



### **REGIONAL OVERVIEW:**

## THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE STATUS OF EQUALITY IN MONTÉRÉGIE

2<sup>nd</sup> edition

Updated March 2023

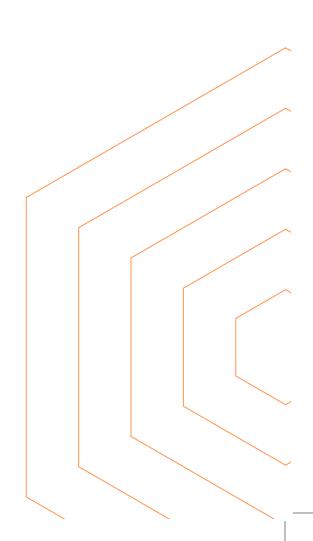
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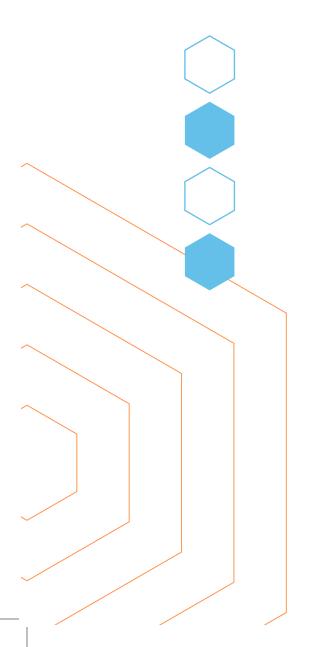
Table de concertation des groupes de femmes de la Montérégie

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ISBN: 978-2-9818877-5-7 (imprimé) ISBN: 978-2-9818877-4-0 (PDF)



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### **ACRONYMS**

AL Urban agglomeration of Longueuil

CALACS Centre d'aide et de lutte contre les agressions à caractère sexuel

[sexual assault centre]

CAFAL Comité d'actions féministes de l'Agglomération de Longueuil

CCFTÉ Coalition pour la conciliation famille-travail-études

JFB+ Job-family balance+

CFOJA Canadian Feminicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability

CMM Communauté métropolitaine de Montréal

CPRMV Centre de prévention de la radicalisation menant à la violence

CRÉ Conférences régionales des élu·es

[regional committees of elected officials]

**CSF** Conseil du statut de la femme

[Québec's status of women council]

**DPCP** Directeur des poursuites criminelles et pénales

[in charge of criminal and penal prosecutions in Québec]

WGEC Women and Gender Equality Canada

GBA Gender-Based analysis

GBA+ Gender-Based analysis Plus

**GFPD** Groupe Femmes, Politique et Démocratie

MIRS Maison internationale de la Rive-Sud

MRC Municipalité régionale de comté

[regional county municipality]

MSSS Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux

[ministry of health and social services in Québec]

RTRGFQ Réseau des Tables régionales de groupes de femmes du Québec

SAC Service aux collectivités

SCF Secrétariat à la condition féminine

SPAL Service de police de l'Agglomération de Longueuil

TCGFM Table de concertation des groupes de femmes de la Montérégie
TCSFIAL Table de concertation sur la situation des femmes immigrantes

de l'Agglomération de Longueuil

TIRS Table Itinérance Rive-Sud

**UQAM** Université du Québec à Montréal

### 1. ABOUT THE TCGFM

Created in 1980 and officially incorporated in 1988, the Table de concertation des groupes de femmes de la Montérégie (TCGFM) directs its actions towards improving the socio-economic, cultural and political conditions of women. It works from the perspective of defending rights and achieving equality between women and men and between women themselves. The TCGFM is a key player in mobilization in Montérégie and assumes a regional leadership role with regard to the status of women and gender equality.

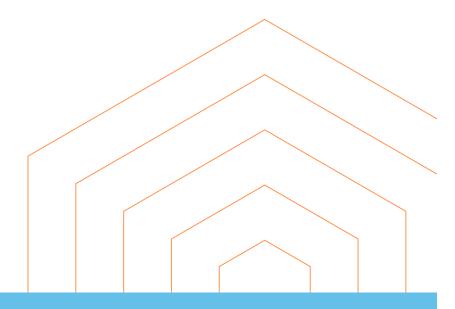
Acting as a rallying force, the TCGFM owes its vitality mainly to the involvement of its members and their delegates in regular meetings and on committees. The feminist convictions of member groups and the sharing of expertise, information and vision generate solidarity to achieve a common goal: bringing equality back to the forefront of local and regional institutions' concerns, and, in so doing, safeguarding the rights of women in Montérégie.

### 2. ABOUT THE REGIONAL OVERVIEW

#### A. OBJECTIVES OF THE REGIONAL OVERVIEW

The overview was produced in response to a request from the Secrétariat à la condition féminine (SCF). This report is not intended to replace regional portraits prepared previously by the Conseil du statut de la femme<sup>1</sup>, as the TCGFM is a regional advocacy organization that does not produce its own statistics. It relies on data generated by other bodies that have been made available to the general public.

The purpose of this report is to produce a regional overview that will be disseminated to the SCF, as well as to the TCGFM's partners and the main local and regional coordinating bodies in the Montérégie region. Specifically, the TCGFM aims to highlight the key gender equality issues facing women's groups.



#### B. ISSUES INVOLVED IN DEVELOPING THE OVERVIEW: GBA+

The data collection issues identified in the first edition of this report are unfortunately still relevant today2. Gendered regional data, and, especially, gendered regional data broken down by additional demographic indicators (religion, ethnic origin, membership in a First Nations community, sexual orientation, disability status, etc.) remain largely inaccessible<sup>3</sup>. One of the first steps in implementing gender-based analysis (GBA) is the collection of gender-disaggregated data. Application of gender-based analysis from an intersectional perspective (GBA+), however, continues to be a secondary priority. In fact, the Québec government envisages restricting its implementation to pilot projects—as presented in the Government Strategy for Gender Equality, 2022-20274. This data is essential, however, to gaining a better understanding of the realities and issues of our community's members. We also need this data to devise

solutions and services that are truly adapted and aimed not only at meeting the immediate need, but also at eliminating the sources of inequity<sup>5</sup>. Lack of data limits the ability of organizations working at the local and regional levels to act.

