



## Article

# Feminist Visions of the Future of Women's Work: A Systemic Exploration of the Past, Present and Future of Women at Work in Canada

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## Abstract

*Despite progress being made, we are still far from achieving gender equality at work. Women's economic participation and prosperity face systemic barriers and are further threatened by the digitization and automation that drive the future of work. Furthermore, the impacts and discussion around the future of work are often gender-blind. This research uses strategic foresight to explore the trends shaping the future of work and scenarios to help envision feminist futures where our systems can evolve to value women's work.*

## Keywords

Women's Work, Gender Equality, Future of Work, Feminist Futures, Systems Thinking

## Introduction

Our modern workplace is designed by men, for men, and does not serve the needs of 21st century women. Patriarchal social norms and entrenched stereotypes create a persistent economic inequality between men and women, making it nearly impossible to power progress towards a fairer world (Grantham, Stefov, & Tiessen, 2019). The World Economic Forum suggests that it will take 257 years to close the economic gender gap (Schifter, 2020). Women still earn less than men and they still face biases in hiring and promotion rates, discriminatory laws and a growing unpaid care burden (Abbott & Mohapatra, 2019). Furthermore, working mothers continue to suffer a "motherhood penalty" and time poverty, which limits their chances of career advancement and reinforces the perception that their paid labour is secondary to that of men (Daibes, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has forced women to leave the paid workforce to fulfil unpaid care duties, rolling back three decades of advances in women's labour force participation in Canada.

Women's economic participation and prosperity is further threatened by digitization and automation that is driving the future of work. These technological advances along with demographic shifts, social movements, and political factors are leading to the emergence of new employment systems that will impact us all (Abbott & Mohapatra, 2019). Although the future of work discussion has caught global attention, it is, however, often gender-blind, and does not look at how trends may impact women. Given the urgency and complexity of the challenges ahead, we need collective action to break down existing barriers and inequalities for women, and redefine the relationship between paid and unpaid work. This represents an opportunity to rebuild our systems, future-proof gender parity efforts, and collectively shape a future of work that finally works for women.

This research explores the following research question: What is the value of women's labour in the future of work and its implication for women's economic participation and prosperity? The goal of this research is diagnostic and exploratory, and uses future thinking to provide an aspirational guide to help envision plausible interventions, opportunities and risks that the future of work holds for women in Canada.

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## Sensemaking the Present

Gender inequality in the workplace and its impact on women's economic participation and prosperity is a complex, wicked problem that spans across multiple systems. This research analyzes the four systems that impact women's work: the workplace, governance, economy, and social system (Kwan, 2021). For more details on the systemic analysis of gender equality, refer to the [full report](#).

- **The Workplace System:** women encounter many barriers that stem from organizational hiring, retention, promotion and leadership practices. The system also reinforces gender inequality as the current workplace is designed for the male default, which gives rise to sexism, perpetuation of gender norms and the gender pay gap (Criado-Perez, 2020).
- **The Governance System:** there is lack of government-provided social support despite use of gender-based analysis (GBA+) to develop gender-inclusive policies. A GBA+ lens should be used to reevaluate existing policies and social systems that reinforce traditional gender roles that inadvertently disadvantage women and impact their ability to participate in paid labour (Kaplan & Roy, 2020).
- **The Economic System:** current neoliberal policies and our modern economic priorities oppress women, as unpaid care work does not have a monetary value that contributes to GDP and economic growth (Faraday, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that the "Love Economy" sectors, which are based on the principles of caring, sharing, mutual aid, and cooperation, are undervalued (Henderson, 2021). Our economic policies leave the informal care economy behind and create gender and economic inequality for women (Raworth, 2017).
- **The Social System:** gender norms follow women through their learning years to their earning years, as role modelling at home and gender socialization in education impacts how women work (Croft, Schmader, Block, & Baron, 2014). The dominator culture maintains a rigid understanding of power within gender roles, where men are in control, leading women to take on more unpaid care work, invisible social reproduction and emotional labour, which hinders women's ability to participate in the paid workforce. Time famine shapes women's career choices and essentially pushes them out of work (Kaplan, 2018).

## Envisioning Feminist Futures

Jöster-Morisse (2020) noted the urgent need to link feminism and futures studies to create feminist futures, which means "a future society, which is based on gender equity, equality, and where sexist oppression is non-existent." Feminist futures "bear the promise of a better future for everyone, thus, an improvement of the human condition altogether" (Jöster-Morisse, 2020). There are many essential works done by feminist futurists that were not examined in this report as it is beyond the scope of this research.

