

# Viewpoint: The pandemic exposed gender inequality. Let's seize the opportunity to remedy it

March 8 2023, by Rebecca Jaremko Bromwich

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

This year, we are commemorating [International Women's Day](#) alongside the three-year anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While COVID-19 affected everyone, [it did not affect everyone equally](#).

The [pandemic exposed many aspects of inequality](#), including socioeconomic inequality, accessibility and [gender inequality](#).

The pandemic [destroyed the momentum](#) towards more emancipatory [gender](#) relations by disproportionately harming [women](#) and gender diverse people, according to the [United Nations](#) and [Canadian Human Rights Commission](#).

As the world reopens after the global catastrophe, I [join in on the urgent call to reset "normal"](#) in a more emancipatory way. There is an opportunity to capitalize on the potential offered by the pandemic to rebuild our professional, business and personal lives.

To [echo Winston Churchill's words from the Second World War](#): we cannot "let a good crisis go to waste." We will waste the COVID-19 crisis if we don't address the inequalities—specifically the gender inequalities—the pandemic both exacerbated and revealed.

## **Burden of unpaid labor**

[Women do an unequal share of unpaid labor in Canada, as they do around the world.](#)

The term "[silent partner](#)" has been used to refer to the unpaid work spouses—usually wives—do behind the scenes to support the paid careers of their husbands and male co-parents.

Another term, "double shift," has been used to refer to women's combined paid and unpaid labor, as has been documented by [Statistics Canada](#).

Usually, unpaid and paid labor was done sequentially, with a [double shift of unpaid work](#) occurring before and after the paid workday. This

second shift grows longer as time passes.

[The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this](#) by creating a context where both paid and unpaid work occurred simultaneously.

The pandemic compounded the impossibility of women's [professional lives](#)—especially those of professionals and academics, like myself, who are mothers. It also made women's unpaid work more visible than it had ever been before. Speaking figuratively as well as literally, no digital Zoom background could hide this reality.

## Potential for change

As the lockdowns progressed, businesses and governments began to acknowledge the unpaid care labor done largely by women in unprecedented ways, as myself and other authors discussed in this [anthology of feminist writing about the pandemic](#).

The Canadian government, for example, has announced a plan to [bring \\$10-a-day child care to every province and territory by 2026](#).

The pandemic also demonstrated how changeable and contingent things are: we stopped doing many normal activities, creating space for possibility and changing the future of how certain things, like work, are done.

Although [hybrid work has become widely practiced around the world](#), there has been little or no change to the accommodations offered in relation to [unpaid work](#).

Hybrid work, while beneficial, is no panacea for those with caregiving roles whose [care work](#) can be made invisible by hybrid work itself.

## Resetting normal

As we mark International Women's Day, we remain in a limitless space of possibility resulting from the pandemic, but we won't remain here for long.

While we are still re-establishing norms, we need to work within businesses, governments, and our own [personal lives](#) to reset—not replicate—gender relations, doing [as the Canadian Women's Foundation recommends](#) and building gender equality into our new normal.

It is not enough to return to the way things were because [social and gender inequality](#) was already rampant in Canada before the pandemic.

We must undertake policy actions to subsidize childcare, ensure flexible work schedules, identify opportunities to promote equitable health care, close gender wage gaps, normalize male parental leave, and provide mental health support for employees.

As gender consultants [Stephenie Foster and Susan Markham wrote of gender equity and the pandemic](#):

"We can use this as an opportunity to reimagine a different future, one that values gender equality, women's participation and women's leadership. Women must be part of COVID-19 response and recovery planning and decision making. We must value the unseen work done by women."

The radical shifts that result from crises like the pandemic invite us not to just restore old patterns when the calamity has passed, but to learn from them and move meaningfully forward. We urgently need to make meaningful change now, before the potential for us to learn from the lessons offered by the pandemic disappears.

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