To promote the development of data disaggregated by gender and other identity factors, and also to ensure practical spinoffs, analysis and project implementation, TCGFM has engaged in an intensive mission of GBA+ education, capacity building and sustainability since September 2021. This mission comprises online trainings, short and long term coaching, and tool development. Spin-offs include the production of local overviews (RLS Champlain and Brossard). In these overviews, the analysis of disaggregated collected data highlights realities that are often ignored and left out, in addition to contributing to a detailed knowledge of the local population.

COACHING PROVIDED BY THE TCGFM				
WHAT IS INVOLVED IN COACHING?	COACHING STATISTICS			
Coaching is flexible and varies according to each group's needs. It provides a supportive space and helps people to identify blind spots and develop reflexes to integrate and apply a GBA+ approach  The TCGFM provides:  Strategic advice related to the initiative  Review of the initiative's main focuses and action plan  Application of GBA+ within the initiative	<ul> <li>November 2021 to February 2023:</li> <li>9 coaching activities completed or underway with community groups and municipalities</li> <li>16 online training sessions (48 hours)</li> <li>248 individuals trained</li> <li>171 women, 26 men, 1 non-binary person, 2 people identifying as other gender and 48 people who did not declare their gender</li> </ul>			

### 3. THE MONTEREGIAN CONTEXT

### A. TERRITORY COMPOSITION AND DIFFICULTIES OF REPRESENTATION AND ACCESSIBILITY

Montérégie is composed of 148 municipalities agglomerated in 12 regional county municipalities (RCMs), in addition to the urban agglomeration of Longueuil. Despite the abolition, in 2015, of the regional conferences of elected officials (CRÉ) that divided the Montérégie territory into three areas, this same territorial division into three sub-regions (Montérégie Est, Montérégie Ouest and the Agglomération de Longueuil) has continued. Currently, the Alliance de la Solidarité uses this same territorial division for its three sub-committees. To add to the complexity, Montérégie also has three health and social services regions (CISSS) that have developed their own territorial divisions (Montérégie-Centre, Montérégie-Est and Montérégie Ouest). These artificial divisions are a challenge in terms of creating, consolidating and maintaining a common identity and regional solidarity.

In 2021, changes were made to Montérégie's territorial boundaries when the MRCs of La Haute-Yamaska and Brome-Missisquoi officially left the administrative region and joined the Eastern Townships<sup>6</sup>. The decision was mainly motivated by administrative concerns, as the two MRCs' organizations and elected officials were contending with substantial administrative duplication between the Montérégie and the Eastern Townships. The Québec government asserts that the decision was intended to

lighten the burden of the MRCs and promote cooperation and local development<sup>7</sup>.

Despite these changes, Montérégie remains the second most populous administrative region in Québec, after Montréal. It comprises 17% of the province's population<sup>8</sup>. It encompasses more densely populated urban areas—including four of the 20 most populous municipalities in Québec (Longueuil, Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Brossard and Saint-Hyacinthe)<sup>9</sup>—and large rural and agricultural areas where 14.7% of the region's population live<sup>10</sup>. It is also important to highlight the presence of two Indigenous communities on the territory of Montérégie: the communities of Kahnawá:ke and Akwesasne, both of the Mohawk Nation. In 2021, the Kahnawá:ke community had a population of 11,343<sup>11</sup>.

These representation issues also make it more difficult to engage in collective political action across the territory. The realities of urban, peri-urban and rural areas vary greatly and this makes it difficult to identify common regional issues and strategies for the entire territory. This obstacle to coordinated action had already been identified in 1985 in a report by Diane Grenier for the Women's Program of the Department of the Secretary of State of Canada<sup>12</sup>.

### B. WOMEN'S GROUPS: FROM SERVICES TO RIGHTS ADVOCACY TO UNDERFUNDING

According to the Conseil du statut de la femme (CSF), Montérégie has 65 local, regional and province-wide groups that work specifically with women¹2. Most women's groups in the Montérégie region provide services to vulnerable women (poverty, violence, health, employability, etc.). Some groups, such as the TCGFM, the Réseau des tables régionales de groupes de femmes du Québec (RTRGFQ) and other feminist groups are more directly involved in representing women and women's groups, and collective action to defend women's rights.

A few years ago, the TCGFM member groups were already seeing an increase in requests for services. Many workers noted lengthening waiting lists in their organizations. In 2022, 23.3% of female staff working with women in Montérégie stated that their organization's diminished capacity to accommodate the demand represented an obstacle to women users obtaining the support they needed. In addition to rising numbers of requests<sup>13</sup>, workers also reported that cases are becoming more complex. The phenomenon of «dumping» users of public services on community resources, although it remains difficult to quantify, means that the community sector is confronting a clientele that is struggling with increasingly complex problems.

MOREOVER, A RECENT STUDY SHOWS THAT

MORE THAN A THIRD OF COMMUNITY WORKERS

WORKING WITH WOMEN IN THE MONTÉRÉGIE

REGION (36.9%) BELIEVE THAT THE COMPLEXITY

OF THE PROBLEMES EXPERIENCED BY WOMEN

USERS REPRESENTS A SIGNIFICANT OBSTACLE

IN THE SUPPORT THEY RECEIVE<sup>14</sup>.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has further weakened the public health system and exacerbated the problem of «dumping» on to chronically underfunded community resources<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the health and social services network was operating with severely reduced staffing levels while facing an exceptionally high demand. This was because of both the number of people affected by COVID-19 and the consequences of restrictive public health measures. The overloading of the public network, where the vast majority of human resources were mobilized in the fight against COVID-19, created an additional burden on the community sector, where many people in need of care were redirected.

THE RESULT IS HARDLY SURPRISING: LESS
CAPACITY TO ENGAGE IN ALLIANCE BUILDING AND
COLLECTIVE ACTION DUE TO THE CONCENTRATION OF
HUMAN RESOURCES IN SERVICE DELIVERY. THIS
CONSTANT OVERLOAD DISCOURAGES COLLECTIVE
WORK AND LEADS TO A SILO APPROACH.

Overload not only hinders regional mobilization and collective action, it also contributes to dividing service provider organizations from those whose mission is collective social and political action.