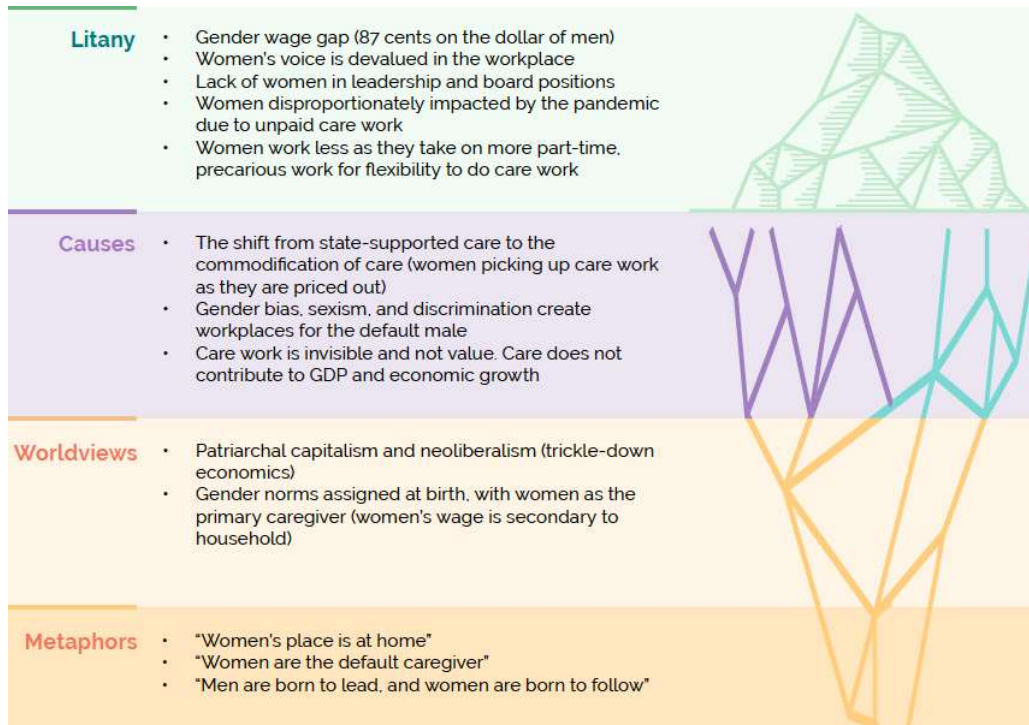
For this research, strategic foresight was used to provoke new thinking about the future of work and its implications for women's economic participation and prosperity across the four systems identified; the workplace system, the governance system, the economic system, and the social system. Sohail Inayatullah's Causal Layered Analysis (2008) was used to understand the current systems and to explore the roots of gender inequality in the workplace. Using a gendered lens, a horizon scan was completed to identify key trends that will shape the future of work. These trends inform the development of plausible future scenarios using Jim Dator's (2009) Generic Images of the Futures. These scenarios encourage envisioning of how our systems can evolve to create feminists futures that value women's work. It's important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic may influence the trajectory of how trends unfold within the scenarios. Finally, risks and opportunities were explored to generate insights for us to consider in order to future-proof gender parity efforts for the future of work.

## Casual Layered Analysis (CLA)

Inayatullah's CLA explores the underlying causes and worldviews that contribute to a situation by uncovering the powerful, metaphorical motivations that we believe. It consists of the following layers of analysis (Inayatullah, 2008):

- **Litany:** what is the common understanding (daily headlines) of the problem?
- **Causes:** what are the deeper systems that sustain the problem?
- **Worldview:** what are the paradigms and cultures that feed the problem?
- **Metaphors:** what image depicts the problem (deep stories held and often unconscious)?

The following CLA reveals the deep-held metaphors and worldviews that influence women’s economic participation and prosperity in Canada:



**Fig. 1:** Casual layered analysis for women’s work

**Gendered Horizon Scan**

A comprehensive horizon scan was conducted on the domain of work which generated 120 signals correlated to 18 key trends and drivers of change that were reviewed using a gendered lens. These key trends and change drivers shapes the current and future state of work for women, and are organized under the four systems identified (Kwan, 2021):

**Table 1:** List of trends and change drivers (Kwan, 2021)

		Trend	Description	Implication	Gendered Implication
W	1	Employee Activism for Corporate Social Justice	Workers are advocating for better rights and accountability for racial and gender justice.	Employees are holding companies accountable with diversity, equity, and inclusion as a priority.	Fight for intersectional feminist rights to promote more women and diverse groups into leadership and board positions.

