

Similarly, while immigrant workers represent 27 per cent of all workers, they make up 33 per cent of workers in the AFS sectors. In 2022, part-time workers were also overrepresented, at 47 per cent in the AFS sector compared to 17 per cent of all workers in Canada (see Table 1). The traveller accommodation industry group has a higher percentage of older women and immigrant workers compared to the AFS sector in general. Notably, the percentage of accommodation services workers who are older (55 years and over) is higher, at 26 per cent, compared to older workers in the whole AFS sector, at 12 per cent, and older workers across all industries, at 22 per cent (see Table 1). The lower percentage of older workers in the AFS sector is due to the unique demographic of workers in food services and drinking places, where only 10 per cent workers are 55 years and over. Further, workers in accommodation services and traveller accommodation are more likely to be employed full-time compared to other workers in the AFS sector, albeit still in a lower percentage compared to workers in all sectors. Of part-time workers, the overwhelming majority are women: 69 per cent of part-time workers in the traveller accommodation industry group and 61 per cent of part-time workers in the AFS sector (see Figure 1).

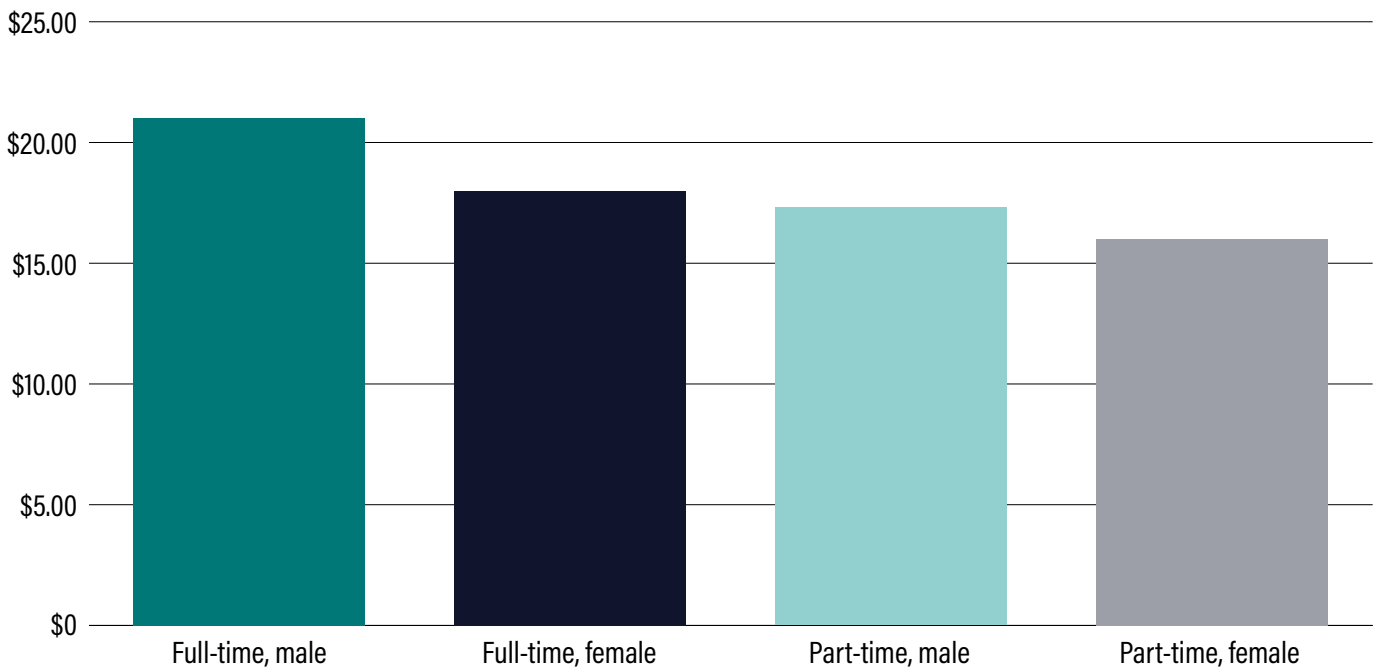
Employment in the AFS sector is characterized by low wages. The median gross hourly wage of workers in the traveller accommodation industry group in 2022 was \$18.50/hour compared to \$27/hour for all workers across all industries. This is, however, slightly higher than overall AFS sector wages, at \$16/hour, reflecting even lower wages among workers in the food services industry. Women workers earn less than their men counterparts. In the traveller accommodation industry group, the median gross hourly wage of male workers was \$2.09 higher than that of women workers in 2022: \$20 for men and \$17.91 for women.¹⁸ Part-

Figure 1 Percentage of part-time employees by sex and industry group, Canada, 2022



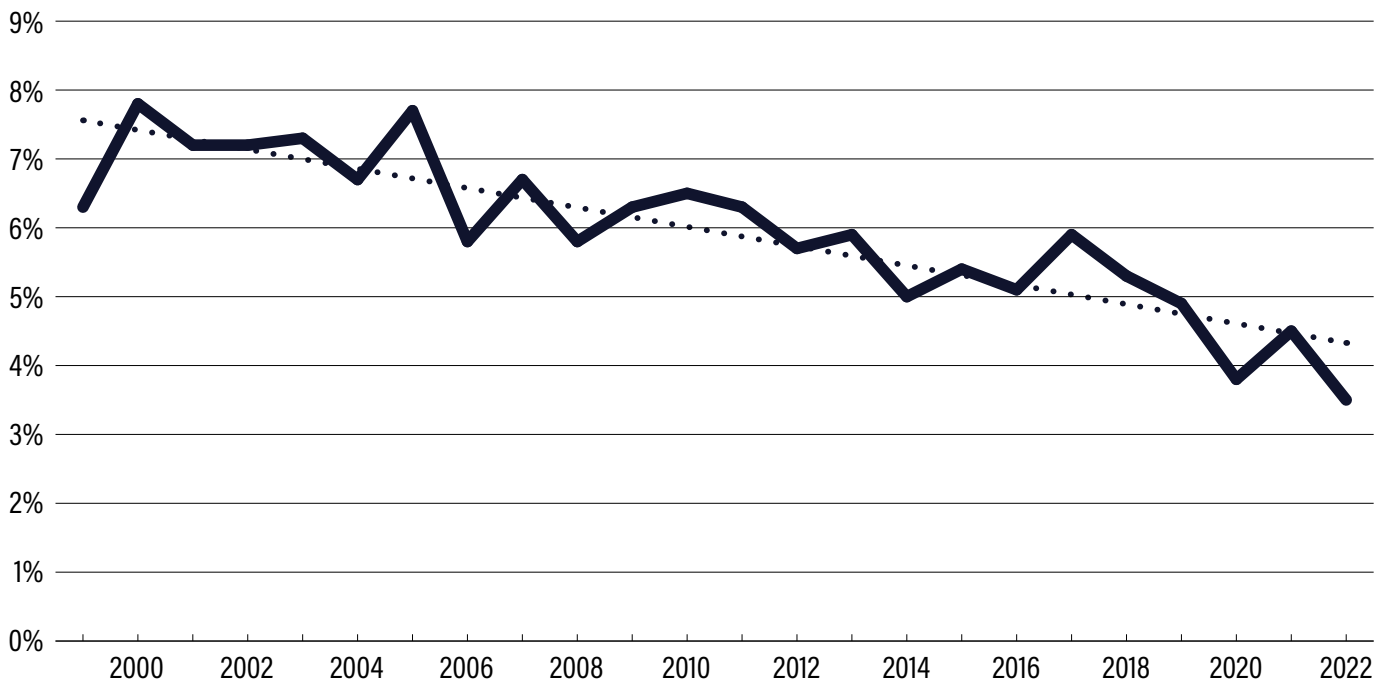
Source: Statistics Canada, 2023, Table 0922_01—Employed population by industry, North American Industry Classifications (NAICS) 2017, type of work, immigrant status and period of immigration, wages, presence of children and age of youngest child, age and sex, Canada, annual average, 2019 and 2022 (persons x1,000 unless otherwise stated) [custom order].

Figure 2 Median gross hourly wage rate, by work arrangement and sex, traveller accommodation industry group, Canada, 2022



Source: Statistics Canada, 2023, Table 0922_01: Employed population by industry, North American Industry Classifications (NAICS) 2017, type of work, immigrant status and period of immigration, wages, presence of children and age of youngest child, age and sex, Canada, annual average, 2019 and 2022 (persons x1,000 unless otherwise stated) [custom order].

Figure 3 Trend in unionization rates in the accommodation and food services sector, Canada

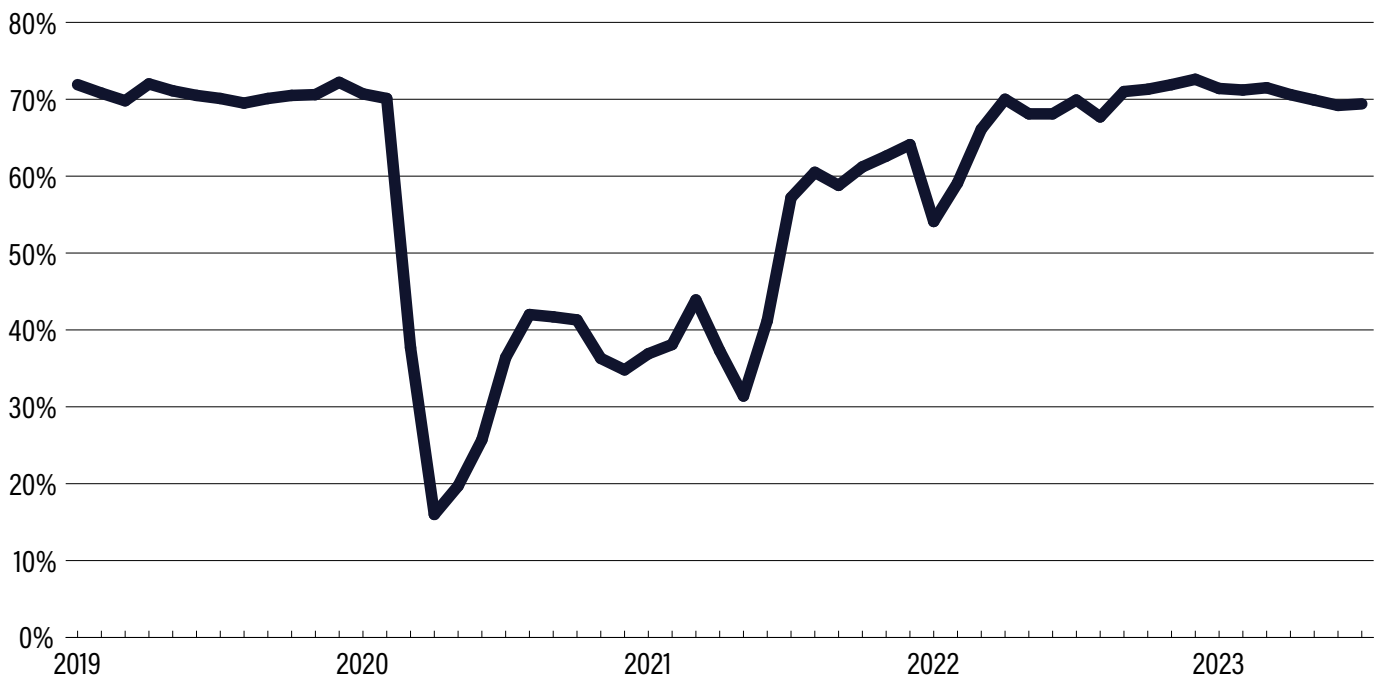


Source: Statistics Canada, 2023, Table 14-10-0132-01—Union status by industry.

time workers, majority of whom are women, earn less than their full-time counterparts (see Figure 2).