# 4. REGIONAL SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES

TCGFM members are particularly concerned about the effects of poverty on women's living conditions. In 2019, they were already concerned about «the multiplication of factors of precariousness specific to women as well as the non-recognition of systemic gendered factors generating women's poverty: domestic violence, loss of earnings in maternity situations, single-parent families, older women and isolation, immigration and isolation, etc.» <sup>16</sup> The pandemic has unfortunately exacerbated factors of precariousness and vulnerability among members of our communities. Poverty must therefore be seen as a cross-cutting issue the repercussions of which intersect with other social and political issues.

### A. POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

intensified efforts specifically aimed at promoting the participation and representation of women in politics. In Montérégie, funding was provided for projects involving

In recent years, some government structures have action-research, training, networking activities as well as the creation and distribution of awareness tools across the Montérégie territory<sup>17</sup>.

### WHAT ARE THE RESULTS OF THESE COORDINATED INITIATIVES?

#### ... AT THE PROVINCIAL LEVEL<sup>18</sup>

At the provincial level, parity has been achieved in Monteregie. In the 2018 election, 11 of the 21 elected officials were women. In the 2022 election, parity was confirmed when 12 female candidates won their elections in the territory's 21 constituencies. Montérégie has therefore raised the provincial average from 42% (2018) to 46% (2022) of elected women<sup>19</sup>. We must remain vigilant, however, as there are no laws protecting or regulating women's representation in politics, and the proportion of women elected can guickly decline if efforts to promote their participation cease.



#### ... AT THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL<sup>20</sup>

From 2013 to 2017, the presence of women in municipal politics in the territory showed little significant improvement, continuing nearly two decades of non-linear fluctuations and resulting in a stagnation effect. However, women's representation on municipal councils in the region increased after the 2021 general municipal elections. In fact, a jump of more than 5% was recorded; women now hold 35.3% of the seats on Montérégie municipal councils.

This increase indicates that efforts within the regions appear to be paying off. However, some figures remain worrying and show that the fight for parity is far from over:

- Women represent only 27.7% of those elected to the mayor's office in Montérégie's 148 municipalities. The target parity zone is between 40% and 60%
- In 30 municipalities, no women or only one woman were elected to the municipal council (including women mayors). These municipalities are not evenly distributed across the territory; some MRCs appear to be significantly more affected than others by the under-representation of women in municipal politics.

### **B. IMMIGRATION**

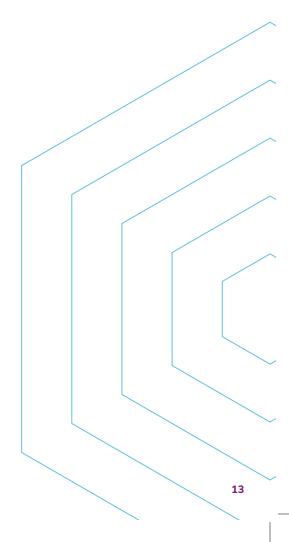
Montérégie's immigrant population is constantly increasing. Between 2016 and 2021, it increased from 150,000 to 187,275, 51% (95,500) of whom are women<sup>21</sup>. The place of birth of immigrants residing in Montérégie is almost equally distributed among four regions: the Americas, Africa, Europe and Asia<sup>22</sup>. The number of visible minorities is estimated at over 202,845, of which 102,335 are women<sup>23</sup>. Montérégie continues to be one of the main places of residence for immigrants in the province, outside of the Montréal area<sup>24</sup>.

The immigrant population is far from being evenly distributed across Montérégie. According to data from the Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration, in 2021, there were more immigrants residing in the municipality of Longueuil (31,286) than in all the other MRCs of Montérégie (25,536)<sup>25</sup>. This can be explained by the municipality of Longueuil's geographical proximity to the metropolis of Montréal, and also by the size of Longueuil, which has more resources to meet these communities' specific needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the adoption of restrictions that slowed the growth of Québec's immigrant population. According to the Montréal Metropolitan Community (MMC), immigration will remain the main factor of demographic growth for years to come<sup>26</sup>. Despite their undeniable contribution to Québec society, immigrants continue to face numerous systemic obstacles, as shown in the social and economic analysis conducted in the first edition of this report.

IN RECENT YEARS, IMMIGRANTS AND PARTICULARLY
WOMEN, HAVE CONTINUED TO BE PROPORTIONATELY
OVER-REPRESENTED IN INDICATORS OF POVERTY,
MARGINALIZATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC
VULNERABILITY.

According to a worker at the Maison internationale de la Rive-Sud (MIRS), the living conditions of immigrant women have not improved significantly in recent years. On the contrary, this worker has observed a setback in women's autonomy, given the difficulties in accessing services. She notes that some immigrant women are more vulnerable than others, including foreign students, temporary workers and refugees whose status gives them access to only limited services. This is particularly true in the area of sexual and reproductive health care. The imposed restrictions lead to dangerous situations where women are prevented from consulting practitioners in the public health network due to the hefty fees imposed for pregnancy follow-ups, deliveries, abortions, etc. In addition, they have no access to followup care for chronic diseases. The MIRS worker describes cases where miscarriages could have been avoided, where women end up with considerable hospital debts, and where collective fundraising has been required to enable a woman to have her baby in the hospital.



### HATE CRIMES, RACISM AND COVID-19...

The first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic also saw an increase in hate speech and acts of hatred directed against Asian communities, who are strongly represented in the urban agglomeration of Longueuil (AL). This situation is obviously not unique to the Montérégie region; several research reports mention the injustices, discrimination and acts of hatred suffered by Asian communities in Québec and more widely in Canada<sup>27</sup>. In their 2020 annual report, the Service de police de l'Agglomération de Longueuil (SPAL) explicitly refers to the dangerous marginalization of Asian communities and the visibility of racist acts against them<sup>28</sup>. SPAL and the Centre de prévention de la radicalisation menant à la violence (CPRMV) agree that these examples of hate speech and acts of hatred remain largely underreported, notably because of, 1- lack of trust in institutions; 2- the threshold of seriousness of the acts that must be reached; 3- the length and difficulty of procedures, etc<sup>29</sup>. This makes it difficult to paint a realistic picture of the hatred experienced by these communities.

