

# Extreme inequality is bad for us all, but women are hurting most

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It takes a CEO from the top five fashion retailers just over 11 days to earn what a Vietnamese garment worker makes in her lifetime. The superrich are building massive wealth on the backs of the poorest workers — the majority of whom are women.

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Next time you lace up your running shoes, consider who made them.

Lan stitches 1,200 pairs of shoes like yours each day in a factory in Vietnam.

Let that sink in for a moment: 1,200 pairs.

Lan's wage is so low, she not only can't afford a pair for her young son, but she doesn't see him and his baby sister for months at a time. While she toils for a dollar an hour, six days a week in the city, her children live with their grandparents in the Vietnamese countryside. Under pressure to meet daily targets for a leading fashion brand, she barely gets breaks or vacation time.

Some days, Lan works so hard, she faints on the job.

Meanwhile, it takes a CEO from the top five fashion retailers just over 11 days to earn what a Vietnamese garment worker like Lan makes in her lifetime.

This kind of extreme inequality is on the rise around the world, making it impossible for people to lift themselves out of poverty.

To put this in perspective, 82 per cent of the wealth created last year went to the richest 1 per cent of the population, while the 3.7 billion people who make up the poorest half of the world saw no increase. Nothing. Zero.

And while Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has repeatedly expressed concern about economic inequality in Canada, we also continue to see wealth amongst the superrich rise at a rapid pace. Oxfam calculates Canadian billionaire fortunes grew by \$28 billion last year alone. That's enough to pay for universal child care and lift 4.9 million Canadians out of poverty.

The superrich are building massive wealth on the backs of the poorest workers — the majority of whom are women.

Here in Canada and abroad, women workers consistently earn less than men and do the lowest-paid and least secure forms of work. Oxfam has spoken to women who experience this in a variety of sectors, including the hotel industry. Female housekeepers in Toronto, the Dominican Republic and Thailand told us they live in fear of losing their jobs if they complain about low pay, working conditions or sexual harassment.

And some of the hardest work women do isn't even paid at all. They shoulder the vast majority of unpaid care work around the world — cleaning the house, tending to children, looking after sick and elderly family members. The McKinsey Global Institute estimates women contribute an estimated \$10 trillion in unpaid care annually to support the global economy.

Tax cuts for the rich, tax havens, cuts in public services and a race to the bottom on wages and labour rights all hurt women more than men.

Reading all of this might make you feel powerless. What can you really do to change a global system rigged in favour of the superrich?

Well it turns out, a lot.

You can spread the word. You can demand better from the companies that produce the goods you buy. You can demand action from the politicians who get your vote.

As Prime Minister Trudeau meets with the rich and powerful in Davos for the World Economic Forum this week, he has an opportunity to move beyond words and take real, meaningful action.

Trudeau can press fellow leaders to limit returns to shareholders and top executives, and eliminate the gender pay gap. He can talk to CEOs — especially those who employ large workforces of poor women — about better wages and treatment for workers, as well as stronger sexual harassment policies.

But there is also work to do when he returns to Canada.

The government must raise taxes for corporations; close the loopholes that allow the superrich to avoid paying their fair share in taxes and crack down on those who stash their wealth in tax havens overseas. We need investments in social infrastructure, and better employment insurance and labour protections for those in precarious jobs.

These fundamental changes are not a pipe dream.

Just a few weeks ago, Iceland made it illegal for firms to pay women less than men. The government hopes to eliminate the gender wage gap entirely by 2020.

In 2010, Ecuador introduced a minimum “dignity wage” to cover basic costs of living, helping lift hundreds of thousands of people out of extreme poverty. That country now has one of the lowest unemployment rates in Latin America.

Change is possible. We know what action we need to take to fight inequality and end poverty.

We owe it to women like Lan to create an economy that rewards work, not wealth. We owe it to Lan’s daughter to one day be able to afford a pair of shiny new running shoes for her own kids.

Kate Higgins is the director of policy and campaigns at Oxfam Canada.

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