Most workers in the AFS sector are non-unionized: The sector has the second lowest unionization rates across all industries (with only the agriculture sector below it), at 3.5 per cent, compared to 28.1 per cent across all industries.¹⁹ In the AFS sector, unionization rates, defined as employees who are members of a union as a percentage of all employees, has been declining over the years, indicating increased employment precarity (see Figure 3). This downward trend in rate of unionization is consistent with the general trend in the private sector but is in contrast to the upward trend in the public sector.²⁰ Across all industries, workers aged 25 years or older are more likely to be unionized, at 31 per cent, compared to younger workers, at 15 per cent.²¹ However, with increased precarity in the AFS sector over the course of the pandemic, workers' interest in unionizing, as an avenue to safeguard employment security, has anecdotally been reported.²² Fragmentation in the sector and employer resistance to unionization, among other challenges, present barriers to unionization among workers.²³

Figure 4 Occupancy rate in B.C. hotel industry, 2019-23



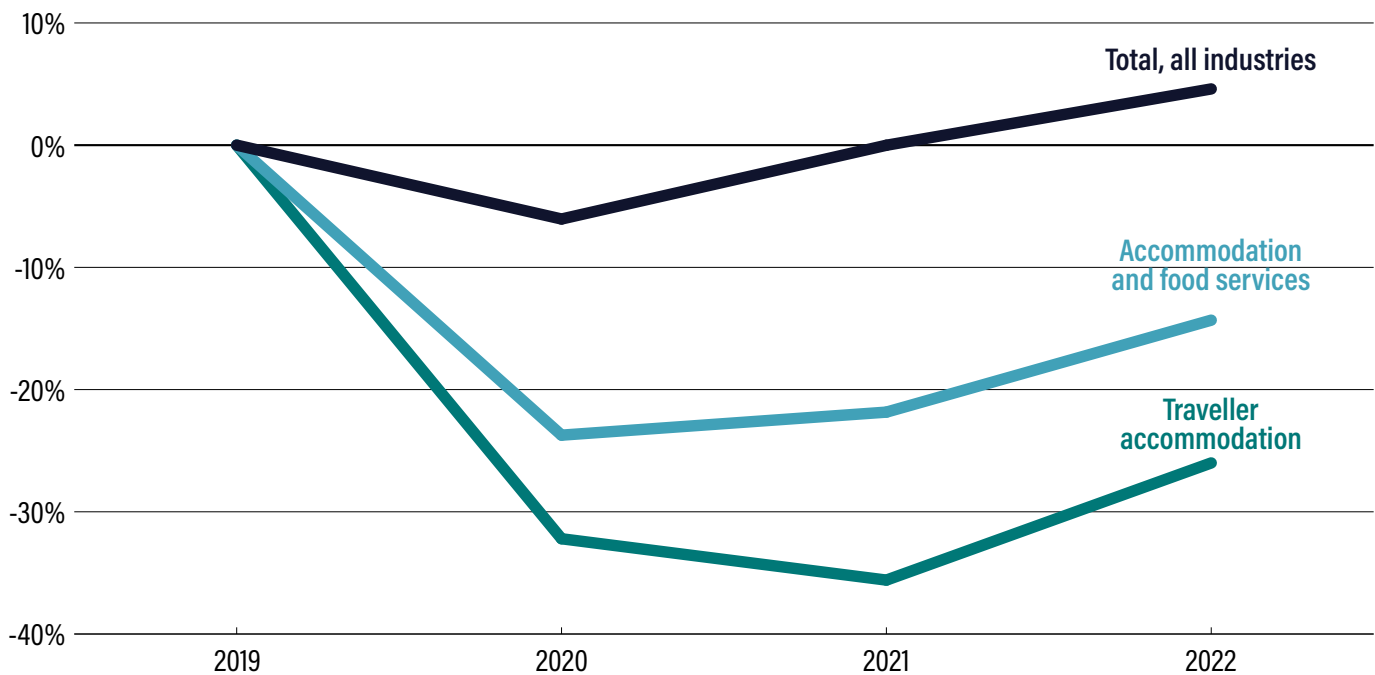
Source Government of British Columbia, 2023, Monthly tourism sector indicators, seasonally adjusted. The occupancy rate is the percentage of rooms occupied of the total available.

Pandemic impacts and responses

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent public health measures had devastating effects on the AFS sector. Closures and travel restrictions, especially in the first wave of the pandemic, March to June 2020, impacted both international and domestic tourism and recreation activities on which the accommodation and food services sector depends. Tourism expenditure was reduced by 71 per cent when comparing tourism demands in the second quarter of 2019 and the second quarter of 2020, representing lost revenues of approximately \$17 billion.²⁴ In British Columbia, hotel room occupancy rate dropped drastically: From 72 per cent in April 2019 to 16 per cent in April 2020 (see Figure 4).²⁵ Provincial revenues from the tourism sector reduced by 46 per cent, when comparing 2019 and 2020 revenues.²⁶

Employers responded to losses in revenue by laying off their workers. By March 2020, the B.C. Hotel Association predicted that two-thirds of workers in their over 700 member hotels (approximately 40,000 workers) would be laid off.²⁷ Employment in the broader tourism sector in the province (including the accommodation and food services sector) recorded a 52 per cent drop in employment between 2019 and 2020.²⁸ The traveller accommodation industry group, in particular, experienced

Figure 5 Percentage change in employment levels from 2019, selected industries, Canada



Source Statistics Canada. 2023. Table 0922_01—Employed population by industry, North American Industry Classifications (NAICS) 2017, type of work, immigrant status and period of immigration, wages, presence of children and age of youngest child, age and sex, Canada, annual average, 2019 and 2022 (persons x1,000 unless otherwise stated) [custom order].

dramatic employment loss in 2020 and has yet to return to pre-pandemic employment levels. This is severe compared to all industries, which, by 2022, had significantly recovered from COVID-related losses and had surpassed 2019 levels (see Figure 5). While neither the traveller accommodation industry group nor the AFS sector has fully recovered, the former particularly lags: it has not yet reached 75 per cent of 2019 employment levels.

In responding to the significant revenue and employment losses by the accommodation and food services sector and other hard-hit sectors, the federal and provincial governments rolled out targeted benefit programs to support businesses from as early as March 2020. The hotel industry benefitted from wage subsidies, rent subsidies, and loans through the Tourism and Hospitality Recovery Program, Canada Emergency Rent Subsidy (CERS), Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS), Canada Emergency Business Account, Tourism Relief Fund, and Highly Affected Sectors Credit Availability Program, as well as other support programs by the provincial government. Between May 2020 and October 2021, the accommodation and food services sector was consistently among the top recipients of the CEWS subsidies, ranging

from 10 to 15 per cent of all approved applications.²⁹ By September 2023 the Tourism and Hospitality Recovery Program (initiated in October 2021 after the CEWS and CERS programs were phased out) had approved \$1.99 billion in wage subsidies and \$716.24 million in rent subsidies.³⁰ British Columbia's accommodations and food services sector received over \$1.2 billion in wage subsidies alone from the federal government, through the CEWS, between March 2020 and May 2021.³¹ Wage subsidies through CEWS were, however, not conditional to return to work for laid-off employees, despite its intention to support employee retention.³²

Employees who had been laid off could apply for emergency benefits through the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and, subsequently, the Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) or Employment Insurance. In 2020, accommodation and food services sector workers represented the largest group of workers who received CERB, at 66.6 per cent of all eligible workers.³³ Workers received a taxable monthly payment of \$2,000, which offered relief from unemployment, but it did not reach the employment income level of many hotel workers.³⁴ The government did not extend the benefits to workers who had earned less than \$5,000 in 2019 and migrant or undocumented workers without a social insurance number, excluding some laid-off hotel workers from this relief.³⁵

The accommodation and food services sector began reporting revenue recovery in 2021 following the lifting of closures and other pandemic public health measures. In 2021, the accommodation services sub-sector recorded a 14.6 per cent increase in its operating revenue from 2020, with British Columbia representing the second largest share of Canada-wide accommodation service revenues (23.4 per cent): Room or unit accommodation recorded the largest share of sales revenue.³⁶ Profit margins by hotels, motor hotels and motels stood at 10.8 per cent in 2021 compared to 3.6 per cent in 2020 and 14.7 per cent in 2019.³⁷ In 2022, accommodation room revenues rebounded in B.C. For the first time since the pandemic, provincial room revenues surpassed 2019 levels and generated \$3.8 billion.³⁸ Increased travels and higher room rates contributed to this recovery: Across B.C., revenues per available hotel room for January to August 2023 were 18 per cent higher than that in the same period in 2022.³⁹ Hotel industry actors reported "remarkable" and "exceptional" recovery, as demonstrated by hotel occupancy rates and revenue per available room (RevPAR).⁴⁰ While performance may vary from market to market, the hotel industry has generally reported a pandemic recovery in their revenues.

This revenue recovery, however, did not spur a robust employment recovery. Employment increased at a much slower rate, with levels still below pre-pandemic levels. Salaries, wages, commissions, and benefits, as a share of operating expenses, notably decreased compared to pre-pandemic levels, from 29.2 per cent in 2019 to 25.5 per cent in 2021.⁴¹ Labour shortages have been reported as a reason for this trend: in 2021, 63.1 per cent of businesses in the accommodation and food services sector reported labour shortages.⁴² Various cost-cutting strategies, however, blur the line between actual labour shortages and employer-induced shortages. During the pandemic, hotels adopted business models requiring fewer workers, in pursuit of “labour efficiencies” and a lower break-even occupancy rate.⁴³

Termination of hotel employees and turnover due to high workload and low wages are notable features that are also affecting employment levels in the sector.⁴⁴ Unionized workers had negotiated recall rights with their employers to protect them from seasonality of work in the sector, but this was largely limited to one year following layoff. While some employers extended the recall period in consideration of unforeseen circumstances due to the pandemic, others chose to terminate their workers. Unionized hotel workers in British Columbia, mostly women, went on strike in a bid to regain their employment.⁴⁵ In the summer of 2020, the workers staged a hunger strike on the steps of the BC Legislature to draw attention to their fight: They urged the provincial government to intervene to protect the employment of approximately 50,000 laid-off hotel workers by adopting temporary recall protections that would secure them the legal right to return to work as business recovered.⁴⁶ The province declined to intervene, citing the primacy of securing recall rights through collective bargaining process between union employees and employers,⁴⁷ even as other jurisdictions in North America stepped up to strengthen and protect the rights hospitality workers during the pandemic.⁴⁸

In British Columbia, some hotels recalled their workers following labour actions and bargaining, but others have yet to recall them. At the same time, in 2022, the federal government, following lobbying by industry actors citing labour shortages, increased the proportion of low-wage workers that accommodation and food services sector employers can hire through the Temporary Foreign Worker program to 30 per cent, undercutting the position of all hospitality workers.⁴⁹ In 2023, there were hotel workers still on strike who had been on the picket lines for over two-and-a-half years. The very low rate of unionization and prevalence of precarious employment in the sector meant that avenues to fight for a return to work were non-existent for most workers.