Even before the pandemic broke out in Québec, in February 2020, the mayor of Brossard, Doreen Assad, was already noticing the appearance of discriminatory comments online: «We're seeing racism online, isolating statements, criticisms, and I find it very distressing.»<sup>30</sup>

### ADAPTING OUR RESOURCES TO IMMIGRANT WOMEN'S REALITIES AND NEEDS

In discussions with workers from different groups that work with women in Montérégie, we realize that outreach problems to immigrant women remain significant. Moreover, there also seems to be a retention issue since immigrant women rarely return to existing resources, even after having used them once or twice. Yet, social and economic indicators show the chronic difficulties that many of these women experience. It is therefore clear that the services provided do not meet the specific needs of women from these communities. According to a MIRS worker, several factors explain the absence of immigrant women in women's resources in Montérégie.

- Language barrier: To date, it remains difficult to find interpreters within a reasonable time frame. Women can therefore spend several days in a resource, without complete care, since no one is able to communicate with them.
- Intercultural dialogue: Beyond language, cultural differences may discourage many immigrant women from using existing resources. Organizations must develop an intercultural approach to mitigate these differences and create a safe and welcoming environment.
- Service duration: Some time-limited services do not correspond to immigrant women's realities and specific needs.
- The feeling of safety/care/welcome: The impact of the first three points undermines any attempt to instil
  a sense of safety, care and welcome. In fact, some immigrant women simply prefer to avoid using existing
  resources because they do not feel welcome and their needs are not being met. In addition, there is the fear
  of the legal system, especially true of immigrant women with precarious status.

Clearly, these issues point to the work that needs to be done within feminist community organizations. However, they also testify to the lack of resources to adapt services to the realities of all Montérégie women.

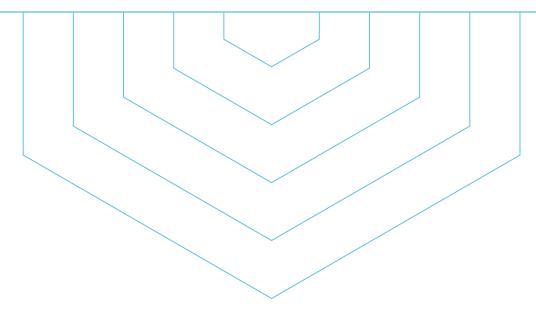
#### **CLOSURE OF ROXHAM ROAD**

At the time of writing, the announcement of the reworking of the Safe Third Country Agreement is generating more questions than answers. The closing of Roxham Road has been announced. As this crossing point between the United States and Canada, located in Montérégie, has been the subject of much controversy in recent years, it seemed appropriate to reiterate the conditions under which immigrants seeking refugee status arrive in our municipalities.

Back in 2017, a group of citizens in the Town of Hemmingford founded the group Bridges not Borders. The objective of their organization is to raise awareness among the population and elected officials about refugees by deconstructing myths and stereotypes:

Too often, refugees are rejected or stigmatized, but they are just human beings like us, fleeing terrible situations and seeking safety. People who cross illegally are not «illegal immigrants.» Nor are they «queue jumpers,» because claims are processed in the order in which they are received.<sup>31</sup>

One MIRS worker explained that women travel through several countries before reaching Canada and that the social and health conditions of these long trips are often minimal. She also described the context of vulnerability and dependence in which many women find themselves, which places them in a particularly precarious position with regard to sexual violence and mental health issues. In addition, despite the difficulties in accessing sexual and reproductive health care, many women cross the border while pregnant. Indeed, over the past year, there have been enough of them that social pediatrics resources have been reorganized to meet the growing demand. From March to November 2022, 640 pregnant women seeking asylum benefited from a new coordination mechanism to ensure follow-up and care in the Greater Montréal area<sup>33</sup>.



### C. ANTIFEMINISM AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN<sup>34</sup>

Mélissa Blais, a professor in the Department of Sociology at the Université du Québec en Outaouais, defines antifeminism as «a counter-movement that opposes the feminist movement and seeks to impede the emancipation of women.» This author describes antifeminism as a reactive force, that «evolves with the advances of the feminist movement.» As mentioned in the first edition of this overview, anti-feminism represents a real obstacle to the work carried out by feminist groups since it challenges certain rights that women have won.

Feminist groups are frequently on the front lines of these anti-feminist attacks. Many women affirm they engage in their activities as delegates to certain coordinating bodies with a sense of wariness: they report that they are the only ones equipped to identify anti-feminist strategies aimed at either 1- blurring the systemic inequalities that disadvantage women and gender minorities, or 2- minimizing the issues that concern women.

FOR EXAMPLE, ACROSS THE MONTÉRÉGIE REGION,
WOMEN WORKERS REPORT ON THE INCREASINGLY
DOMINANT DISCOURSE REGARDING THE APPROACH
TO « DOMESTIC VIOLENCE », A DISCOURSE THAT
EMPHASIZES MEN'S INDIVIDUAL DISTRESS AND
VIEWS WOMEN'S DEFENSIVE ACTIONS AS
« REACTIVE ABUSE ».

This way of conceptualizing domestic violence represents a significant and alarming step backwards since, as early as 1995, the Québec government has recognized the social and political nature of this type of violence, which is committed for the purpose of control and domination .

THESE BATTLES OVER DEFINITIONS EXTEND FAR
BEYOND THE IDEA OF A SIMPLE « WAR OR WORDS »
AS THEY AFFECT TRAINING, INTERVENTION
PROTOCOLS AND PROCEDURES WITHIN CRISIS
UNITS, LOCALPOLICE FORCES, THE DIRECTOR OF
CRIMINAL AND PENAL PROSECUTIONS (DPCP), ETC.

Not only do feminist groups have to bear the brunt of these challenges and struggles—which are not part of their core mission in most cases—but they must also constantly reaffirm the legitimacy of feminist positions that are rooted in the situation of women they serve on a daily basis. Some workers reported feeling discouraged and exhausted by the repetitive nature of the awareness-raising work that needs to be done on feminism and antifeminism within their local coalitions and with some of their institutional allies.