p l a c e	2	Flexible & Liquid Workforce	Reshaping traditional work with a flexible, liquid, and global remote workforce.	Accelerated adoption of remote, borderless teams and shift towards outcome-based work.	Flexibility allows organizations to cast a wider net to foster more diversity. However it can contribute to inequality by reducing access to information.
	3	Humanizing Virtual Work	Humanizing remote work to decrease negative work-from-home impacts.	Lack of social interaction, work/life boundaries and prolonged screen time may impact mental health.	Women are more likely to have compounded mental health impacts due to multiple burdens and the disproportionate amounts of unpaid care work.
	4	Employee Surveillance	Remote management practices using tattleware workplace surveillance.	Use of workplace surveillance to maximize remote work efficiencies setting new norms for surveillance and privacy.	Digital surveillance is the equivalent of facetime tracking in the physical workplace which negatively impacts women.
	5	Workaholic Paradigm Shift	Finding meaning and joy through regular sabbaticals to balance working retirement.	Society’s approach to work may change as individuals prioritize meaning and breaks throughout their long careers.	Opportunities for employers to design more accessible, flexible work arrangements (parental leave and care leave) and to tailor incentives to various needs.
G o v e r n a n c e	6	Lifelong Learning to Close the Skills Gap	Workers will need to routinely upskill and reskill due to automation and displacement of work.	Need to develop comprehensive training programs, micro-learning opportunities and use of AI to personalize learnings.	Women face more barriers to learning new skills in the face of automation-related job transformations.
	7	Call to Renew the Social Contract	Growing need to protect the new worker, create a stronger social safety net and prioritize care.	Governments may need to adjust or create new policies for basic income, national child care and parental leave to support workers.	Systems of oppression, like poverty and patriarchy, are intertwined with women often bearing the brunt of poverty in Canada.
	8	Data Feminism & Ethical AI	Addressing the gender data gap to create responsible, feminist technologies.	Priority of ensuring collection methods are unbiased and gender sensitive.	Dire need to increase the collection of gender data and hiring more women in tech positions.
E c o n o m y	9	Human-AI Augmentation	Collaborations between AI and humans may displace or augment work.	Partial automation of some skills may change jobs in meaningful ways with humans working alongside machines.	Women are more likely to work in occupations that are more susceptible to automation.
	10	“Gigification” and Automation of Work	Combination of gig work and automation could create new structural realities for work.	As jobs are unbundled to tasks, more work may be automated or uploaded to digital platforms.	Gig work may strengthen the “invisible advantage” men have by favoring stereotypes and willingness to bargain.
	11	Shifting the Power in the Digital Economy	Using the power of technology and collective intelligence to build equitable alternatives.	Rise in worker collectives, unions and alternative models (platform cooperatives or decentralized autonomous organizations).	Feminist principles must be built into new business models to ensure that existing patriarchal systems are not replicated.



E n v i r o n m e n t	1 2	“Responsible” Capitalism	Towards new economic paradigms based on feminist principles of care, sustainability, and collaboration.	GDP is no longer seen as the only viable metric for success, as other measures of prosperity include the health of people and the planet.	A feminine economy is a proposal for a holistic vision of a new economic paradigm based on feminist principles.
	1 3	Climate Catastrophe	Severe climate disruptions will lead to an influx of climate refugees and resource wars.	Climate disruptions will have substantial social and political implications, impacting the nature of work.	During a time of crisis, women are more likely to leave work to fulfil care duties and social reproduction work.
S o c i e t y	1 4	Population in Crisis	Tackling a mental health and care crisis that is exacerbated by the pandemic.	Organizations need to prioritize the wellbeing of workers by reducing burnout and providing more meaningful work.	The triple duty burden of waged labour, care work and household work creates an outsized effect on women’s mental health.
	1 5	Anti-feminist Movements	Counter movements against feminism led by men who think they are the true victims of gender bias.	Technology has become a guiding hand that perpetuates the discrimination of women with the rise of extreme toxic male movements.	Misogynistic counter movements against feminism creates a bigger public backlash against diversity and gender equality.
	1 6	Queering Social Norms	Fundamental transformations to how we think about gender and family.	Gender identity goes beyond traditional norms and workplaces must create inclusive policies for people of all gender identities.	Queering the future of work can eliminate the heteronormative laws that include the hierarchal value of gender.
	1 7	Decentralized Care Networks	Communizing care through mutual aid and hyperlocal social networks.	Community networks leverage social capital and commonality for mutual aid and connection.	During socio-economic hardships, women often form networks to provide some level of economic stability.
	1 8	Partial Automation of Care	Care is on the cusp of unprecedented change with potential for partial automation.	Demographic changes are increasing the demand for care, yet care work involves skills that are not likely to be fully automated.	AI and robotic care may intentionally reproduce gender stereotypes and reinforce existing social behaviour.

**Scenario Development**

The trends were used to inform the development of four possible futures of work for women in 2040, using Jim Dator’s (2009) Generic Images: growth, collapse, discipline and transformation. This method was chosen to explore how the value of women’s work could evolve in alternative futures with different system structures. In these scenarios, women’s work may be valued the same as today, less valued, valued in parity to men or completely transformed. Each scenario uses a systems perspective to explore: what and how work is done, the government’s involvement in providing social infrastructure support, economic priorities and gender roles within society. The following scenarios aim to help readers contemplate how the future of work may evolve to impact the value of women’s work and women’s economic participation and prosperity.

**Growth Scenario: “Woke” Workplace**

In 2040, Canadians are still progressing towards a fairer world and closing the gender and racial wealth gap is still of utmost priority. Businesses are held accountable with new diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) reporting metrics along with mandatory financial climate risk disclosures. However, the partial automation of work and the prevalence

of gig work have created many challenges, especially for women. Job displacement and reskilling programs are part of the normal work cycle, and the government has finally stepped in to provide better care support for families. The egalitarian model dominates most households with diminished gender expectations. Yet, the unfortunate reality persists that power remains with the higher income earners, which are often men.