METHODOLOGY

THIS PROJECT UTILIZED QUALITATIVE research methods to capture and understand patterns in the lived experiences of women hotel workers in B.C. during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted focus groups and follow-up interviews where needed to allow nuanced understanding of themes and individual experiences that were not fully captured through focus groups. In total, six focus groups and five interviews were conducted, engaging 27 workers between March and May of 2023. Researchers at Simon Fraser University collected data presented in this report, with the support of a research director at UNITE HERE Local 40. Project participants were recruited through email correspondence to the UNITE HERE Local 40 union membership: UNITE HERE Local 40 has a membership of 5,500 workers who work in the accommodation and food services sector. Focus group discussions and interviews were guided by semi-structured questions on key themes relating to the impact of the pandemic on income, workload, and health. These conversations were sound recorded and transcribed. Through reflexive thematic analysis, we identified, discussed and refined themes. A literature review and statistical analysis (e.g., Statistics Canada datasets) were also conducted to contextualize this research.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

The women hotel workers whose voices and experiences are centred in this report are members of the UNITE HERE Local 40; only two participants were not unionized at the time of the interview. Occupations of the participants are designated as sales and services occupations, excluding management in the National Occupation Classification;⁵⁰

Table 2 Participants' occupations

Occupation	Occupation classification (NOC)	Number of workers
Room attendants	Light duty cleaners (65310)	16
Laundry attendant	Dry cleaning, laundry and related occupations (65320)	1
Restaurant servers or hostess	Food and beverage servers (65200)	2
Kitchen support staff	Food counter attendant, kitchen helper & related support occupations (65201)	2
Cook	Cooks (63200)	1
Banquet workers/ porters	Support occupations in accommodation, travel and facilities set-up services (65210)	2
Front desk or reservation sales agents	Hotel front desk clerks (64314)	3

Table 3 Age of participants and years worked in hotel industry⁵¹

	Age				
	20-30	30-40	40-50	50-60	Over 60
Number of participants	2	9	2	11	2

	Years in hotel industry			
	0-9	10-19	20-30	Over 30
Number of participants	10	4	7	5

most worked as room attendants (see Table 2). Most of the women hotel workers were immigrants; only five were born in Canada. Also, most of the workers were racialized in the Canadian context: 15 were born in Asia, three in Latin America, and one in Africa. Forty-one per cent of participants were older workers: 11 of the 27 participants were between 50 to 60 years of age; two were over 60 years old (see Table 3). This is likely a reflection of the demographic characteristic of accommodation service workers, where older workers are overrepresented, and the recruitment of mostly union members. Most worked in big hotels, generally with more than 150 employees. At the time of the interviews, a majority of the participants had worked in the hotel industry for over 10 years: 12 over 20 years and five over 30 years (see Table 3). Only six had worked in the industry for under five years. Furthermore, many had worked in the same establishment for over 10 years: Eight had worked in the same hotel for over 20 years and one for over 42 years. This report highlights both the shared and differential experiences of this group of women.

RESULTS

PANDEMIC'S ECONOMIC IMPACTS OFFLOADED ONTO WORKERS

As highlighted earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent public health measures significantly reduced tourist and recreation activities, especially during the first and second waves of infections (2020 and 2021). Consequently, hotel occupancy dwindled, and employers responded by laying off workers and/or reducing their work hours. Industry actors essentially offloaded economic impacts of the pandemic onto their workers. All women hotel workers engaged in this project spoke of employment or income loss. As full-time workers, most of them never had to worry about not having enough work hours prior to the pandemic. Participants narrated how their reality quickly changed after March 2020; from reduced scheduled hours to temporary layoffs, and for some, termination. Workers are paid by the hour; hence, every hour missed translated to lost income. Job and income insecurity characterized the pandemic experience for this group of workers.

"So, in March, during 2020, March 2020, on the 15th of March our schedule changed. And they told us that we don't have any schedule because of the pandemic. At the time, it's not really like it's pandemic. It's just a lot of events that are already booked at the hotel were all withdrawn because they say there is this disease, that it is going around, and it's very dangerous. So, at first, we thought that it's just a simple, or maybe it will just last for a week because they said it's only temporary." (Int.05)

Women narrated how "...there were whole departments of people that just weren't there." (FGD3) While all departments were impacted, room attendants and banquet workers/porters were particularly affected.

Some hotels restructured departments, resulting in re-classification of responsibilities to have a flexible workforce. For example, luggage porters, front desk staff and telephone operators were brought together under the same department in one hotel. It was noted that during the first wave of the pandemic, only a skeleton crew of the front office staff and limited housekeeping staff were working in many of the hotels. While some hotels lay nearly empty at the height of the pandemic, others were turned into government-run quarantine centres or supportive housing for those experiencing homelessness. These initiatives brought in their own cleaning staff, hence contributing to the loss of jobs for hotel workers, though some dining workers continued working to supply food to those housed through these arrangements. What seemed like a short-term financial setback became increasingly unbearable as months of the pandemic rolled by. Workers lamented how the decision to lay off and terminate workers was made without much consideration for their well-being. These decisions directly impacted the ability of workers to meet their necessities: "We never expected that [hotel] will just take a very, very bad decisions...we were all surprised when they say that they're going to lay us off." (Int.05)

Workers felt anxious and scared about their job security throughout this period as "...nobody then knew what's going to happen." (FG1) Workers narrated successive layoffs where different groups of workers would be laid off every couple of weeks. They received phone calls and email correspondence informing them that their services were temporarily not required due to low room occupancy and cancellation of events booked through their hotels. They would be called in for work after business picked up again. Many workers anticipated that they would be called back in about a week or two. Soon, workers received communications that they should apply for government benefits because of continued layoffs. They hopefully waited for an email correspondence or a call that would bring them good news of their return to work. For some workers, this good news never arrived.

In focus group discussions, women narrated receiving email correspondence every couple of months notifying them of their continued layoff until one day, after being laid off for over a year, they were notified of their termination. These workers had a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) that secured their recall rights: Workers were protected from termination following up to 12 months of layoff to account for seasonality in the industry. These rights they bargained for did not anticipate more extended layoffs due to health or other emergencies. During the pandemic, these enshrined rights were seemingly used against them

since some employers used this provision to justify the termination of long-term workers. These workers had worked for the same hotel for between 10 and 29 years; three whom were almost at their retirement age thought they would retire from there. Some of these unionized workers mobilized and voted to strike in a bid to recover their employment. Some workers regained their employment after being on the picket line for over one year; others were still at the picket line at the time of the interview, over two years following their termination. A non-unionized worker lamented that she could not mobilize and fight for her right to return to work because she did not have union membership. Having worked for over 10 years at her hotel, she highlighted the challenges of getting unionized; she was working towards getting herself and her colleagues unionized before the pandemic.

Hotels in leisure markets that are more dependent on domestic travel and less dependent on international travel and conferences or group business were noted to have recovered their business more quickly than hotels in major urban markets like Vancouver and Victoria. Consequently, workers in these hotels recalled their employees as soon as summer of 2020. Towards the end of the second wave of the pandemic in early 2021, more workers started receiving notification of their return to work. In many hotels, seniority rights were upheld, with more senior workers (based on number of hours worked in the same hotel) being the last to be laid off and the first to be recalled back to work. While some workers were recalled after one year, others were only recalled two years into the pandemic.

Loss of income and employment over the course of the pandemic translated into moderate to extreme financial hardship for the hotel workers. Workers narrated their struggles in meeting basic needs, pointing to increased food and housing insecurity. Frugal living strategies adopted by most workers included a first step of eliminating any expenses deemed unnecessary, such as going to restaurants, movies, or on vacation. As a second step, many workers reduced the quality and expense of the foods they purchased. Healthy foods, such as fresh vegetables, fruits and meat, were replaced with cheaper canned foods and soups: "I haven't bought lettuce for the longest time because one lettuce was five dollars. Tomatoes, and there's a lot of things I stopped buying." (FG6) Workers cut expenses where they could, trying not to compromise their family's housing arrangement, noting how "every penny mattered." (FG6) Single mothers and parents whose spouses were out of employment during the pandemic highlighted this as "double trouble."

Health-related expenditures created additional financial pressure for workers whose employment had been terminated and consequently lost their extended health benefits. One woman narrated how these benefits were critical to the health of her family: "My daughters needed their teeth cleaned but we had to stop everything. My husband needs medicine, because he is a diabetic from 2011. He had a damaged the pancreas, so that's why it's very expensive medicine. Then I did lose a job so they did cut my medical, everything, dental cleaning and medicine we have to pay from pocket all the time." (Int.01) This worker had sustained injuries from work and was unable to continue with her physiotherapy treatment due to associated costs.

Workers adopted various strategies to cope with financial hardships. As discussed above, the first line of action was reducing expenses. Those whose work hours were significantly reduced took on second, and others third, jobs to make ends meet. Many were forced to draw from their savings to meet immediate needs, with longer-term ramifications, particularly for those nearing retirement. Others received financial support from friends and colleagues. Workers with older children shared how, for the first time, they asked their children, most of whom were in university or had just finished high school, to contribute towards household expenses. One worker noted how this coping strategy affected the education of her child: "I'm a single mom, and since my son turned 18, I include him to pay rent. So that was shocking for me because he's just finishing high school at the time. And that was motivation to stop studying and get a job, which is what happened." (FG6) Others shared how they benefitted from government income relief offered through the Employment Insurance and the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), subsequently replaced by the Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB). Despite these benefits not being sufficient for some, they offered much-needed relief at the height of the pandemic. Many described applying to receive these benefits as a last resort because they "wanted to work," while others did not apply for fear of "paying it back in taxes."

Many women who participated in this study and returned to work did not initially return to full-time employment; some still did not have guaranteed full-time work hours at the time of the interview. Regular work schedules were replaced by inconsistent schedules based on assessed availability of work, making their work precarious and income unpredictable. One worker, for instance, narrated how her full-time work was organically transitioned to seasonal unpredictable work.

"...only the first person on the list, the seniority list, is getting any hours. So now I'm only working six months of the year. And, yes, it will be busy in the summer and, yes, I will get hours in the summer, but after that, you know, it's only five months, six months of work, and then I'm just left hanging to pick up any extra shift I get or try for EI. And that directly affects my income, which directly affects keeping a roof over my head." (FG2)

Even as some workers reported relief due to recovered income, high inflation coupled with low industry wages negatively impacted financial security. The median gross hourly wage of women workers in the traveller accommodation industry group in Canada is \$17.91. The hourly wage of workers among participants ranged from just above the minimum wage (currently at \$16.75 in British Columbia) to \$27. Workers indicated that wages were dependent on occupation, union membership, seniority, and location of hotel, among other factors. The incomes of most workers were below the living wage. In Metro-Vancouver, where most participants worked and lived, the living wage is assessed at \$25.68 per hour (earned by each of two parents working full-time to support a family).⁵² Room attendants and dining workers who used to rely on additional income through gratuities or tips, mostly for their savings, noted that this income has significantly declined: "...we're not seeing the tips at all. I used to get \$30 a day, approximately, like I'll average—I'm lucky to get five bucks." (FG2) Another worker lamented how her employer withdrew promises to increase workers' wages during the pandemic; despite her enjoying her work, she was contemplating resigning because of the low wages.