#### A PROJECT NOW UNDERWAY

In 2019, the TCGFM became the first organization in Québec to be funded to carry out a project specifically on anti-feminism and the symmetrization or de-gendering of violence. The purpose of the project, funded by Women and Gender Equality Canada (WGEC), is to co-construct a feminist advocacy strategy and to equip it's members and allies to contribute to reducing the manifestations of these issues in Montérégie. A self-training kit was created to sensitize workers of its member groups to anti-feminism, its multiple forms, and appropriate ways to respond to it.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had another tragic social consequence: the significant increase in cases of violence against women and femicide. According to the Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability (CFOJA), 23 women and girls were murdered in the province in 2020<sup>39</sup>. In 2021, 26 women were murdered because of their sex—a terrible number not reached since 2008<sup>40</sup>. Although the number of femicides declined in 2022, there seems to be an overrepresentation of their number in Montérégie (4 out of 14 femicides) <sup>41</sup>. It is too early to draw any conclusions, but it will be important to monitor this indicator over the next few years.

The breadth of violence against women and girls extends well beyond femicide. Province-wide, SOS violence conjugale estimates it «received 7,000 more calls in 2020-2021 than in 2019-2020. The number [was] as high as 200 per day, compared to an average of 90 in 2019.» <sup>42</sup> On the ground, this period was characterized by a forced reduction in shelters' capacity following the imposition of Québec public health regulations. This resulted in the denial of 15,000 requests for shelter from women experiencing domestic violence across the province<sup>43</sup>.

Over the past 18 months, the capacity of support organizations has gradually returned to normal, thanks to the relaxation of health regulations that restricted the number of available beds. However, despite this return to normalcy, it must be remembered that the number of resources is insufficient to meet the needs of women subjected to these situations of violence. Existing resources continue to deny requests for assistance and set up waiting lists. According to a worker from the Table Itinérance Rive-Sud (TIRS), groups have been calling for the creation of a transitional violence resource (2nd step) in the region since 2017. The overload of organizations as well as the pandemic have delayed the implementation of this project. New efforts are being made through one of the TIRS committees to ensure that this demand is heard and that concrete action is taken.

### THE ANTI-ABORTION MOVEMENT AND THE EXAMPLE OF CHÂTEAUGUAY

Anti-feminism is also expressed by the anti-abortion movement. Over the past year, the Femmes Vigilantes committee of the municipality of Chateauguay has carried out several collective actions to condemn the increase in services provided by anti-abortion practitioners<sup>44</sup>. It is not uncommon for these organizations to locate near feminist (or free choice) <sup>45</sup> resources. This is the case of a new shelter for young mothers that is part of the program of Options, an organization that provides, among other things, counselling services during an unplanned pregnancy, and that is identified as a resource that discourages abortion on moral grounds. <sup>46</sup> This new housing resource is located near the women's centre, Quartier des femmes.

At the provincial level, many feminist and pro-choice activists are calling for new research, including regionalized data, to be conducted on the anti-abortion movement in Québec, as a follow-up to the research conducted in 2014<sup>47</sup>.

### D. WOMEN AND HOMELESSNESS

From 2019 to 2023, very little new data has been generated about women's homelessness in Montérégie (quantitative or qualitative). This has compromised our ability to update this section of the report. In 2022, TCGFM, in partnership with the Service aux collectivités (SAC) of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), published a research report that briefly touched on women's homelessness<sup>48</sup>. That section of the study contained no regional data and drew on quantitative data from five to ten years ago. This reflects at least two things.

First, the difficulty of quantifying women's homelessness, which is by definition less visible than men's homelessness. In fact, according to Professor Céline Bellot, «women will generally do anything to avoid the street, and even, once on the street, avoid being identified as a woman experiencing homelessness.» [Translation] The invisibility of women's homelessness is the result of a need for protection, as the street and mixed-gender housing resources can be hostile and even dangerous places for women.

ACCORDING TO A TIRS WORKER, THERE ARE NO WOMEN-ONLY HOMELESS SHELTERS IN MONTÉRÉGIE.

According to her, the number of women using mixedgender housing resources varies greatly from season to season, sometimes leading workers to wonder where women go during their long periods of absence from the shelters and the places they usually frequent on the street. In addition, many last resort shelters do not allow people experiencing homelessness to stay for the day or leave their belongings.

A WORKER AT D'MAIN DE FEMMES HAS NOTICED

THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW PHENOMENON:

HOMELESS WOMEN'S USE OF HER CENTRE'S LIVING

SPACE DURING THE DAY.

They arrive in the morning with their bags and take refuge in the centre. Workers at other women's centres said they had observed the same phenomenon: some homeless women use the community computers available to them, while others simply take advantage of the chance to warm up for a few hours before walking back to the last resort shelter. The TIRS worker said that some organizations informally allow women to drop off their belongings for a few hours or days to make it easier for them to get around and support them in taking steps toward meeting their basic needs and social reintegration.

The absence of data from the 2022 study also demonstrates the importance of producing gendered and regionalized data to generate a realistic overview of the issues unfolding in the regions

NEVERTHELESS, TWO PARTICULARLY WORRISOME
FINDINGS EMERGED FROM THE STUDY ON WOMEN'S
WELL-BEING IN MONTÉGÉRIE. FIRST, THAT RURAL
HOMELESSNESS IS UNDERESTIMATED AND
MISUNDERSTOOD. SECONDE, THAT MARGINALIZED
POPULATIONS, LIVING AT THE INTERSERCTIONS OF
OTHER VULNERABILITIES, ARE OVER-REPRESENTED
AMONG THE HOMELESS POPULATION.

Once again, this justifies the importance of adopting GBA+ to understand the specific causes of women's homelessness and, more importantly, the specific causes of homelessness for all categories of women and gender minorities in Montérégie. For example, according to one MIRS worker, immigrant women with precarious status are more vulnerable to situations of violence and abuse. They also tend to be more tolerant of these situations as they fear homelessness, in addition to fearing retaliation from the legal system (including deportation from the country). As a result, they are more wary and less likely to turn to existing resources. Some of these women are homeless and move from one home to another through their network of acquaintances. Eventually, many return to live with their abuser, as there is no economically viable alternative where they feel safe.

Despite limited available data, the issue remains a priority and a concern. Over the past year, the TIRS Women's

Homelessness Committee has created the Trousse essentiELLES [Women's Essentials Kit], containing a variety of basic sanitary and hygiene products, which is distributed free of charge<sup>50</sup>. During the 2021-2022 year, nearly 300 kits were distributed<sup>51</sup>. This year, TIRS wishes to continue developing this project with strategically placed distribution machines. The project is currently in the consolidation phase and seeking funding from institutional partners.

