

The future of our economy hinges on valuing women's care work

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Excerpts

This National Gender Equality Week, I'm reflecting on the stories of stress and strain I have heard over the past year. They have been simply heartbreaking:

"My role as a single mother got tripled as I managed three kids under the age of 15 from home and tried to sustain a consistent pay cheque."

"The cost of living, housing and food affects my ability to leave an unhealthy marriage. It affects the quality of life for my kids and myself."

"I am at my limit. There is too much expected of people with dependents. You are burning out an entire generation of people."

These are just some of the women and gender-diverse people who told us they're struggling with caregiving. They join 44% of mothers in Canada who, after more than two years into a pandemic with stunning gendered impacts, say they've reached their breaking point.

At the start of the pandemic, women's labour force participation dipped to historic lows.

"Women's wages are not keeping pace with inflation, especially for those working in highly feminized sectors."

We've seen some recovery since then, but the most marginalized and time-strapped women are still highly impacted. Women's part-time work exceeds pre-COVID levels, and women with young children are the ones with the lowest participation. Employment has also fallen for young women aged 15 to 24. On top of that, women's wages are not keeping pace with inflation, especially for those working in highly feminized sectors.

These problems we see today tie back to an old story.

Canada's economy and society have been built on women's unpaid and underpaid care work, at the same time it was founded on stolen land and stolen labour. Gendered care is the presumed sacrifice we bank on. It keeps our households, communities, workplaces and cities running. It underlies the smooth function of the places where we live, work and play. It carries us through life as we face all kinds of challenges.

Women's care work is written as a difficult story, a journey of underappreciated sacrifice for the greater good. We've built our economy and institutions on the requirement that women – particularly racialized and marginalized women – will be there to perform free and undervalued nurturing, education, health and life support for children, elders, families, adults, romantic partners, coworkers and the public at large.

We see it at home. Women and girls perform the bulk of unpaid childcare, eldercare and housework in Canada. Things are slowly changing, but the duties are by no means gender-balanced.

"Over half of women workers are in the "five Cs" of occupations: caring, catering, clerical, cashiering and cleaning."

We see it in our economy. Over half of women workers are in the "five Cs" of occupations: caring, catering, clerical, cashiering and cleaning. These jobs are often set up as precarious, pressure-laden, under-protected and poorly compensated, and they're dominated by immigrant, racialized and marginalized women. In these roles, women have been at the forefront of the pandemic, but they've had little decision-making power in the pandemic response.

We see it at work. So much of women's time is taken up with unpaid work so they have less time to do paid work. Furthermore, the paid work they do is generally not well-compensated. Women also get penalized for parenthood. Think of the motherhood penalty, where women lose advancement opportunities by having children. Compare that to the fatherhood bonus, where men's compensation bumps up when they have children.

At the workplace, who are the ones who feel the pressure to do diversity and inclusion initiatives off the side of their desks and take on staff socials and celebrations? It's the lowest-paid women, racialized women and 2SLGBTQI employees.

We see it in our communities, too. Women and girls are most likely to volunteer their time in Canada in places like food banks, shelters and community centres. Eighty percent of charity and non-profit workers identify as women.

I do not mean to make a case against care. Paid and unpaid, care work is essential and formative to humanity. I grew into a healthy, functioning adult who participates in the economy because many people, many women, took care of me along the way.

There's not a single person who does not benefit from care work in our daily lives.

What I want to make a case for is for us to highly value all kinds of care work. There can be no healthy and functioning economy without it.

As the impacts of the pandemic continue to reverberate, one of the most radical economic innovations we can pursue is to uplift care work, and most importantly, uplift, value and support the diverse women and Two-Spirit, trans and nonbinary people who have been doing it all along.

What if they were paid for their unpaid childcare, eldercare, community care and homecare?

What if they were paid excellently for 5C jobs? What if these were set up to be the best professions and not the hardest, most draining and thankless professions?

What if migrant care workers had an automatic, clear path to settlement and citizenship?

What if women and gender-diverse people weren't teetering on the brink of poverty as they did care work? What if it wasn't a struggle?

In the last two years, recognition of essential work trended. We applauded essential workers as heroes. What if we moved forward with real vision to give care work its recognition as essential and take care of the carers? We should do this not just because we are virtuous, but also because we understand the enormous economic stimulus it will create and the human and social benefits it will lead to.

Those of us who advocate for gender justice and economic development are pushing for three things to happen, as a start.

“We need to make sure Canada's new national childcare system truly creates universal and accessible childcare, prioritizing the most vulnerable families.”

First of all, we need to make care work excellent work with excellent pay, protection, benefits and working conditions.

Second, we need to make sure Canada's new national childcare system truly creates universal and accessible childcare, prioritizing the most vulnerable families. We need well-paid workers doing this childcare work with the right infrastructure and significant funding to match the need.

Third, Canada needs big investment in care systems for seniors and people with disabilities, including assistance for families who struggle with costs.

It's easy to talk about what needs to happen on a grand scale. But what about our own lives, workplaces, homes and spheres of influence? We all need to proactively take steps to value care work and support the women and gender-diverse people we know so it's not such a struggle.

What can you do today to help? I encourage you to think about it carefully.

If you're in any position of workplace leadership, for example, can you better support your colleagues dealing with the stress and strain of care responsibilities? Can you push for more flexible, supportive and sensitive policies and practices? Can you influence your workplace culture and strategic plans for the better? Can you access professional development opportunities to build your own care-focused leadership skills?

In 2022, we need progress on gender justice in leaps and bounds for the health of our economy. We need to vote accordingly and tirelessly hold our leaders accountable for these changes too.

This is more urgent than ever. Our future economy must be grounded in care.

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