"We were all on track for getting raises, we were all on track for having the best year that we've had in terms of profits, and we were promised things... and COVID hit... I love where I work, and I love the people I work with, but if it's going to continue like this, then I might not be able to keep working there." (FG2)

Some workers shared how the pandemic forced them to rethink their career as the precarity of their work increased: "For the first time in my life, I asked myself if I ever, like, had to give up my career goal and shift to, like, a different industry." (FG5) At the time of the interview, two room attendants had changed careers to become caregivers and a cook had just accepted a position as a cook in a hospital. Many, however, having worked in the hotel industry for most of their productive years, or years in Canada, felt like they had limited leverage to change careers. They decidedly remained in the hotel industry hoping that continued recovery from the pandemic would translate to stable and higher income. At the

time of this project, in 2023, some women hotel workers maintained a second job to keep up with inflation even when full employment was recovered. Workers felt that to manage financially, “you have to take every single penny in your life right now” despite feeling that “you’re working more hard, but you’re more poor.” (FG2)

Financial stressors due to loss of income, increased cost of living, low wages, and income and employment insecurity were felt by all the women hotel workers. Workers whose employment had been terminated or whose scheduled hours were significantly reduced particularly highlighted the stress associated with reduced ability to afford necessities, such as rent and fresh vegetables: “With the amount of money I’m making, and they put me on schedule for four hours a week? I don’t know what they’re thinking... So how do we go about with our daily needs? It’s so hard.” (FG4) Inflation also affected those who had fully regained employment due to stagnant low wages: “Everything has gone up and with COVID, pretty much like all your money went to rent or food, or sometimes you had to choose.” (FG6) Older workers whose employment was terminated were particularly anxious about their future work due to their age and specific skill set. With retirement plans derailed and savings drawn upon, they became unsure about what retirement would mean for them.

“It’s stressful. Most of us, we’re not that young anymore—at least, not me, I’m over 60. And where I go for now, you know, I thought I’m going to work another five, six years and go to pension, have a pension, you know, that’s where I spent all my life since 1991, I’m in hospitality. I started working with [name of hotel]. And now, who’s going to hire us? Where are we going to go? Nobody will hire us [a different participant interjects]. Yes, we are too old.” (FG1)

“It hurts because, as I say, the expectation’s that you’re going to retire in that place, that you have already a security, that you’re going to be working until the age of 65/67, as long as you can, your body can, but when things like that happen, it feels like I have to start over again.” (Int. 5)

A CHOICE BETWEEN SAFETY AND LIVELIHOODS IN THE FIRST YEAR OF THE PANDEMIC

Women hotel workers who continued to work during the first year of the pandemic, or who returned to work during this time, faced work stressors associated with heightened risk to COVID-19 infection and

abuse from customers. While grateful for secured income, they felt placed in a position where they had to choose between their safety and their livelihood.

Women who continued to work during the first year of the pandemic, and subsequent waves, described being fearful of being infected by the COVID-19 virus. Even as public health restrictions eased and increased travel facilitated return to work, workers did not feel prepared or supported to do their work, especially at the height of the pandemic in 2020 and early 2021. While some hotels put in protective measures, including leaving rooms unoccupied for a few days after check-out, others did not have such measures. Some workers were not provided with any personal protective equipment (PPE) or training on doing their work safely: "We're all concerned, nobody want to get sick on that time. We didn't know what's going on." (FG1) One worker narrated how a work transition from the front desk to housekeeping exposed her to COVID-19 infection with little information on safety protocols. Workers were not only afraid because of the potential impact of infection on their own health, but also because of their loved ones and dependants, including children, older parents, and immune-compromised spouses.

Hotel employers put workers on the frontline of the pandemic without enough protection or attention to their well-being, forcing some to forgo their much-needed livelihood. A single mother lamented her difficult decision to not return to work because of fear of getting sick and being unable to take care of her children: She had no relatives in Canada to care for her children if she became incapacitated. This fear was not unfounded. Some workers shared how they were infected by the COVID-19 virus more than once over the course of the pandemic. In one focus group discussion, workers remembered a colleague died because of COVID-19-related complications.

"But mentally, I think it really, really hit us a lot. Just the fear to go in the room when they're infected and last year, on the second wave, we got infected a couple times. Was so bad, we got COVID... I said I don't want to [work], they had asked to, you know, clean the room, and that's why I say I don't want to go to the room after, you know, a guest because I don't want to bring anything from the hotel to the home. Because I have kids." (FG3)

Harassment and aggressive behaviour of customers was another stressor experienced mainly by front desk staff whose work required direct contact with the customers. Workers narrated how many customers were particularly agitated by changes in hotel protocols on room cleaning, even after provincial public health measures were relaxed.

Communication strategies by some hotels were noted to be ineffective, leading to backlash between hotel guests and front desk workers. In one hotel, communication with customers regarding room cleaning was relegated to room attendants, exposing these workers, who previously had no contact with guests, to the aggression of customers who did not understand or agree with hotel protocols. Use of flexi-glass and masks by front desk staff reduced the quality of communications with complaining customers, further heightening aggression of impatient customers. These workers narrated how they were anxious about engaging with hotel guests because of the unpredictability of their reactions and felt afraid for their safety in some cases.

“...there were some staff members who had genuine concerns for their safety. Just with the amount of abuse and the amount of anger that guests were giving them. Even our most seasoned front desk agents were going on stress leave. Because there was just a lot of abuse.” (FG4)

Many women felt unable to voice their concerns due to intimidation from management and fear of potential retaliation that could affect their work. Even where front desk workers complained about abuse and harassment by hotel customers, which affected their mental wellness and sense of security in the workplace, this was left unaddressed: “...front office had a big push for, like, we don't feel safe with the abuse that we're getting. And they wouldn't even hire a security guard.” (FG4)

HIGH WORKLOADS AND THE LABOUR SHORTAGE PARADOX

Heavy workloads were a feature in hotel work even before the pandemic. Workers endured the continuously taxing work of cleaning rooms, laundry, and dishes, and cooking and serving food to hotel customers for eight hours straight per day, some for over 20 years. While many enjoyed their work because of good colleagues and an income to support their family, their physically taxing work responsibilities took a toll on their health and well-being. A worker whose workload remained unchanged during the pandemic narrated:

“I do the laundry, and they gave me another job for cleaning the lobby. And the courtyard, so and the glasses, so yeah, I help two kinds, two categories, so, that's why sometimes I'm behind doing the laundry, because I'm doing cups and glasses, yeah. Washing, putting them in the dishwasher, I collect from second floor. Then yeah, put them in the dishwasher, and then I have to

collect the linen, towels, bring it down, to do the laundry and then after that, because yeah, it is really hard for me, my routine. It's very tiring for every day, doing that. Yeah. Especially when it's busy, of course, it's non-stop glasses, cups to put in the dishwasher then bring all from the second, third and fourth [floors] and then after the washing again, there's lots of glasses and cups again, so yeah." (FG3)

The pandemic only made their ordeal that much harder. Transitioning back to work after pandemic-related layoffs proved to be challenging for most workers due to an increase in an already high workload: "I think we were put into a position where we had to work harder." (FG2) These outcomes were a direct consequence of decisions by employers in the hotel industry. Employers' pandemic response and recovery strategies offloaded pandemic risk onto workers by understaffing and by overworking their workers. Following their return to work, for example, room attendants noted that the most impactful change was a shift from daily room cleaning to cleaning checkout rooms. While this shift was meant to reduce the potential for the spread of COVID-19 infections at the height of the pandemic, it had a significant impact on the workload of room attendants. Workers felt this measure was a pretext to reduce staffing expenses as some hotels maintained this protocol even after all public health measures were lifted.

Prior to the pandemic, room attendants would clean occupied rooms every day unless hotel occupants opted out by placing a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door. From 2021, many hotels required their customers to opt-in for daily cleaning, with most rooms only cleaned after checkout. Checkout rooms were significantly dirtier than rooms cleaned every day, with some rooms left uncleaned for up to five days, yet workers were expected to spend the same amount of time cleaning the rooms. Workers narrated how, prior to the pandemic, they cleaned 12 to 15 rooms per shift, representing approximately 30 minutes cleaning time per room. When they returned to work, they were expected to clean the same number of rooms, yet cleaning check-out rooms took between 45 minutes to more than one hour. This forced workers to work overtime, some without overtime pay, to complete their shift assignments.

"It's like it's really hard, and it is like, it's painful. But we don't clean daily right? Someone staying in the room three or four days, four or five days room and they eat there. There is a lot of garbage. They order food, eat there, shower. The pile of linens, and towels. It's like they give you 30 minutes to do the room, but it takes more than an hour." (FG4)

The pandemic also brought to the spotlight a paradox in labour shortages reported by the industry, which made it challenging to differentiate between actual shortages and shortages created by employer cost-cutting strategies. Indeed, the accommodation and food services sector has consistently recorded higher job vacancy rates compared to all industries. In the first quarter of 2023 (at around the time the interviews were conducted), the sector's vacancy rate in British Columbia was at 7.9 per cent compared to 4.6 per cent across all industries (unadjusted for seasonality).⁵³ In the same period, the British Columbia Hotel Association noted that, "Many of the hotels are operating at 70 to 80 per cent capacity because they don't have people to clean their rooms."⁵⁴ Yet, at around the time this statement was made, women hotel workers in the province narrated experiences of unemployment and underemployment. Some workers were still on the picket line fighting for the right to be recalled back to work. One after another, they described deliberate strategies by employers to cut costs by understaffing. Further, high workloads and low income propelled workers to leave, increasing turnover and further undermining conditions of work for the remaining workers.

Staffing levels were kept to a minimum, leaving little room for contingency. Some workers were not recalled back to work and others were kept on flexible schedules. Some workers, including full-time workers, were only called into work depending on availability of work. The pursuit of a flexible workforce strategy to avert pandemic-related losses made hotel work more precarious and the hotel industry further susceptible to staffing shortages as some workers were unable to honour unexpected calls to work because of family responsibilities or last-minute nature of such calls. "Well, you're calling me at 8:00 for an 8:00 shift. And I live in Surrey. So even if I get ready and I get to work, I'm still not getting eight hours because you're doing all this last-minute scheduling." (FG4) Workers also noted little consideration for their time as managers would, at times, call them for a shift at the last minute. They lamented being expected to "hang around for their calls" (FG4) and to drop everything on short notice after the call, including family responsibilities. Nonetheless, they felt powerless to refuse these calls because they needed the income; they knew another worker would be called if they did not answer to claim the offered shift.

"Me and my former co-worker, we found it very frustrating coming to work every day and then seeing our manager just, like, randomly cut down on people's shifts. We don't know if, you know, like, 'Hey, [Name], you're done for

the day you can just go home.' And then we don't if we ever get called to get, like, shifts. And we didn't earn enough money for living." (FG5)

Due to the unpredictable work scheduling and consequent unreliable income, some workers were forced to take on other jobs to supplement their income; hence, they were unable to honour last-minute calls to work when they were engaged in their second or third job. In trying to manage unpredictable customer demand, some hotels inadequately scheduled workers, even as room occupancy increased, creating a self-induced staffing shortage and, consequently, overworking scheduled workers.