#### THE HOUSING CRISIS AND NEW FACES OF HOMELESSNESS

The housing shortage combined with the sharp rise in the cost of living is having a strong impact on Montérégie households. In 2022, the Comité logement Rive-Sud stated that the vacancy rate was 1.2% in the municipality of Longueuil, whereas in a so-called balanced market, this rate should be at least  $3\%^{52}$ . In our region, the Comité logement Rive-Sud states that households spend between 30% and 80% of their income on housing costs. This is due in particular to an average 20% increase in rental costs over the past few years<sup>53</sup>. «The Comité logement Rive-Sud has noted that a growing proportion of the population is having difficulty paying their rent.»<sup>54</sup>.

This observation was shared by a worker at the Centre D'Main de Femmes who has noticed an increase in the number of services provided to women living in precarious housing situations. She remarked that the most vulnerable women tend to accept unsanitary living conditions and unwarranted rent increases because they have nowhere else to live. This worker also maintained that new faces are appearing among the users requiring assistance related to housing<sup>55</sup> and other types of administrative procedures<sup>56</sup>; these are women who previously were able to meet their financial obligations and never had to fight for their housing rights. They do not necessarily know the extent of their rights, how to assert them, or of the available helping resources. They may be low-income women living in apartments and no longer able to absorb successive increases, but also slightly better-off women living in a newer building. This worker explained that there is a lot of new construction in her municipality and that the lack of regulation for rent increases in newly built properties, coupled with the shortage of housing, is creating a new form of vulnerability and precariousness. The workers at the Centre D'Main de Femmes, like others, find themselves exceeding their counselling responsibilities in order to support women in meeting basic needs.

The same is true for the TIRS, which confirms the arrival of new faces in the streets of Longueuil, near the metro station and in the shelters; people who were just making ends meet, but now, due to the housing crisis and inflation are in an extremely precarious position. A TIRS worker explained that due to the housing crisis, some emergency resources have to extend the average length of stay, often beyond the length of time allowed by the organizations' official mandate.

### E. JOB-FAMILY BALANCE +

Historically, the issue of job-family balance has been seen as an individual issue affecting women<sup>57</sup>. According to Gabrielle Pitre, assistant director and former leader of the TCGFM's job-family balance+ (JFB+) project, labour market transformation and the diversification of family models have spurred employers to respond with measures to reduce work-life balance conflicts and motivate and

retain workers<sup>58</sup>. The TCGFM prefers to use the term JFB+, rather than the traditional term «family-work-school balance.» This position is intended to reflect:

the collective capacity to harmonize, over time, parental, family, school and social obligations with the demands of work, school and caregiving responsibilities. The term job, rather than work, is used to avoid the work-family dichotomy that makes work done within the family sphere invisible.<sup>59</sup>

### THE STATE OF JOB-FAMILY BALANCE IN MONTÉRÉGIE<sup>60</sup>

In 2019, the TCGFM surveyed Montérégie community organizations as part of its JFB+ project. Nearly 235 individuals responded to the online survey, which sought to assess the existence of formal JFB+ policies as well as how employers manage such requests. Only 25% of respondents said they had a formal job-life balance policy, while 62% said they had no such policy<sup>61</sup>. Among the latter, a large majority stated that their employer manages JFB+ on an ad hoc or informal basis (82%).

These informal and individualized methods entail risks and unintended effects: «unequal treatment, inconsistency [in the application of measures and decision-making], additional workload, loss of certain achievements, etc.» <sup>62</sup>.

According to a 2021 study by the Coalition pour la conciliation famille-travail-études (CCFTÉ)<sup>63</sup>, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on opportunities for balancing work, school and family life. This study is based on a sample of over 1,000 respondents across the province, 90% of whom were women. The report paints a disturbing picture of the impact of the pandemic and respondents' precarious conditions. Indeed, nearly 70% of people «had difficulty combining their different roles (parent, worker, student, caregiver) during the

pandemic.» <sup>64</sup>Some services, including on-call services, had to cease operations for extended periods for health reasons<sup>65</sup>. In addition to limited access to services that improve job-life balance, many changes in daily life have also contributed to reducing respondents' ability to achieve a balanced life: school closures, telecommuting, limited access to a support network and pressure to perform in a context of uncertainty<sup>66</sup>. For more than three quarters of the respondents, these difficulties have led to a decline in their mental health<sup>67</sup>.

THE PANDEMIC HAS FURTHER INDIVIDUALIZED

JFB + ISSUES AND THE SEARCH FOR A « BALANCE

BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT SPHERES OF LIFE »68.

### FIGURE 1. VISUAL CREATED BY THE TCGFM FOR ITS JFB+ PROJECT

# CONCILIER, C'EST POSSIBLE!



Je ne suis plus stressée quand je reçois un appel imprévu



Je me sens comprise lorsque je doism'absenter



Ca diminue ma charge mentale et monéquipe me soutient



Mes besoins sont entendus et normalisés



Je sens qu'on me considère comme une personne, pas juste une employée



Ça facilite le recrutement d'employéies qualifiées et ca aide à les garder plus longtêmps



CA DONNE UNE ÉQUIPE DE TRAVAIL PLUS EN SANTÉ!



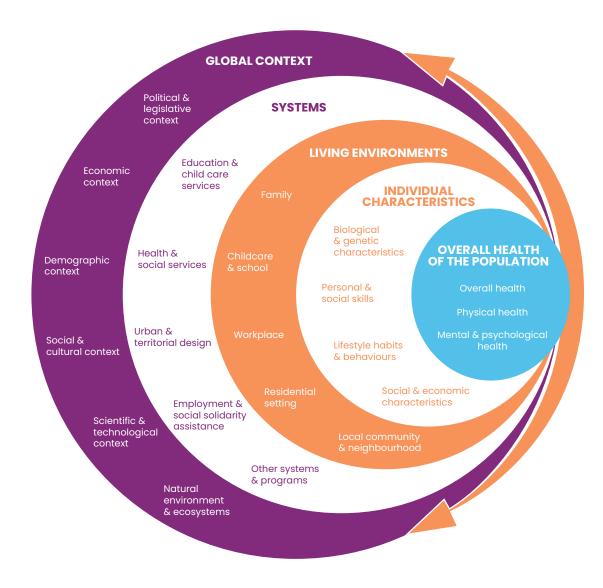
# F. WOMEN'S HEALTH AND WELL-BEING NEEDS AND BARRIERS<sup>69</sup>