### ***A look into 2040***

*The Digital Workplace Strives to be Inclusive:* Canadians have fully embraced remote work, and a digital-first mentality permeates day-to-day life. Fifty percent of the population now work virtually, and another thirty percent go into the office twice a week. Work predominantly consists of many short-term projects, and specialized workers are hired on contract for each project. It is common to never meet your colleagues in person, as they may live in another province or on a different continent. Virtual work has unlocked the potential of borderless workers, giving people the freedom to choose where they want to live and work.

Many workplaces have standardized gender and racial equality reporting, and DEI initiatives are now mandatory checkboxes for not just shareholders but all stakeholders. Canada's security legislation updated the "comply or explain" rule in 2030 to become a "comply" rule requiring mandatory diversity quotas in order to be listed on the Toronto Stock Exchange. This was driven by the corporate social justice movement that has pushed for more equitable workplace policies that include pay transparency, family-friendly policies, and performance evaluation metrics on inclusion, empathy, and collaboration.

Even though more women and people of colour are in leadership and board positions (40% makeup), equal representation in small-medium enterprises (SME) and non-media facing companies are still relatively low. Unfortunately, the motherhood penalty still persists, and most women still make less than men due to taking time off work to raise their children.

*Weak Social Safety Net:* The proliferation of gig work, fueled by underpaid labour, has led to minor updates to employment standards to protect self-employed gig workers. These workers now have access to voluntary employment insurance (EI) benefit programs where they pay into EI for a modest degree of income security (Busby, 2021). Despite better access to social programs, many gig workers are still falling through the cracks due to job displacement from automation. Platform cooperatives have also become a new popular form of organizing to create more ethical alternatives to the gig economy.

As constant upskilling is required to keep pace with automation, the government now provides heavily subsidized training programs to help workers reskill through micro-learning and micro-credentials. However, those with care duties in lower-income households are left behind, as the government's care subsidies and tax credits are not enough to offset the high in-person childcare cost of daycare and eldercare centres. As care work continues to be performed in person and cannot be automated, the service rates have skyrocketed.

*Automation Drives Economic Priorities:* The market drives businesses towards mandatory environmental, social and governance (ESG) reporting, yet profitability is still the predominant performance indicator. Due to severe climate risks, many large businesses have become carbon neutral by 2035. However, industries are still transitioning towards a green economy with a long road ahead. The rapidly changing digital economy has also created opportunities for many, however, this gain is offset by automation disruption, as 60% of industries that women occupy, specifically in service and administrative roles, are now partially replaced by AI and robots.

Many reskilling programs are now teaching workers to work alongside AI to achieve greater productivity. Those who want a competitive edge also use implanted chips as a new productivity augmentation tool that allows them to be more efficient at their jobs. Despite significant advances in automation, robotics for care work has yet to be fully embraced, and care performed by humans is still preferred and required.

*Sharing the Care:* Since the government equalized parental leave in 2028, there has been a considerable uptick in fathers' participation in childcare. Both parents now take an equal six months off from work to take advantage of parental benefits, which has led to more modelling of fathers as caretakers. The majority of Millennial and Gen Z households have adopted an egalitarian approach to sharing the care, and traditional gender norms no longer hold. Despite these changes, women still find it challenging to balance care work and their careers, as the division of labour still depends on earning power and income. The need for care is at an all-time high, and women who make less than men are increasingly called to take care of their kids and ageing parents.

**Table 2:** Key takeaways for the Growth Scenario

What is the value of women’s work?	Women’s work is acknowledged, but the dominant patriarchal and capitalist systems still remain and society still undervalues work predominantly performed by women.
What is the gender pay gap?	Diminished, women make 15% less than men.
What is women’s prosperity?	Restricted due to earning power.
What is the CLA metaphor?	You are what you make.

**Collapse Scenario: Displaced Caretaker**

By 2040, millions of Canadian women have permanently dropped out of the workforce. Many who left the paid workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021 did not return to work. Furthermore, automation has displaced millions of jobs for women, rolling back gender equality to historic lows since the 1970s, with a labour force participation of only 42%. These major setbacks have put many women into poverty, with significant setbacks that cannot be recovered. Climate impacts, globalization, and the rise of China as an economic power have led to a strained, highly competitive economy that is competing for scarce resources. The country is in the midst of a prolonged recession, during which income inequality has worsened by an alarming degree. Surging unemployment rates have left many without jobs, and the lack of opportunity pushes women back to the default caretaker role. Morale is extremely low, and Canadians are feeling desperate and abandoned by their government. Violent protests are common, and workers often go on strike to demand better working conditions and wages.

**A look into 2040**

*A Workplace Exclusively for Men:* People yearn for stability, as the 9-to-5 workweek is a thing of the past. Workers now jump project to project based on tasks that have yet to be automated. Companies embrace remote work to attract the cheapest labour. Intensified global pressures have put companies in constant survival mode, forcing them to innovate, capture market share, and prioritize their bottom line. Surveillance technologies have been used to increase the productivity of remote workers. Now, HR Robocops govern employees with performance reviews and billings tied to how often they speak during meetings, how many words they type, and how long they work. Despite the added flexibility of remote work, the nature of that work is under extreme mechanistic scrutiny. Meaningful work is hard to come by and many are just desperate for employment.