"We didn't have enough staff to do the rooms we had. And they were opening it [the hotel] more. Because when we came back from COVID, we had certain sections open. Then it became busier, open another section, another section. And so, we didn't have the staff for those sections. But they would still open up more. 'Figure it out,' they'd tell our boss and staff. So, they'd just say 'figure it out.' So, the figuring out was then add more and more rooms. So instead of saying 'OK, we only have enough staff to do 150 rooms.'" (Int.02)

"The manager, they just try to pushing, pushing. I remember one time there's just not enough room, and then they don't want to give the extra hours, and then they asked every housekeeping person to do extra one room. And then they [supervisors] only do... help you strip all the rooms, and then they give you a cart to assigning extra rooms to them." (FG02)

In some cases, the management took on service work to counter this shortage. This business approach created job and income insecurity for hotel workers: "I find that they [managers] have started doing the job that we should be doing. So, it's frustrating." (FG5) "I was the only server, we only have one cook, to wash dishes too. And one manager who did everything from administration, to purchasing, to bartending, to run and buy lettuce, to clearing tables." (FG6) These practices violated collective bargaining agreements (CBA) covering some of these workers. Some hotels coped with labour shortages by hiring new employees. Workers observed an increase in recent immigrant workers in their hotels even as some of their colleagues were still laid off. Workers shared how hiring new workers was itself a cost-cutting strategy as long-term workers had accrued increases in wages and benefits; new workers represent minimum labour costs to employers.

"I saw the new cleaning crew come in, and so, I thought, this is specialty crew, because they have to know what they're doing, because we don't want to get sick. Then I realised they didn't know—they even know less than my

co-workers who had worked in housekeeping and they end up being laid off. Because those people, they'd never worked in the housekeeping before, and my co-workers, they worked there all their lives over there and they know the hotel, they know everything." (FG01)

Hotel workers whose employment was terminated were skeptical about labour shortage claims by hotels. Some of the workers who had voted to strike had been on the picket line for over two years trying to get their job back: Five workers were on strike at the time of the interview. They felt it was more likely that hotels wanted to reduce labour costs by hiring new staff at minimum wage: Striking workers had higher income ranges in the industry due to their seniority, some having worked in the same hotel for over 20 years. Other workers who had lost their employment looked for work elsewhere, some outside the hotel industry. In reflecting on staffing shortages in their hotels, some workers observed how low wages combined with a high, physically taxing workload deters new workers. They noted how new staff would quit their job not long after starting their employment.

"I see a shortage of staff, and it's the pay. You know, 20 [dollars per hour] is what we're getting, they can't survive on it. So, we do lose the cooks. We lose all of our staff because they just simply can't pay the bills on it. So, I don't know what's going to happen with the industry because it's not a liveable wage... it's frustrating sometimes, watching staff come and go." (FG02)

The high workload was a significant stressor, especially among room attendants. Their work was both "mentally and physically demanding." (FG5) It contributed not only to physical exhaustion and injuries, as described below, but also emotional exhaustion. Some workers were unable to mentally or emotionally engage after their shift, compromising their family responsibilities and relationships. Taking second or third jobs to supplement their hotel employment income put workers at higher risk of poor mental health, with limited time for self-care. An international student who took on an additional part-time job noted how her routine resulted in burnout: "If you're working two jobs, that's like definitely going to affect your health because, first of all, you don't have, like, enough time for you or yourself... I was feeling dizzy and then not having that much of time and energy." (FG6).

HEALTH IMPACTS OF HEAVY WORKLOADS

The negative impact of hotel service work on the physical health of workers is a longstanding consequence of the heavy workload and the nature of this work. WorkSafeBC data reveals an industry injury rate of 1.95 per 100 people working per year in 2022 among workers in overnight and short-term accommodation.⁵⁵ Most injury cases were reported by light duty cleaners at 54.9 per cent of all cases, followed by janitors, caretakers and building superintendents (6.5 per cent), cooks (3.5 per cent), hotel front desk clerks (3.2 per cent), dry cleaning, laundry and related occupations (3 per cent), and food and beverage servers (2.6 per cent), among others. Most reported injuries were classified as other strains and back strains, at 37.7 and 20.8 per cent of all reported injuries, respectively. Other reported injuries included contusions, lacerations, fractures, tendinitis, respiratory inflammation, and mental disorders, among others. Table 4 shows the nature of injuries, which accounted for over one per cent of reported injuries. Women workers represented 69 per cent of reported injured workers in the industry.⁵⁶

Women hotel workers narrated how their work affected their physical health, and how this effect was exacerbated during the pandemic due to an increased workload. For room attendants (whose occupation is classified as light duty cleaners), work responsibilities included pushing, pulling, lifting, and lowering objects, with some weighing over five kilograms, including furniture and heavy bedding, kneeling on hard

Table 4 Nature of injuries reported to WorkSafeBC, overnight and short-term accommodation industry classification, 2018-22

Nature of Injury	Counts	Per cent
Other Strains	1,313	37.7%
Back Strain	726	20.8%
Contusion	334	9.6%
Laceration	262	7.5%
Fractures	185	5.3%
Concussion	174	5.0%
Tendinitis, Tenosynovitis	119	3.4%
Respiratory Inflammation	71	2.0%
Bursitis and Related	65	1.9%
Mental disorder	50	1.4%
Heat Burns	42	1.2%

Source: WorkSafeBC. 2023. Provincial Overview: Industry Claim Analysis: Counts (2018 to 2022).

bathroom tiles to clean bathtubs and toilets, bending under counters and sinks, and dusting high areas while stepping on furniture, among other tasks. When done continuously throughout the day over years, these tasks result in longstanding injuries. Physical injuries resulted in workers taking disability leave. These workers were susceptible to re-injury after returning to work where such injuries were not fully recovered or where work conditions that resulted in injury persisted.

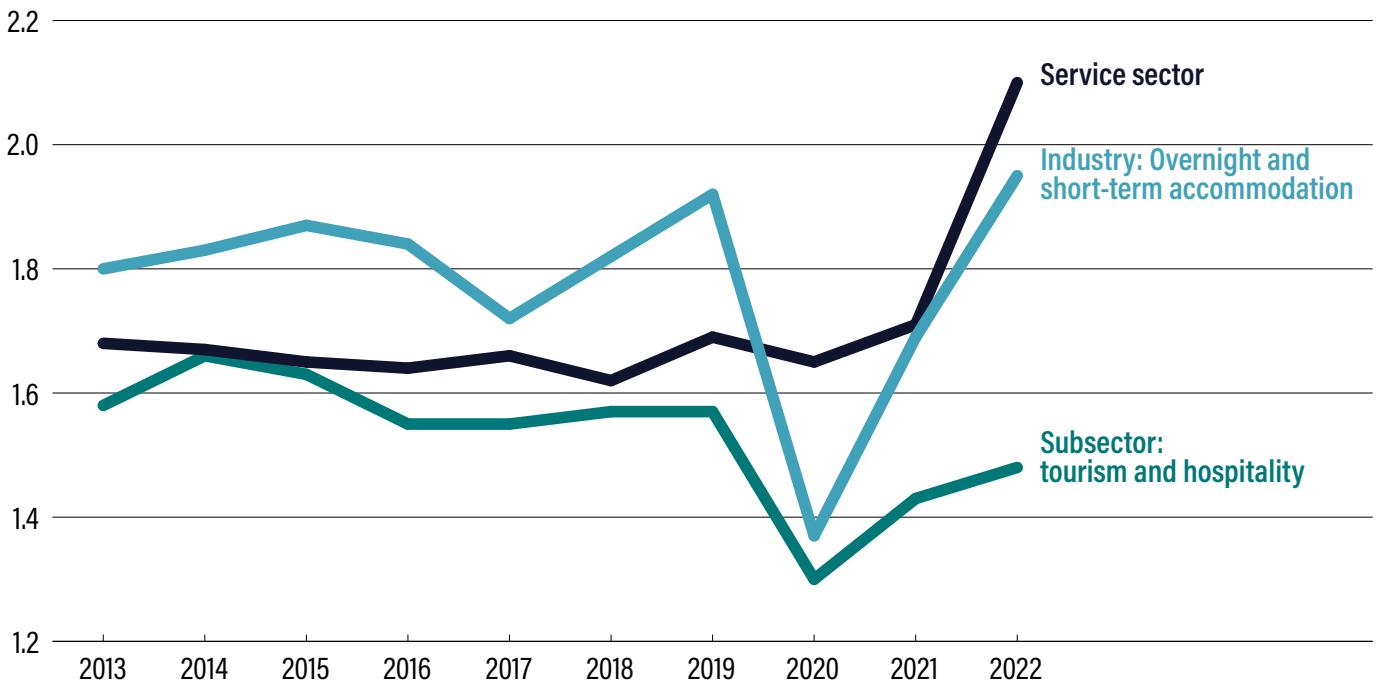
“I know a number of people who have injuries that have just never been able to heal properly because of the workload is still there. Like they’re still working their body, so the heavy workload right away injured it, and they’ve never really been able to 100 per cent come back from it.” (FG2)

Workers revealed a conundrum faced by workers nearing their retirement. Despite suffering longstanding injuries, some keep working—taking periodic disability leaves and getting ongoing treatment—because of their inability to save enough for retirement due to low wages. A 60-year-old worker shared: “I have sore joints. I’m going to physio right now for my shoulder and my ankle because it repeatedly gets frozen. And even my ankle does, so I can’t bend my ankle....[And] I’m sure it’s work-related from holding plates.” (Int.04) Another worker, also over 60 years old, noted how the financial setback due to the pandemic might result in her retiring later than she had planned: “And already it’s year what, three, that we’ve been impacted, and when your income is impacted that directly, it takes a long time to recover, you know? By that time, I’m going to be retiring, so it’s sort of railroaded my plans, my retirement plans. Now I’ll be working till 80 [Laughs].” (FG2)

As hotel room occupancy increased and the workload of workers increased, following the initial pandemic-related reductions, injury cases increased. Figure 6 below illustrates the change in the rate of injuries reported to WorkSafeBC between 2013 and 2022. Notably, workers in overnight and short-term accommodation reported, on average, more cases of injury compared to other workers in the tourism and hospitality subsector. The reduced rate of injuries between 2019 and 2020 could be attributed to workers being out of work. However, corresponding to increased room occupancy (see Figure 4), the rate of injuries increased sharply after 2020, with rates in 2022 being slightly higher than that recorded in 2019.

“When we went back, the work was very different. We had to bag all of the linens. It was much more stressful, to be honest. Not just the mind but the body. We were bagging everything, bagging duvets, bagging all the towels.

Figure 6 Rate of injury reported to WorkSafeBC, 2013-22



Note The injury rate represents the number of claims per 100 people working full year on a part-time or full-time basis.
Source WorkSafeBC. 2023. Provincial Overview: Injury Rate.

Everything had to be bagged to take to the laundry. Girls were starting to have muscle strains, outright injuries. A lot of the injuries weren't reported because they were, you know, 'I'm aching, my shoulders are hurting, my arm is hurting. My -!' A lot of tendon problems, things like that... We were doing strictly checkouts, which are rooms that sit for two, three, four days, not getting done. So, girls are literally crying. They're like, you know, I'd be like, 'Oh, are you hurting?' And you know, these are people that never complain, and then they just start crying... They were already on the verge of going on sick leave. You could see it in them—they were just gone." (Int.02)

A worker who immigrated in 2022 and whose first job in Canada was as a room attendant further highlighted the immediate impact that a physically tasking, heavy workload can have on workers' health.