Québec's Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS) defines health as being determined by multiple interconnected factors of varying scales and diverse systems: population health status (overall health, mental, physical), individual characteristics (biological, social, socioeconomic, lifestyle), living environment (family, friends, work, housing), systems (education, health, employment) and global context (political, economic, social, cultural,

technological, scientific, environmental) <sup>70</sup>. As explained by Cournoyer and Pache, authors of the report *Women's Health and Well-being in Montérégie: Perspectives of the community sector :* 

These different elements are all shaped by social position, including race, gender and class relations, as well as by immigration status and individual capabilities. In terms of health, these intertwined experiences create significant gaps between women and men, as well as among women themselves.<sup>71</sup>

#### FIGURE 2. HEALTH DETERMINANTS<sup>72</sup>



Cournoyer and Pache's research was based on a two-fold methodology: a review of the available literature and consultation with TCGFM<sup>73</sup> member and allied groups. The consultation was carried out in three stages: 1- the identification of priority issues; 2- the distribution of a survey that was completed by more than 130 individuals who work with women and represent 80 Montérégie organizations; 3- focus groups in which about 20

people participated. The analysis revealed a category of data that had not been anticipated by the research steering committee. The data concerned not only users of community sector services, but also, through the consultation process, certain aspects of the health and well-being of women who work in community sector groups.

#### I. USERS OF COMMUNITY SECTOR SERVICES

The study informs us about the health and well-being of women who use the services of community organizations in the region. This information is revealed indirectly through the accounts of workers who participated in

the study. They provided us with information about the needs expressed by users and the barriers they faced when trying to meet their basic needs. Four priority areas of intervention were identified<sup>74</sup>.

THE NEEDS OF WOMEN USING COMMUNITY SERVICES IN MONTÉRÉGIE			
HEALTH	Users mainly expressed the need for psychosocial support. They also asked for support in «navigating the complexity of the healthcare network.» <sup>75</sup> They also sought help in accessing mental health services and a family physician.		
HOUSING	Most requests for housing assistance concerned access to public housing. Considering emergency shelter capacity, users also made numerous requests for support in their search for available resources. Finally, because of the housing crisis, many also sought assistance in finding affordable housing in the private rental market.		
EMPLOYMENT	Employment-related needs include re-entry into the labour market, but also barriers to JFB+. Also included in this category were requests for support related to returning to and entering school.		
ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES	Last, administrative procedures refers to requests for assistance in obtaining other types of services. Here, the most frequently requested support is related to accessing legal aid, programs to help victims of violence, and finally, accessing social benefit programs (e.g. scholarships, last resort financial assistance, and retirement programs).		

These requests for support from community workers reveal great needs on the part of users. However, there are still many obstacles to meeting these needs. The most discussed issue continues to be barriers to accessing services. There are two main barriers. First, there is the issue of long waiting lists, both for community resources and the health care system. Waiting lists for access to mental health services are of particular concern as these delays can «further complicate other interrelated issues. For example, they can create a barrier to returning to employment, which can lead to financial insecurity.76» Second, physical accessibility of services is problematic due to the lack of available public transportation. The Montérégie territory is vast and obstacles related to travel are recurrent and affect women in many ways: access to emergency housing resources, access to health care, travel between institutions for administrative purposes, etc. Physical accessibility is another example of a barrier that affects women differently depending on their social position (disability, poverty, homelessness, etc.).

Finally, it would be difficult to ignore the significant consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on women users of Montérégie community sector services. Accessibility and availability of mental health resources, already insufficient, continued to decline while needs continued to increase. As discussed at several points in this report, psychological, social and political vulnerabilities increased during the pandemic. These included «increased social isolation, anxiety, [an] increase in marital separation, [an] increase in violence against women, [a] lack of housing, and [an] increase in women's material insecurity.»<sup>77</sup> These intertwined issues have resulted in increased mental health needs for women service users.

#### II. WOMEN WORKING IN THE COMMUNITY SECTOR

The report approaches the health and well-being of women community workers from the perspective of their relationship to work. It is therefore a non-exhaustive portrait that focuses on the obstacles encountered in their work and the consequences of these obstacles on their health and well-being. Essentially, workers reported

a lack of three types of resources: human resources, financial resources and external resources. These shortages translate into barriers that lead to chronic overload in the performance of their daily tasks as well as negative impacts on their health and well-being.

### LACK OF RESOURCES EXPERIENCED BY WOMEN WORKERS. Staff shortages are the result of two co-occurring phenomena: recruitment difficulties and absences for health reasons (including burnout). The lack of human **HUMAN RESOURCES** resources in work teams puts additional pressure on workers who are trying to make up for the lack of personnel. Chronic underfunding of community organizations imposes strain in multiple areas, threatening the capacity to pay competitive salaries (which has a direct impact on staff recruitment capacities), provide specialized training to properly equip women workers, deal with unforeseen and urgent needs, and provide women-only services adapted to all women. These difficulties represent obstacles to providing **FINANCIAL** services that meet the diversity of users' needs. **RESOURCES** In addition, workers described the cumbersome procedures that must be followed to access project funding, in a context of scarce human resources. The constant search for funding and accountability is a source of anxiety that undermines the sustainability of jobs and services offered. Women workers also reported a general shortage of external resources. They refer users to mental health and addiction resources only to see them turned away: **EXTERNAL** «while waiting for specialized services from the health network, many community **RESOURCES** organizations must offer psychological services without being trained or organized for this purpose »78.