With profitability as priority, companies are putting less effort into DEI initiatives as they try to stay afloat. As a result, women and people of colour make up only 10% of leadership and board roles, the lowest percentage in decades. Women in the workplace are few and far between, with remote work creating further barriers to their participation. Women are continuously excluded from digital conversations and networking opportunities where important decisions are made. The old boys club mentality is pervasive in the remote work environment, as many companies follow the invite only “clubhouse” model, where women have to wait to be asked to join digital channels and often need to prove themselves before they are let in.

*No Trust in Government:* Economic inequality is more severe than ever, and many women live below the poverty line and rely on social assistance to get by. This financial insecurity has led to a longer road to retirement and has forced many to turn to gig and microwork platforms that often only pay \$2-4 an hour. These extremely precarious situations take advantage of women’s labour, as anti-discriminatory labour laws cannot be enforced within these unregulated platforms.

Governments have been in crisis mode for years, and funding has mainly been concentrated on mitigating the impacts of the economic and climate crises. Severe storms and floods have eroded the coastal communities in Atlantic and Western Canada, with adverse effects on vital infrastructure and industries. Furthermore, millions of climate refugees have turned to Canada in the past five years, putting a strain on government resources to provide jobs, housing, and health care for new immigrants. Women are falling through the cracks of the ill-fitted social architecture; those who are gig workers have minimal protection, and there are no care subsidies to help women

with unpaid care work. In fact, the government’s extreme austerity measures have cut more childcare support programs. The high health care cost of elderly care has also led the government to deploy medical robots to senior care facilities.

*Obsession with Productivity and GDP:* The market is in a prolonged recession, and businesses have a one-track focus on increasing profitability. Large multinational corporations are reducing headcount and cutting salaries for those without much bargaining power; this, unfortunately, impacts women and people of colour (POC) the most. Several large scale media movements to boycott these corporations have led to aggressive hiring quotas for women and POC. However, these commitments have been met with extreme pushback from anti-feminist groups and sparked a rise in the Corporate Men Movement. These groups claim that all lives matter and feminism must be stopped as it marginalizes men by taking away their power.

With fewer women and POC in the workforce, especially within STEM positions, gender and racial bias are increasingly magnified in AI and algorithms. This is creating increasingly ageist, ableist, sexist, and racist technologies that govern our society. The impacts of automation and increasing gender bias have pushed many women out of the workforce.

*Default Caretaker:* The majority of women are unemployed or underemployed and often choose caregiving over their career. In times of economic hardship, women default to their biological instincts. This regression is pushing women back into default homemaker and caregiver roles. The commodification of the care economy has led to robotic care innovations; however, these technologies are still unaffordable for many households. Because of this, many women rely on hyper-local communities to provide rotation of care and mutual aid.

**Table 3: Key takeaways for the Collapse Scenario**

What is the value of women’s work?	Women’s work is unacknowledged due to more significant socioeconomic challenges. Women’s work is invisible and valueless due to automation and increased gender inequality.
What is the gender pay gap?	Exacerbated, women make 50% less than men.
What is women’s prosperity?	Non-existent.
What is the CLA metaphor?	Survival of the fittest.

**Discipline Scenario: The Matriarch Model**

The year 2040 marks the end of the patriarchy, with society adopting matriarchal business models that value sustainability, justice, and cooperation. This is largely driven by the rise of socially-minded Millennials and Gen Zs who have pushed for change and have held governments and businesses accountable for equality. The 2020-2021 COVID-19 pandemic fueled a feminist economic recovery, and gender and racial equality became a central focus for businesses in 2022-2023. Organizations designed intentional strategies to bring women back to the workforce by not only increasing women and people of colour in their hiring pipelines but fundamentally changing their organizational practices and policies to foster family and women-friendly work cultures. Governments provided generous tax credits for businesses to rehire women, and new forms of care and social support were prioritized. Ultimately, society now values equity, quality of life, and community over productivity and profitability.

**A look into 2040**

*The Workplace Designed for Care:* Over the past decade, the meaning and value of work have slowly shifted. Canadians are now motivated by purpose and crave opportunities to connect with nature, build community, and explore passion projects. The workforce thrives off the flexibility that remote work, satellite offices, and project-based tasks provide. However, to attract talent, organizations also need to be flexible in every aspect, allowing individuals to choose when they want to work and what policies and benefits they might need (parental leave for rainbow families, menstrual leave, etc.). As people live more fulfilling lives, the retirement age has also been

prolonged, as regular sabbaticals become the norm. Workers often take a 6 to 12-month leave every four years to recharge and reconnect with their passions. As a result, workplaces have adapted to create transparency around roles, skills required, and opportunities post-leave. The government partnered with private corporations to develop a one-of-a-kind comprehensive skill-to-job training program. Organizations can now bridge individuals returning from sabbatical or parental leave using micro assignments and training to guarantee future roles. These types of onboarding training programs have been instrumental in eliminating the motherhood penalty.