"This is my first time working like a housekeeper. It's hard work, really, it's hard, hard work... You have to clean 14 rooms, 15 rooms. Alone.... But yes, this is a hard work. I have a problem with my back, with my legs and my knees and my arms... Sometimes, I feel like an old woman because all the time it's, 'Oh, my back pain, I don't know my legs, my arms.' It's difficult... I'm 44 years old and I lose 15 kilos working in a few months." (FG5)

Workers shared how the risk of injury was even higher for those who sought a second or even a third job to supplement reduced income that was caused by unpredictability of scheduled hours. These additional jobs entailed similar responsibilities: Some room attendants, for example, also worked as cleaners in hospitals and universities. Many maintained their employment status at their hotel despite being underemployed and earning inadequate incomes: Hotels were noted to have better benefits (notably health benefits) and stability compared to other potential employers, secured through their union membership and corresponding bargaining. Workers, hence, sought part-time or casual supplementary employment with the hope that their prior employment situation would return after the pandemic. The hotel workers noted the physical toll of additional employment: “You’re on the second job, your body never recoups.” (FG2)

Increased workload meant that workers were less likely to use support equipment, such as props for kneeling when cleaning bathtubs. To complete their assigned number of rooms on schedule, room attendants rushed from one room to another with few breaks and little consideration for ergonomic measures because they were in “fear mode.” The pandemic was characterized by job and income insecurity for hotel workers, making workers less likely to complain about increased workload and report injuries for fear of retaliation by their manager and/or employer. Workers noted that the fear of complaining existed even before the pandemic, where even with employment security due to their union status, retaliation worsened their work situation, such as being assigned the “worst” or check-out rooms and discriminately increasing workers’ workload. The pandemic raised the stakes for workers: Retaliation had the potential of translating into fewer scheduled hours for workers, consequently reducing their income. Some workers pushed back against these odds. For example, workers on strike at a Vancouver area hotel, after winning back the jobs of workers terminated in the early days of the pandemic, held out for an extra six months to secure better working conditions including going back to daily room cleaning. This is one of several work actions that centred around the crucial issue of workload.⁵⁷ In another instance, a worker took it upon herself to bring their case to WorkSafeBC for redress (see case study 1). Individually, workers also coped by going to physiotherapy, with some taking disability leave to disengage from work activities that were aggravating their injuries. In the focus groups, workers expressed the need for more avenues to petition for change and seek redress within their workplaces.

"A lot of them were told, when they were being pushed to do more rooms: 'Well, if you can't do it, maybe you should look for another job.' And that was the common thing that was told. Like, 'Well, if you can't do it, I don't know why you're here.' So, they were all very scared to say anything. So, they told me in secret their injuries, their muscle strains, their problems." (Int. 02)

Service and support occupations in the hotel industry depend on the physical wellness of workers. Yet the very work, without robust safety protocols and manageable workloads, contribute to their physical unwellness, reducing the capability of workers to do their job effectively and efficiently. The hotel industry, hence, suffers from reduced capacity and workers who would otherwise earn their income are forced to depend on disability benefits. Workers are forced to work while in physical pain. One worker highlighted this embodiment of work: "I feel my whole entire body making the food for my family." (FG2) Some are forced to resign because of this pain, risking an early exit from the labour market. A worker who had worked for the same hotel for 25 years as a room attendant went on disability leave for one year prior to the pandemic because of a shoulder injury. She was laid off shortly after returning to work during the pandemic. To sustain her family, she found work as a cleaner in a hospital but soon resigned because this work further aggravated the shoulder injury.

"My shoulder was hurt. It's mopping, like you know, eight-hour shift, four hours mopping the floor... You know, that's too hard for me, but still, I have kids... I think I did five months that job, but after that I did quit. I can't because of my shoulder; too much painful." (Int.01)

While physical injuries dominated conversations on health, the women hotel workers also revealed other health-related effects that often go unnoticed. For instance, one worker attributed high blood pressure and ongoing medication to her work: "So, before I was healthy but now I have, my blood pressure high because of the job." (Int. 01) Another noted how having bad managers and resultant anxiety at work over the years affected her physical health: "I am an anxious person. You know, if I anticipate that something bad is going to happen, my skin breaks out, and I get all... So, I do have health issues. I've had a heart operation, so I've had four stents put in." (Int. 04) For women hotel workers, their occupation negatively affects their physical health and their mental well-being. Workers, for instance, worried about the potential of sustaining an injury that would make them unable to earn a living: "My back I have to worry about the most... An injury would be, like, detrimental to your

Case study 1: Seeking redress for high workload through WorkSafeBC

This case study is based on an account elaborated by one of the research participants. Associated risk assessment documentation was also consulted.

Following the partial re-opening of the economy after the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, Eve was recalled back to work as a room attendant. While she was happy to have her work and source of income back, she slowly started to notice the increased workload and its subsequent impact on her health and that of her colleagues.

The number of rooms that attendants cleaned per day had increased from eight rooms to 10 rooms and then to 12 rooms. She complained to her manager, who responded, "People got to get used to it because we're going to go back to 16," the maximum number of rooms cleaned in a 7.5-hour shift when a worker cleaned only stayover rooms (rooms which are cleaned during a customer's stay in a hotel.) However, post-pandemic, attendants often cleaned checked-out rooms, which required a change of bedding and more thorough cleaning after stays of up to five days. This workload forced workers to do their work quickly, in "fear mode," and at the cost of doing their work safely. Ergonomic measures, including the use of supportive tools, were underutilized.

Eve and her colleagues experienced tendon and muscle strains, sustaining shoulder, arm, and back pains. In her 20 years of working at the hotel, Eve had never noted such widespread health-related concerns among room attendants. She shared, "I'd be like, 'Oh, are you hurting?' And you know, these are people that never complain and then [they] just start crying... They were already on the verge of going on sick leave." As Eve narrated, their work also affected their ability to care for their families, "They said they couldn't make dinner. They couldn't help their kids with homework. They were just physically and mentally exhausted."

As a member of the hotel's joint health and safety committee, Eve decided to pursue the complaint

through WorkSafeBC. This required a great deal of her time and energy, as there was limited support from other committee members, none of whom were housekeeping staff. Eve ended up taking on many of the associated tasks, including recording reports from room attendants, conducting risk assessments, and liaising with WorkSafeBC. In some cases, room attendants were afraid to share their concerns and only did so in secret out of fear of intimidation from managers and losing their employment in the context of increased precarity. Eve felt protected as a member of a union and a senior employee at the hotel.

According to Eve, the "four to five months of ongoing work" dedicated to this process, including drafting documents and emails during her breaks and at home after work, "paid off." Despite the pushback from the employer, a supportive WorkSafeBC officer and the enforcement of fines by WorkSafeBC kept the process on track. Eventually, the workload was reduced to a maximum of nine to 10 rooms per 7.5-hour shift, with the hotel also committing to training employees on carrying out their duties safely including taking brief breaks.

We acknowledge that this case study is likely a best-case scenario, where workers in similar situations may not bring a case to WorkSafeBC due to fear of losing their employment, intimidation and lack of support from employers, lack of effective representation in health and safety committees, or lack of time or energy to pursue this work particularly as women workers are often disproportionately burdened with family responsibilities.

In this account, the managers were notably unsupportive of the room attendants. We acknowledge that the hierarchy of employment and associated power might put negative pressure on managers who might otherwise act in a supportive way towards other workers.

work that you do...especially a back injury. Because I do a lot of lifting and receiving.” (FG3) Those who wanted to exit the labour market by retiring early due to physical health issues felt despair because of limited financial capacity.

“Where is my hope, where is my future? It’s only the tired body’s being in there... If you do the house cleaning, they understand that your back, your shoulder, it’s your legs, sometimes it’s your knees, oh my God, it’s all a problem. It is, like, and then it will be affecting your mental, right, and then you’ll be always thinking of, how long do I have to continue?” (FG2)

VALUE AND STRENGTH THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF CARE

Devaluation of the work and contributions of the women hotel workers was a consistent theme in all interviews and focus groups conducted as part of this project. Systematically, their work was devalued through low wages and challenging working conditions. The women made it apparent that a sense of dignity through work is commonly eroded through interactions with an employer or manager. Examples where workers were made to feel disposable, disrespected, voiceless, and powerless, lie at the heart of hotel worker devaluation during the pandemic. The workers, however, carved a space where they felt valued and drew strength by coming together and creating communities of care. Both systemic and interpersonal devaluation, often interacting, were heightened by the pandemic contributing to workers feeling devalued as humans.

Workers felt that their well-being was not prioritized or even considered over the course of the pandemic. Well-being was elaborated as financial, physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Those whose employment had been terminated, for instance, lamented about lack of consideration for their years of service and retirement; some had worked in the same hotel for over 20 years. Those who had returned to work but whose work hours were inadequate and inconsistent because of sporadic scheduling felt that their employers did not care if they earned enough to sustain themselves and their families. One worker who lived in substandard employer-supported accommodation, lamented how the inadequate housing and limited income to afford alternative housing pushed her to quit her work. Regarding their health, the women narrated how they were “pushed more” during the pandemic, noting a prevailing attitude of “to heck with the workers.” (Int.2) Many did not feel able to voice their concerns due to intimidation from management and fear of

potential retaliation that could affect their work conditions and scheduled hours.

In a focus group with both room attendants and front office staff, workers conversed about the contradiction of hotels scheduling room attendants to only clean checked-out rooms for their safety, to protect against COVID-19 infection (concurrently increasing workers' workload and reducing staffing costs) yet showing little concern for safety concerns raised by front office workers, resulting from abuse by customers. They concluded that where their hotels have voiced concerns for workers, this has been rhetorical. One worker highlighted the paradox between her hotel's motto of 'care and understanding' and her experience: "...any time the boss asked me: 'what's happening for you?', they only think about how many rooms I finish." (FG5) Feeling devalued evidently made workers question the intention of their employers: Some commented on how their hotels had recovered to record-high revenues with some receiving government benefits, yet this did not translate to improved income or working conditions for workers.

Workers expressed an awareness that their devaluation emanated both from their occupation and their identity as racialized and immigrant women: "Yes, we are room attendants; we come from different backgrounds. Sometimes, yes, we do clean, but it doesn't mean that we are less." (FG3) The hotel worker highlighted implicit and explicit sexism and racism experienced in their workplace. One worker noted how their hotel owner never looked or spoke to women workers: "I know this guy doesn't value the women." (FG1) A recent immigrant room attendant indicated that qualifications from outside Canada are disregarded by the industry, resulting in overqualified workers who feel devalued. In reaching out to the human resource department at her hotel regarding other potential opportunities, the worker narrated how, "One of them mentioned that 'you are from Asia' immediately, and the human resource didn't give me any chance." (FG5) When asked what changes they would like to see in their hotel, many workers highlighted the need to be respected and valued as workers and humans. While the industry highlighted an over representation of workers who are female, immigrants, seasonal foreign workers, and visible minority in advocating for pandemic recovery support,⁵⁸ employers did not seem to value these very workers.

