

Oxfam testimony to the Status of Women Committee on Women's Unpaid Work ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Thank you for inviting Oxfam Canada to present on the important issue of women's unpaid work.

At Oxfam Canada, we put women's rights and gender justice at the heart of everything we do, both here in Canada and in our work with some of the most disadvantaged communities across the world. As a global confederation, Oxfam has been raising the alarm bells on rising inequality over the past decade. In 2019, the world's billionaires had more wealth than 4.6 billion people combined. This great divide is the product of an exploitative and sexist economic system that values the wealth of the privileged few, mostly men, over the billions of hours of hard and essential work that women and girls do around every days. As COVID-19 has shown us, much of this work – caring for children, elderly people and those with physical and mental illnesses or disabilities, and domestic work to keep households running – is essential to our communities, our societies and our economies. But it is nearly all unpaid.

Make no mistake. Our economies are built on the backs of women, especially women of colour, who provide 12 billion hours of unpaid and underpaid care work each day. The monetary value of unpaid care work globally for women aged 15 and over is at least \$10.8 trillion annually – three times the size of the world's tech industry. In Canada, women spend 50% more time on unpaid care work than men. Despite increases in women's participation in paid work and changing social norms around the male breadwinner model, men's participation in unpaid care work has not increased in any substantial way. Instead, women have taken on a double burden of paid work and unpaid care duties, increasing their total working hours and reducing their ability to rest. The double burden of paid and unpaid work has been significantly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In a study conducted by Oxfam in June on the impacts of the pandemic on unpaid care work in Canada, four in ten Canadians stated that as a result of the pandemic and social distancing measures, their household's amount of domestic and care work has increased with the bulk of the work falling to women. Over 70% of women surveyed reported feeling more anxious, depressed, isolated, overworked, or ill because of having to shoulder even more unpaid care work as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

Unpaid work is one of the biggest determinants of women's economic security. Globally, 42% of women cannot get jobs because they are responsible for all of the caregiving, compared to just 6% of men. In Canada, too many women are stuck in part-time and contract work due to care responsibilities. The pandemic has severely increased women's economic insecurity. Take the example of Asha, a 32 year old communications professional who has steadily been promoted in her company over the past few years. She was on maternity leave with her first child until April of this year. Asha went back to working from home with a full-time workload, no daycare options, and no extended family to help with childcare. With her partner working in an essential occupation, she was routinely staying up until 2-3am to meet work deadlines while caring for her new baby. Asha decided to quit her job in October.

Women living in poverty and ethnic and racial minorities suffer more acutely from the social and economic fallout of the pandemic. In the same Oxfam study referenced earlier, Indigenous women and Black women reported greater challenges due to increased house and care work due to COVID-19 than their white peers. Indigenous women were three times more likely as white respondents to say they have had to give up looking for paid work as a result of increased care responsibilities. Women make up 70% of all pandemic-related job losses in Canada and a new study by RBC showed that men are picking up jobs three times the rate than women are leaving the workforce during the pandemic. Women's labour force participation has fallen to 50%, the lowest in over 30 years.

Promoting women's economic security requires investments in the care economy to address the 5Rs of care – recognizing, redistributing and reducing women's unpaid care, and rewarding and representing care workers. The best investment Canada can make right now to address the widespread social and economic fallout of the pandemic-induced recession—now termed a she-cession—is to invest in childcare. Canada continues to lag behind its OECD peers in providing affordable and quality child care to all families who need it. After decades of dragging their feet and leaving care to market forces, government inaction resulted in the child care sector nearly collapsing during the pandemic, leaving more families without essential care. A recent survey of licensed child care centres in Canada found that 70% laid off all or part of their workforce and more than one-third of the centres across Canada are uncertain about reopening.

The government's commitment to a significant, long-term, sustained investment to create a Canada-wide early learning and child care system announced in the throne speech and underscored in the Fall Economic Update comes at a critical time. Canada needs a public child care system, and federal leadership is needed to realize it. This needs to start with the allocation of \$2.5 billion in emergency funding for the sector and then a \$2 billion investment in Budget 2021 plus an additional \$2 billion each year after to build a national child care system that ensures everyone has access to care when needed. Transfers to the provinces and territories should include measurable targets in accessibility, affordability, quality and inclusiveness. The benefits of a public child care system would be tremendous for Canada: it would increase government revenues by up to \$29 billion therefore paying for itself, it would increase employment for 725,000 women in Canada, and increase Canada's GDP by \$100 billion a year.

If current trends in the gendered distribution of care work continue, it will take 210 years for unpaid care work to be equally shared between men and women. Surely, women can't wait another two centuries. The solutions are in front of us, we need the political will to make them reality.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present to you today.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: gender equity ^[4]

women ^[5]

national child care ^[6]

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[2] <https://www.oxfam.ca/publication/oxfam-testimony-to-the-status-of-women-committee-on-womens-unpaid-work/> [3]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/women> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/national-child-care>