As mentioned at the beginning of this report, for many years, the community sector has had to make up for the public network's shortcomings and, in spite of itself, has become an increasingly important part of Québec's social safety net. The community sector is facing an increase in the complexity of the problems observed among the users it serves, in a context of scarce human and financial resources. This is not without consequences. Cournoyer and Pache explain a cascade of consequences:

A veritable vicious circle, the reported issues successively aggravate working conditions in the community sector and the services that organizations are able to provide. Discontinuity of follow-up, restricted accompaniment for essential outside appointments, limitations on reception capacity: workers have to function under difficult conditions that everyone is aware of, and that allow them to provide services only on a much reduced scale. The community sector has the impression that it is making up for the shortcomings of the health care system, without receiving adequate recognition or training, particularly in the area of mental health <sup>79</sup>

This lack of resources places community workers in a position of chronic overload. In this respect one worker stated:

Currently, we are subsidized by a project of the Secrétariat à la condition féminine to maintain workers' health, so we provide psychological support to workers. But it is not enough, the women are burnt out. Even a month of holiday in the summer does not suffice. I'm really worried about the future. I am seeing enormous emotional, psychological and physical fatigue, [a] state of post-traumatic shock. The work of helping new employees settle in is hard because everyone is so strained already.<sup>80</sup>

Aware that they are the last link in this heavily damaged social net and that they are the last resort for many users, the workers are struggling to reduce their workload. They are also aware that despite their own symptoms of exhaustion and anxiety, «organizations often cannot replace them when they are absent.» The vicious circle described by Cournoyer and Pache results in an impact on the capacity to provide services to users and a potential deterioration in community health and well-being (workers and users). Like their clients, women community workers struggle to obtain services and care within a reasonable time frame from the health care system.

IN SHORT, THE CONSEQUENCES OF STRUCTURAL ISSUES, LARGELY RELATED TO LACK OF FUNDING FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS AND THE HEALTH CARE NETWORK, ARE INDIVIDUALIZED, AND BORNE MAINLY BY COMMUNITY SECTOR PERSONNEL, THE VAST MAJORITY OF WHOM ARE WOMEN. THIS VICIOUS CIRCLE WILL NOT BE INTERRUPTED OR REVERSED THROUGH INDIVIDUAL SOLUTIONS, HOWEVER: A BROADER SOCIAL AND POLITICAL RESPONSE IS NEEDED

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this report is to provide a regional portrait of the state of equality between women and men, and also among women themselves. This regional overview is an awareness-raising tool that will be disseminated to the SCF, to the TCGFM's partners and to the main local and regional consultation bodies in the Montérégie.

We decided to produce a thematic portrait to address the issues raised by local and regional feminist groups in Montérégie. Some issues, such as women's political representation, are showing signs of improvement. In contrast, many others appear to be worsening, such as the social and economic conditions of immigrant women, the rise of anti-feminist movements, and the consequences of insufficient resources on women workers and their users. Unfortunately, it was difficult to profile other issues, such as women's homelessness and women's health. The lack of gendered and regionalized data remains a major obstacle to the production of a truly comprehensive overview that fully reflects the reality on the ground. While a lack of available data affected the production of the report as a whole, we were able to rely on the contribution of workers from many community groups in the region by conducting interviews. Once again, we wish to highlight their contribution and their knowledge of the field by recognizing their expertise.

In addition to the lack of gendered and regionalized data, it seems important to reiterate, one last time, the consequences of not having disaggregated data based on additional identity-based indicators. It is one of the limitations of this report. Despite our efforts, several categories of women have remained in the shadows due to lack of data, and we have not been able to observe how the issues affect these categories of women specifically (young women, older women, fat women, sex workers, neurodivergent women, women with disabilities, etc.). Gender-based analysis recognizes that the causes of a social issue, its manifestations and solutions differ by gender. GBA+ postulates that the causes of a social issue, its manifestations and its solutions differ according to gender and additional identity factors. This report contains many concrete examples that validate the intersectional approach underlying GBA+. Without this data, it is virtually impossible to gain adequate knowledge of the members of regional communities and to take precise and effective action to eliminate the sources of inequity, discrimination, vulnerability and precariousness.

L'Accueil pour Elle Salaberry-de-Valleyfield

Ainsi soit-elle centre de femmes Chambly

APTS CISSS Montérégie-Est Longueuil

Association des femmes diplômées des universités (AFDU) Montérégie, Saint-Lambert

C.A.L.A.C.S. Châteauguay Châteauguay

C.A.L.A.C.S. La Vigie Salaberry-de-Valleyfield

Carrefour pour Elle Longueuil

Centre de femmes Autonomie en soiE Saint-Hyacinthe

Centre de femmes Com'Femme

Brossard

Centre de femmes Entres Ailes

Sainte-Julie

Centre de femmes du Haut-Richelieu Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu

Centre de femmes L'Éclaircie Sainte-Catherine

Centre de femmes L'Essentielle

Centre des femmes de Longueuil

Centre de femmes La Marg'Elle

Centre de femmes La Moisson

Île Perrot

Centre D'Main de Femmes Salaberry-de-Valleyfield

CISSS Montérégie Est, RLS Pierre Boucher Longueuil
CISSS Montérégie-Centre Saint-Hubert
La Clé sur la Porte Saint-Hyacinthe

COFFRE Saint-Hubert
Conseil Central Montérégie Brossard

Hébergement La PasserelleVaudreuil-DorionInform'ElleSaint-Hubert

Maison de la Paix, volet La Chaumière

Longueuil

Maison d'hébergement L'Égide

La Prairie

Maison Hina Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu

Maison La Grande Ourse MontérégieSaint-OursMaison La SourceSorel-TracyMaison Simonne-Monet-ChartrandChambly

Option Ressource Travail Salaberry-de-Valleyfield

Pavillon Marguerite de Champlain Greenfield Park

Place à l'emploi Longueuil

Quartier des femmes Châteauguay

La Re-Source de Châteauguay

Résidence Elle du Haut-Saint-Laurent Huntingdon

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- <sup>15</sup> Ibid. Des témoignages ont été recueillis en ce sens dans le cadre de cette étude. Par contre, celle-ci n'a pas permis de mesurer l'ampleur du phénomène.
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- 59 Ihid.
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d'une personne. Les déterminants de la santé sont imbriqués : la perte d'une source de revenus principale peut se traduire en incapacité à payer le loyer et les autres factures mensuelles. La précarité financière fait partie des facteurs de vulnérabilité personnelle.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 24.		
<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 26.		
<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 25.		
<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 28.		
<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 4.		
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Ce document a été produit grâce au soutien financier du

Secrétariat à la condition féminine 
Québec & &

La traduction du document a été rendue possible grâce à la participation financière du



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