Workers drew together for validation and strength from each other, creating communities of care in their workplaces. Such communities are known to empower workers who feel devalued because in these spaces "they are valued for who they are and not for what they bring."⁵⁹ Understanding of shared challenges at work and limited voice therein

particularly drew them to each other, where they felt, “We all just kind of like banded together and helped each other out in the best way that we possibly could.” (FG6) When asked about what they enjoyed the most about their work, almost all workers highlighted familial relationships with coworkers: “...we’re like a real family. We get along well, we help each other, we care for each other.” (FG6) Solidarity among workers grew organically by spending most of their waking hours together, with some having worked together for more than 10 or 20 years: “We work together all day, so at home just we can go eat and sleep just a few hours, right, but all day we are in hotel so that is my family too.” (Int.02) Workers supported each other in practical ways, such as in managing their high workloads, including by advising each other on effective ways to do their work or how to push back on excessive workloads; some even helped each other to finish their shift work. They also extended emotional support to each other, including by debriefing about work over breaks and sharing moments of joy outside of work. This stood out as an important coping mechanism for work-related stress.

The pandemic disrupted this support network as some colleagues did not return to work and, in some cases, workers were separated due to structural changes: “We had a big shift in some people not coming back. So, we had to kind of get used to all new people.” (FG5) The few workers who returned to work earlier in the pandemic, in 2020, noted how “eerie”, “sad”, and “depressing” it was to work with no or few colleagues, without knowing when others would return. For some, this isolation persisted even after more hotel workers returned to work due to inconsistent and reduced schedules and a shift in work culture as workers singularly focused on finishing their high workload.

“Like, I see some of—because we don’t really connect anymore—we used to be there all day. I used to have an eight-hour shift. So, I got to know all the housekeeping, and, like, we’d all have lunch together and we’d all have a great time. But now everybody, everything’s just separate. Like, I don’t even know half the people that work upstairs. And that’s how unpersonal it’s getting. You know? Because everybody’s just kind of kept separate.” (Int.04)

While the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences in the hotel industry disrupted these communities of care and, consequently, isolated workers when they needed such support the most, others found ways to support each other, including through emotional, financial, and advocacy support. A couple of workers indicated that their managers were part of their communities of care.

"[During the pandemic]... a lot of us just kind of, like, helped each other out. Always like messaged how we were doing, like if anyone needed anything, we were always kind of there to like jump in and help out with anyone or anything that needed support or like leave stuff at the front door and then knock on it. And then kind of do things like that. Or whenever Starbucks comes back up, drop a Starbucks off or, like whatever, a Tim Hortons or something..." (FG6)

Union membership extended these communities of care, strengthening workers' bonds of solidarity and empowering them to assert their voice, push back against unsafe work conditions, and collectively demand meaningful recognition including through fair wages. While some workers still felt unable to voice their concerns due to potential repercussions, others felt emboldened by their union membership and support from co-workers. The worker who had brought an unsafe workplace case to WorkSafeBC (case study 1) confessed that she felt able to do so because of her union membership. Union membership opened pathways to collective action, first by increasing awareness of workers' rights and then by protecting these rights. The women hotel workers indicated that union membership secured their employment, allowing them to accrue better income and benefits over the years that come with workplace seniority. They noted that, despite some employers pushing back against solidarity among workers and union membership, their communities of care and union membership were sometimes what allowed them to stay employed.

"I work in a non-union place. They can kick you off anytime they want. Nobody is protecting you. The only reason the people stays longer—they don't go because they're protected by the union. Without the union, they can do whatever they want. ...There's really no effort to foster an environment of support and comradery. I think they [employers] prefer that." (FG4)

"The union definitely protects us. Because people like me who do this [advocate for workplace safety]—we would get fired immediately. I would have been fired years ago if it wasn't for the union. They would have loved to get rid of me years ago. Anybody who says, 'Wait, you know, let's think of the worker instead of the money'—do you think any owner's going to keep me around? No, they're going to be like, 'Get rid of her. Let's get somebody else in there who's just going to shut their mouth and work.' So, without the union, I wouldn't be there." (Int.02)

Unionized workers who were laid off for an extended period during the pandemic, along with their co-workers back at work, pulled together to organize strikes and negotiate an extension of their recall rights to

the end of the pandemic: "...when you get laid off, if you don't work one year, automatically you're losing your job." (FG1) Some of those who had returned to work voted to strike in support of their laid-off co-workers, giving up their own income and risking their employment. In British Columbia, unionized women hotel workers whose employment had been terminated rallied through the B.C. Unequal Women campaign to raise awareness of pandemic-related terminations, which affected about 50,000 hospitality workers, particularly women workers.⁶⁰ Throughout the campaign, more than 3,500 unionized workers successfully negotiated for extended recall rights, but others continue to fight for their job.⁶¹ At the time of the interview, about five participants were still on strike and had been on strike for about two years. Workers continue to advocate for better working conditions in the industry. There was a shared perception that as a group committed to a common goal, their demands and concerns could be better heard. This was reflected in reports indicating increased demand for unionization amid high inflation and increased precarity in the industry.⁶² Their union membership afforded them organizational and financial support through strikes while their communities of care provided strength and validation even in their most challenging days on the picket lines.

"Well, I've been suffering, and at least we have each other—we complain to each other what's going on. Today's too cold for the picket line, you know, it will be too hot, you know. [Laughter]. We support each other. We have good days, bad days, all together as a family." (FG1)

CONCLUSION

THIS REPORT PUTS TO the forefront the voices and experiences of women hotel workers who were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent public health measures, and the hotel industry's response. Many workers lost their employment, while others experienced a reduction in their income due to reduced and unpredictable work hours. The financial struggles that ensued point to increased housing and food insecurity among this group of workers. Even as some fully recovered their pre-pandemic income, the level of their income still made it challenging to cope with high inflation. Workers close to retirement were particularly made vulnerable as they drew on their savings with limited ability to change jobs or careers. The report also illuminated a paradox of unemployed workers and inadequate work hours in the context of employer-reported labour shortages in the hotel industry.

The pandemic brought to the fore and exacerbated precarious working conditions experienced by hotel workers. In the initial waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, workers' fear of exposure to COVID-19 and abuse by customers were not adequately addressed. Further, workloads were systematically increased by changes in hotel protocols, which continued to be implemented even after public health measures were lifted. Resultant health effects, including physical injuries, did little to inspire efforts by employers to alleviate these harms. Deteriorating physical and mental health resulted in workers taking sick leave or short-term disability leave. Some workers were re-injured following leaves, as they did not have sufficient time for recovery. A case study included in this report highlights the extent to which workers are forced to go to seek redress for unsafe workplaces, at the expense of their personal time and family responsibilities, while risking retaliation from their employer.

This report spotlights a devaluation of these care workers at systemic and interpersonal levels, characterized by low wages, precarious work, challenging working conditions, dismissive and demeaning employers or/and managers, and limited space to exercise their rights. The women narrated a myriad of ways in which they felt disposable, disrespected, and powerless, primarily due to their occupation but also because of their gender and ethnic background. The pandemic only exacerbated these aspects of devaluation and heightened mistrust of workers towards their employers and managers. The women hotel workers came together to seek validation and strength by creating communities of care within their workplace and joining union memberships. Despite fear of retaliation, especially in the context of increased precarity in the industry, these avenues of strength inspired courage in the women workers as they learned and fought for their rights.

As the federal government and the government of British Columbia work towards a full pandemic recovery and better pandemic preparedness, it is important that the voices and experiences of these and other workers who have been most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic are placed at the center of policy discussion. Pandemic recovery should not be made synonymous with revenue recovery but should also entail, as its part and parcel, recovery for the women workers who bore the costs of pandemic response. Similarly, efforts to support industries should go hand in hand with efforts to support industry workers. Below are some recommendations that could act as a starting point to support hotel workers, a vulnerable workforce in an important sector of Canada's economy. We recognize that their employment and well-being are central to the future vitality and success of the hotel industry—and the accommodation and food services sector in general. Caring for workers' well-being will not only increase their productivity but also improve the retention of workers. These recommendations are not only drawn from conclusions we drew from this research, but also those directly voiced by this group of workers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Securing recall rights

As we demonstrated in this report, some hotel workers lost their employment during the COVID-19 pandemic because their right to return to their prior employment arrangement following initial layoffs was not secure. Where some had secured recall rights through union negotiations,

to account for seasonality of the industry, this did not extend to more than one year of layoff, which was the reality for many during the pandemic. Hence, even as hotels recovered their business, some workers were not recalled.

The federal and provincial governments should safeguard workers right to recall in case of layoff during health or other emergencies. At the provincial level, this can be done by providing policy protections through the *Employment Standards Act* and other policies or guidance. Both levels of government should enforce recall as a condition for extending emergency benefits to employers who furlough or layoff workers. To implement stronger accountability, governments should ensure employer subsidies intended to preserve workers' jobs also incorporate reporting transparency including reporting on retained jobs.

2. Addressing income insecurity

Hotel workers faced income insecurity because of irregular and unpredictable work schedules as employers sought to minimize costs using strategies such as on-call work arrangements and compensating for understaffing through overtime work arrangements. Participants highlighted that these cost-cutting strategies persisted even as hotels recovered their business, indicating that strategies once used for dealing with effects of the pandemic are becoming a norm in the hotel industry in order to increase profit margins.

Employers in the accommodation and food services sector and hotel industry should provide their workers with full-time employment and regular work schedules as well as abandon cost-minimizing strategies that contribute to income insecurity among workers. Where scheduling changes are necessary, employers should provide workers with reasonable advance notice.

The provincial government should protect workers from income precarity by introducing a predictive scheduling regulation that limits on-call scheduling. Where emergency benefits are tied to recall rights, this should also secure regular and predictable work schedule for those who return to work.

3. Enabling affordability

Hotel workers typically earn below the living wage, with some earning just above the minimum wage. Workers who participated in this project highlight financial challenges that result in constant negotiation on the opportunity cost of meeting their necessities and supporting their

families. This is in the backdrop of increased cost of living and stagnant income that isn't keeping up with inflation.

The provincial government should work towards increasing the minimum wage to a living wage so that salaries better align with actual cost of living.

The federal government should support retirement security by further enhancing the Canada Pension Plan (to reduce reliance on private savings) and income support for low-income seniors through increases to the GIS top-up for both single seniors and couples. This would be especially beneficial for those in seasonal work and/or workers in other precarious industries who otherwise have a difficult time accumulating retirement savings.

The accommodation and food services sector and hotel industry employers should commit to being living wage employers and address gender wage gap. Employers should further provide benefits that reduce the financial burden of workers including transit subsidies.

4. Safeguarding workers' rights

Hotel workers experience challenging work conditions, including heavy workloads and limited breaks between tasks that contribute to workers not utilizing ergonomic measures to protect themselves against injuries. Workers often continue working under unsafe work conditions due to fear of retaliation and the burden of redress.

The accommodation and food services sector and hotel industry employers should establish safe and manageable workloads in collaboration with workers and unions, to be actively monitored and updated. Employers should further ensure workers receive periodic training on work safety, including use of ergonomic measures and tools and taking breaks between tasks. In addition to training materials available through WorkSafeBC, individual employers should supplement with on-job training that is contextualized to meet work demands.

Employers should fulfil their responsibility to ensure that all workers are aware of their rights, including the right to safe workplaces, to take breaks, to unionize, and to seek redress where their rights are not upheld. Employers should respect workers' right to unionize and to advocate for better working conditions. Employers should not engage in anti-union activities.