Diverse teams are now seen as a superpower, as they can unlock innovations to solve social problems for every consumer market. Organizations use AI algorithms to intentionally hire for diversity, and businesses have balanced women and people of colour in leadership and board positions (50% makeup). In this new age, every business owner and leader must also go through mandatory anti-oppressive, anti-colonialist, and emotional intelligence (EQ) training to create space for all voices to thrive and foster employee wellbeing.

*Embracing the Nordic Model with Social Democracy:* The Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) was a popular antidote during the COVID-19 pandemic. It became a stepping stone towards a permanent basic income program, where citizens who earn under a certain amount are guaranteed regular income. Those under the poverty line, as well as workers who would have been displaced by automation, now have some security. Citizens' trust in the government increased as they finally felt that they were listened to and cared for, and everyone is provided with the opportunity to actualize their potential. To fund this basic income program, the government increased corporate tax rates over a span of 10 years, cracked down on tax evasion with offshore tax havens, and introduced a wealth tax for individuals with a net worth above \$10 million. The government slowly started to increase corporate tax rates to fuel the transition to a greener economy. The United States rolled out their \$2 trillion infrastructure plan in 2022 to transform its infrastructure, and Canada followed suit in order to stay competitive.

A Universal Caregiver Benefit was also rolled out to compensate caretakers for unpaid childcare and eldercare work. New types of balanced parental leave, such as bonding leave and secondary parental leave, were introduced to accommodate different types of families and their needs. This renewed focus to invest in the care economy yielded a greater economic return; with every \$1 invested in care, \$6 went back into the economy. Furthermore, the government introduced free lifelong learning programs to help people, especially women upskill, as automation has eliminated many traditional industries while creating new ones.

*Degrowth and Doughnut Economics:* In this new era of considered consumption, there has been a shift from materialistic purchases to meaningful transactions (Khan, 2019). People no longer care for extreme growth and now value slow, sustained growth. Society is moving towards new economic markers of environmental sustainability, wellbeing, and care that put humans and the planet at the forefront, as inspired by the Doughnut economic model. The push for mission-driven innovations to solve climate challenges has made industries move toward zero-waste, circular business models that respect our planet's boundaries. With this renewed consciousness, people have a newfound appreciation and respect for social reproduction work. Although AI, robotics, and monitoring tech are more prevalent in the care sector, it has yet to replace human interaction fully. Human care work is greatly valued and fairly compensated, either via economic dollars or an alternative care currency widely used for bartering that is accepted on most digital platforms.

*We All Need to Care:* Care work is unquestionably recognized and redistributed within households with the help of smart-glasses and smart-home technologies. AI has helped make the invisible labour that women typically perform visible by monitoring the distribution of tasks and setting reminders for care duties. Women no longer have to choose between care work and their career; they can do both just as their partners have historically been able to do. Intentional choices, not expectations, drive household decisions, and women's choices are no longer bound to a caretaker role.

**Table 4: Key takeaways for the Discipline Scenario**

What is the value of women’s work?	Women’s work is recognized and measured. The historically exploited care economy is now acknowledged and valued.
What is the gender pay gap?	Women’s wages are at parity with men, largely due to the government’s effort to close the gender and racial economic gap, and the elimination of the motherhood penalty.
What is women’s prosperity?	Risen dramatically due to renewed socioeconomic consciousness.
What is the CLA metaphor?	Freedom of choice.

**Transform Scenario: Transfeminist Liberation**

In 2040, people in Canada have queered their way towards a transfeminist future, where gender liberation is realized through technologies. This can be seen through the algorithms that command our daily interactions, which are developed with intersectional feminist values and designed to dismantle the matrix of capitalism, hetero-patriarchy, white supremacy, and colonization (Varon, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital transformation for all businesses and consumers, which sparked a fully realized Fourth Industrial Revolution, where automation has taken over our daily lives. Technological advances in energy and labour have transformed our economy where scarcity is replaced by abundance. The transfeminist technologies that govern society have been designed by those who were historically excluded to embody the values of agency, autonomy, empathy, pleasure, and decolonization. This revolution has led to a way of life where all humans belong, live purposefully, and in harmony with AI and robots.

**A look into 2040**

*Human-AI Augmented Workplaces:* Technology has transformed the workplace, eliminating mundane tasks to build capacity for humans to work on purpose-driven projects that stimulate creativity. Most organizations have a Chief AI that handles all administrative tasks, such as scheduling, expense reports, performance reviews, and monitoring of employee wellbeing. Work is primarily remote, as advanced AR/VR and holograms can teleport people anywhere. These technologies are synced with the workers’ personal AI, which can monitor health systems in real-time using smart stickers and neurotechnology. In this new age of working, organizations prioritize wellbeing, building a culture of belonging, and providing human therapy whenever individuals feel isolated and lonely.

The Chief AI conducts a real-time analysis of people’s cognitive state to assess workload, stress, and attention levels. These overall metrics are analyzed with the Chief Health Officer at the leadership and board level with balanced AI and human representation. Executives participate in leadership training to build empathy, collaboration, and inclusion between all human and AI workers. Reputation systems are essential to find meaningful jobs in this new era. The advancement in digital identity and the interoperability of different networks allows the Chief AI to create verified reviews of a worker’s quality of work, empathy and teamwork skills, along with any complaints (such as racist or sexist behaviours). These reviews are connected to the individuals’ social media and LinkedIn accounts for everyone to access.

*Fully Automated Social Democracy:* Trust in institutions is at an all-time high as citizens feel cared for by the government. The government has been effective in using data and technologies to create targeted policies aimed to help individuals out of poverty. There are strong private and public coalitions across sectors and industries that represent citizens’ needs. These coalitions put people first to create shared solutions for data monitoring and ethical technologies that cultivate equity and belonging. Furthermore, robots and AI do a significant portion of the work, and, as a result, humans can better enjoy the fruits of their labour by increasing leisure time and vacations.

After the devastating climate disasters in 2024, the Canadian government parties merged to unify and advance the agenda of building a prosperous and sustainable future for all Canadians. Their mandate allows humans and AI to work together to combat inequality. The government created a robust social safety net with a generous universal basic income program made possible by AI-produced surpluses and the aggressive Robot tax paid for by large



multinational corporations.

*Human Wellbeing and the Happiness Index:* Millennials have overtaken Baby Boomers as the largest generational cohort, and have fundamentally changed how we look at the economy, and to whom it should benefit. In 2040, the economy is healthy and abundant, and people only work when they derive pleasure and purpose from it. A circular economy has become the norm as waste is fully repurposed. Also, cultured meat has been commercialized since 2026 and is widely preferred by Gen Z and Gen Alphas due to its smaller environmental footprint. The world has moved radically to eliminate structures of economic exploitation and instead focuses on metrics of deep wellbeing. People want to live a good, purposeful life, and the biggest societal priority is happiness and health. The happiness and wellbeing metric is a balanced indicator for socioeconomic and environmental health and is tied to human outcomes. It measures economic sufficiency, quality of physical and mental health, community solidarity and integration, and the health of intellectual and creative flourishing.

While automation has enabled humans to enjoy life more fully, human cognitive tasks, such as care work, are still highly valued as people crave human connection. Personal AI has stepped in to automate social reproduction work and emotional labour. Even nursing homes have robots that help with feeding, lifting and washing, but human touchpoints are still necessary to maintain wellbeing. Traditional care workers are highly sought after from the ageing Boomer generation, and in-person care is generously compensated and greatly valued. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many front-line healthcare workers were infected by the virus. As a result, the government has since brought substantial changes to stabilize, support, and recognize the care sector after numerous protests and union negotiations.

*Let a Hundred Sexes Bloom:* Humans acknowledge biological sex, but the traditional notion of gender has been abolished by many, specially amongst Gen Zs and Gen Alphas. The heteronormative laws of the past have been dismantled along with the hierarchal value of “gender”. Gender identity, much like sexual identity, may fluctuate throughout an individual’s lifetime. Every human’s needs are now considered in all decisions, especially policymaking. Technology and AI have made this possible as data has become fully disaggregated based on intersecting identities and is collected and analyzed ethically and equitably.

**Table 5:** Key takeaways for the Transform Scenario

What is the value of women’s work?	Women’s work and care work are highly valued as these roles cannot be fully automated.
What is the gender pay gap?	Inconsequential, as the notion of gender has been removed. However, if it needs to be quantified, those who identify as women make 10% more than men.
What is women’s prosperity?	Flourishing, along with the rest of humanity.
What is the CLA metaphor?	Let everyone flourish.

**Learnings and Insights**

Scenarios were used to explore how various prototypes of future socioeconomic and political systems may evolve to impact the value of women’s labour in the future of work. The purpose was not to select one of the scenarios as the “best-case” future. Rather, these visions of the future are intended to be equally inspiring and cautionary. Different opportunities and risks exist in each future scenario for us to consider for the present, and we may even see aspects from all scenarios as our future unfolds. Each scenario includes associated vulnerabilities, risks and opportunities for the future of work for women. Research findings were synthesized to generate the following ten insights for us to consider today in order to future-proof gender parity efforts for the future of work.