The provincial government should improve enforcement of work safety employment standards. The current enforcement, which is based on workers making formal complaints through WorkSafeBC processes and organizing through health and safety committees, places the burden of

redress on workers and compromises workers who fear and experience retaliation by their employers. The government should proactively enforce workplace rights (both under the *Employment Standards Act* and the *Workers Compensation Act*), including proactive inspections that are strategically targeted at sectors and occupations where there are large numbers of vulnerable and precariously employed workers, including temporary foreign workers, such as the accommodation and food services sector.

5. Safeguarding workers health and well-being

The physical health of hotel workers is compromised by the physically tasking nature of their occupation, particularly among room attendants, and where heavy workloads make work unsafe. Apart from the five-day paid sick leave entitlement introduced by the provincial government in 2022, none of the participants had employer paid sick leave. Injured workers relied on government short-term disability benefits. Where work conditions remained unchanged, workers sustained chronic injuries even after taking disability leave and undergoing treatment. Hotel workers also experienced a deterioration of their mental health due to their challenging work conditions, including heavy workloads, health concerns, income insecurity, and financial challenges.

In addition to the above recommendations to ensure safe and manageable workloads and offer periodic safety trainings, the accommodation and food services sector and hotel industry employers should provide all workers, full-time and part-time, with extended health benefits that include physiotherapy treatment and mental health support. Further, the industry and employers should implement permanent employer-paid sick leave for all workers to supplement the government paid sick leave for workers who might not qualify for disability leave benefits.

Employers should create an environment of emotional safety and well-being. Hotel workers shared how the creation of avenues for exchanges, including through periodic feedback sessions, could bridge the power differential that contributes to tension in the workplace. Participants' experiences made it abundantly clear that there is a need for employers to regularly and tangibly value and appreciate workers, as well as foster respectful relationships between employers and employees.

NOTES

- 1 Katherine Scott, 2021, [Women, work and COVID-19](#), Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Lokprij Shurma and Julia Smith, 2021, [Women in a COVID-19 recession](#), Gender and COVID-19 Project.
- 4 Katherine Scott, 2020, [Women bearing the brunt of economic losses](#), *The Monitor*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.
- 5 Katherine Scott, 2021, [Women, work and COVID-19](#).
- 6 Mignon Duffy, 2005, [Reproducing labor inequalities](#), *Gender and Society*, Vol 19, No. 1.
- 7 Melissa Moyser, 2017, "[Women and paid work](#)," *Women in Canada: A gender-based statistical report*. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 89-503-X.
- 8 Statistics Canada, 2022, "[Pay gap, 1998 to 2021](#)," *Quality of Employment in Canada*, Catalogue no. 14280001.
- 9 Nalinie Mooten, 2021, [Racism, discrimination and migrant workers in Canada](#), Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada; Alice Mürage and Julia Smith, 2023, [Multifaced precarity: pandemic experiences of recent immigrant women in the accommodation and food services sector](#), BMC Public Health; BC Women's Health Foundation, 2021, [Invisible no more: Inequities faced by women healthcare workers](#); House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women, 2020, [Evidence — FEWO-4 \(July 7, 2020\)](#); Lokprij Shurma, Julia Smith, and Alice Mürage, 2022, [COVID-19 and Employment Loss in the Accommodation and Food Services Sector](#), Gender and COVID-19 Project.
- 10 Statistics Canada, 2022, [Pay gap, 1998 to 2021](#); Feng Hou and Garnett Picot, 2022, [Immigrant labour market outcomes during recessions](#), Economic and Social Reports, Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 36-28-0001.
- 11 Kjersti Østbakken, Julia Orupabo, and Marjan Nadim, 2022, [The hierarchy of care work: how immigrants influence the gender-segregated labor market](#), *Social Politics*, Vol 30, No. 3; Evelyn Glenn, 1992, [From servitude to service work: historical continuities in the racial division of paid reproductive labor](#), *Signs*, Vol. 18, No. 1.
- 12 Destination British Columbia, 2023, [Value of tourism — 10 year trend data tables: 2011-2021](#).
- 13 Destination British Columbia, 2023, [2021 Value of Tourism: A snapshot of tourism in BC](#).
- 14 Destination British Columbia, 2023, [Value of tourism](#).
- 15 Statistics Canada, 2023, [Table 14-10-0023-01—Labour force characteristics by industry, annual \(x 1,000\)](#)
- 16 These are industry designation according to the [North American Industry Classification System \(NAICS\)](#) Canada 2022 Version 1.0.

17 Unless referenced otherwise, the data below is drawn from [Statistics Canada's Labour Force Characteristics by Industry \(Table 14-10-0023-01\)](#) and a related customized dataset acquired from Statistics Canada.

18 Statistics Canada, 2023, Labour force characteristics by industry, annual (×1000) [Custom order data, Table 0922_01].

19 Statistics Canada, 2023, [Table 14-10-0132-01—Union status by industry](#).

20 Statistics Canada, 2022, [Trade union density rate, 1997 to 2021](#), Quality of Employment in Canada, Catalogue no. 14280001.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Akshay Kulkarni, 2022, [Interest in unions is growing in B.C.'s hospitality sector](#), *CBC News*, August 21, 2022.

23 Rosemary Lucas, 2009, [Is low unionisation in the British hospitality industry due to industry characteristics?](#) *International Journal of Hospital Management*, Vol. 28, Issue 1; Akshay Kulkarni, 2022.

24 Statistics Canada, 2023, [Table 36-10-0230-0—Tourism demand in Canada, constant prices \(x 1,000,000\) 1](#).

25 Government of British Columbia, 2023, [Monthly tourism sector indicators, seasonally adjusted](#).

26 Government of British Columbia, 2022, [Annual tourism indicators, including GDP and employment](#).

27 Tiffany Crawford, 2020, [COVID-19: B.C.'s hotel industry facing closures, mass layoffs](#), *Vancouver Sun*, May 21, 2020.

28 Government of British Columbia, 2022, [Annual tourism indicators, including GDP and employment](#).

29 Canada Revenue Agency, 2022, [Table 2: Approved Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy \(CEWS\) claims by period and industry sector, Canada](#).

30 Canada Revenue Agency, 2023, [Claims to date—Tourism and Hospitality Recovery Program \(THRP\)](#).

31 Canada Revenue Agency, 2022, [Table 2j: Approved Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy \(CEWS\) claims by period and industry sector, British Columbia](#).

32 Bill Curry, 2023, [Ottawa paid out more than \\$37-billion in pandemic wage subsidies to businesses with tax debts](#), *The Globe and Mail*, February 23, 2023.

33 René Morissette, Martin Turcotte, and Eric Olson, 2021, [Workers receiving payments from the Canada Emergency Response Benefit program in 2020](#), StatCan COVID-19: Data insights for a better Canada. Statistics Canada, Catalogue no. 45-28-0001

34 Rebecca Cheff, Stephanie Elliott, Adwoa Afful and Erica Opoku, 2023, [Mapping the impacts of COVID-19 on hotel workers in the GTA](#), Wellesley Institute.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Statistics Canada, 2023, [Accommodation services, 2021](#), *The Daily*, January 18, 2023.

37 *Ibid.*

38 BC Statistics, 2023, [Room revenues & property counts, January 2010 to June 2023. Table: Room revenues by municipal jurisdictions](#).

39 Commercial Real Estate Services, 2023, Trends in the Canadian hotel industry, CBRE National Market Report, August 2023.

40 Commercial Real Estate Services, 2022, [Canadian hotel industry will return to pre-pandemic revenues in 2023](#); Peter Mitham, 2022, [B.C. hotel operators hopeful after successful season](#), Western Investor; HNN Newswire, 2023, [STR: Canada Hotels Achieved Record-High Rates and Revenue per Available Room in 2022](#), CoStar.

41 Statistics Canada, 2023, [Accommodation services, 2021](#), *The Daily*, January 18, 2023.

- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 Eli Rosenberg, 2021, [Hotel industry emerges from pandemic with new business model, possibly fewer workers](#), *The Washington Post*, June 11, 2021; Erica Alini, 2022, [Welcome to 'hotel shrinkflation,' where rates are high and perks may never return](#), *The Globe and Mail*, August 16, 2023; Melissa Klurman, 2023, [8 things you won't see in hotels anymore](#), *Reader's Digest*, January 27, 2023; Daniel Braff, 2023, [Say goodbye to daily hotel room cleaning](#), *The New York Times*, March 24, 2023; Cameron Sperance, 2021, [Hotels scored profits with massive pandemic cost cuts— But at What Price?](#) *Skift*, March 26, 2021.
- 44 Cassandra Jeffery, 2022, [British Columbia hotel workers fight pandemic profiteering](#), *Canadian Dimension*, September 13, 2022; Michael Sainato, 2021, [Overworked, underpaid: workers rail against hotel chains' cost-cutting](#), *The Guardian*, July 5, 2021; Biyan Wen, Xiaoman Zhou, Yaou Hu, Xiao Zhang, 2020, [Role stress and turnover intention of front-line hotel employees](#), *Front Psychol*, Vol. 11; Asier Baquero, 2023, [Hotel employees' burnout and intention to quit](#), *Behav Sci*, Vol. 13, No. 2.
- 45 UNITE HERE Local 40, 2021, [Unequal women](#).
- 46 Stephanie Fung and Naden Albenes, 2020, [Naden Abenes: I'm fasting in front of the B.C. legislature for my job and my future](#). *Vancouver Sun*, August 20, 2020.
- 47 B.C. Government, 2020, [Minister's statement on report on hotel sector](#), August 31, 2020.
- 48 In the State of California, for instance, the [Labour Code section 2810.8](#) (effective April 16, 2021 until December 31, 2024) secures recall rights for hospitality and business service workers laid-off as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 49 Employment and Social Development Canada, 2022, [Government of Canada announces Workforce Solutions Road Map](#); Rosa Saba, 2023, [Temporary foreign workers need more paths to immigration](#), *CBC News*, June 16, 2023.
- 50 Statistics Canada, 2021, [National Occupational Classification \(NOC\) 2021 Version 1.0](#).
- 51 One participant opted not to answer this demographic question.
- 52 Iglia Ivanova, Anastasia French, Tania Oliveira, 2023, [Working for a living wage](#), CCPA and Living Wage for Families BC.
- 53 Statistics Canada, 2023, [Table 14-10-0326-01— Job vacancies, payroll employees, job vacancy rate, and average offered hourly wage](#).
- 54 Ted Clarke, 2023, [B.C. hotel industry struggling with labour shortages, increased costs](#), *Business in Vancouver*, February 15, 2023.
- 55 WorkSafeBC, 2023, [Injury rate: provincial overview](#).
- 56 *Ibid.*
- 57 CBC News, 2022, ["Longest hotel strike in B.C. history ends with vote in favour of new agreement,"](#) May 11, 2022; CBC News, 2023, ["Striking hotel workers demand wages meet cost of living in Metro Vancouver,"](#) August 5, 2023.
- 58 British Columbia Hotel Association, 2020, [BC hotel industry's response to BC's recovery plan](#).
- 59 Ethel Tungohan, 2023, [Care activism: Migrant domestic workers, movement-building and communities of care](#), Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- 60 UNITE HERE Local 40, 2021, [Unequal women](#).
- 61 *Ibid.*
- 62 Akshay Kulkarni, 2022.