**Table 6:** Research insights generated from the scenario analysis

Workplace Insights	
1	<b>Move from performative to transformational change:</b> Society must hold organizations accountable and call out companies that engage in performative DEI initiatives. Organizations should measure their gender and racial equality efforts using diagnostic frameworks and periodically report these metrics to all stakeholders. Leaders should be held accountable to move the needle, either through participation in mandatory anti-oppression training or quotas tied to executive compensation. Accountability from the top will create rippling effects throughout the entire organization.
2	<b>Prevent the additional barriers that emerging technologies create for women:</b> The flexibility that comes with remote work also comes with additional barriers. Work participation may be magnified in the digital realm, as women may be continuously left out of digital channels and have restricted access to information. Organizations need to understand and assess the impact these changes have on women and marginalized groups by reviewing all policies through a gendered-based analysis (GBA+) lens.
3	<b>Accommodate for the changing notion of work by designing for flexibility:</b> The coming decade will bring significant changes to the type of work we do and how we want to work. The workplace will need to adapt to be flexible-at-the-core to accommodate all needs without disfavoring others, have knowledge and transparency around roles and expectations and update their performance metrics to account for value, not hours worked. Workplace policies must be redesigned to accommodate the needs of women and it must no longer be catered to the default male.
Governance Insights	
4	<b>Reframe the care economy as an essential economy:</b> The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed how the care economy is neglected yet fundamental to the paid economy. The care economy is a significant leverage point. It is the most female dominated sector of the economy and is also one of the largest growing areas of work due to an ageing population. Care work cannot be fully automated, and the care that is provided by humans are based on core values that prioritizes wellbeing over profit. The government needs to make significant, long-term investments in the care economy in order to offer sustainable infrastructure that supports those in care roles.
5	<b>Protect the evolving worker in the face of disruption:</b> Our social contract must be continuously updated to protect the evolving worker, as the nature of what work is and how we work will change in the next decade due to automation and the proliferation of gig work. Automation will also displace jobs, sparking mandatory upskilling for new roles. Women and marginalized groups have limited time and resources to upskill, and so an effective, highly subsidized skill-to-job training program should be prioritized to combat increasing inequality.
Economic Insights	
6	<b>Challenge economic priorities to focus on wellbeing, not wealth:</b> The COVID-19 pandemic presents a pivotal moment to rebuild better and prioritize a feminist economic recovery where organizations can build intentional strategies to hire back women and people of colour. As consumers, we can support businesses with good practices and using ESG reporting metrics, we can create a baseline for accountability to move society towards positive change. Furthermore, to value human wellbeing over wealth, we need to move away from GDP and productivity towards metrics that prioritize our communities and our planetary health.
7	<b>Design technologies and AI to fill in the gaps:</b> AI models will exacerbate existing biases due to the under-representation of women and POC in data sets and decision-making. Organizations need to hire more women and POC to design these predictive algorithms. They need to conduct regular audits for algorithmic biases and provide transparency over how data is collected and validated. Technologies, such as emotional AI software to understand nuanced human emotions and complex cognitive states, will be prevalent in the future, and guidelines must be created to ensure that AI is designed and applied equitably.
Societal Insights	
8	<b>Create an egalitarian approach to the division of labour:</b> There is a social shift in domestic sharing due to changing gender roles; however, women are still doing most of the unpaid care work. Sharing the care within family units means having more men take parental leave to participate in care work and addressing unequal sharing of intra-household dynamics (Gender Wage Gap Steering Committee, 2016). Increasing men's participation in childcare models different

	behaviours starting at birth and works to remove gender biases in households. Technologies may also help measure women's invisible work and help with the recognition, reduction and redistribution of care work.
9	<b>Understand implicit biases for both men and women:</b> We are socialized to conform to gender roles, and these social expectations can lead to implicit biases. Mindfulness is essential when confronting these biases. From an organizational perspective, there is a risk that mandatory implicit bias training can lead to defensive backlash, triggering tension, and negative emotions such as shame (Sukhera, 2020). From a social perspective, we need a safe space to have productive polarized conversations to unlearn and relearn new ways of thinking.
10	<b>Disrupt the status quo by dismantling gender constructs:</b> Jason Tester's theory "queering the future" challenges us to scrutinize, adapt, and transform the status quo into a future that is radically open, human, and empowers marginalized groups (Policy Horizons Canada, 2021). As a society, we are undergoing fundamental transformations in how we think about gender and family. There is an urgent need to abolish gender constructs and dismantle the hierarchical value of gender, as society has progressed beyond traditional gender norms. We must consider every human's needs in all forms of decision-making by fully disaggregating data based on intersecting identities.

## Conclusion

This research contribution is additive and complementary to existing research on gender equality and feminist futures. Due to time and resource constraints, reports of essential work done by feminist futurists were not reviewed in detail and could be further examined (including work done by Elise Boulding, Eleonora Masini, Riane Eisler, Magda Cordell McHale, and Marilyn Waring). Other notable work of the era include:

- [Special issue on Feminist Futures](#), Futures volume 40 (2008),
- [Gender in futures: A study of gender and feminist papers published in Futures, 1969–2009 by Ulrika Gunnarsson-Östling](#), Futures volume 43 (2011)
- [What about the Future? The Troubled Relationship between Futures and Feminism](#), NORA volume 22 (2014)
- [Scenarios for sustainable futures beyond GDP growth 2050](#), Futures volume 111 (2019)

Strategic foresight was used to envision alternative, plausible futures that challenge our mental models and assumptions about the future. Our current systems are broken and structurally oppressive, designed to serve those who are already privileged. We need to design systems where the most marginalized are prioritized in all decisions. The scenarios presented help us reimagine what our future could look like if we changed our current systems to value women's labour in the future. The goal of this research is to spur discussion, provoke new thinking, and inspire action towards building a collective feminist vision for the future of work for women that ultimately benefits everyone.

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