

## Women of the Pandemic

**Commissioner Ward:** Welcome to Level the Playing Field where we explore topics related to economics, equity, women work and money. My name is Kadie Ward and I'm Commissioner and CEO of Ontario's Pay Equity Commission. Today we're talking with Lauren McKeon. Lauren is Deputy Editor at Reader's Digest Canada, and author of *F bomb Dispatches From the War on Feminism*, *No More Nice Girls Gender Power* and *why it's Time to Stop Playing by the Rules*, and most recently, *Women of the Pandemic Stories from the Front Lines of COVID-19*. Lauren your research and journalism has uncovered stories and trends about women, work, and equity with your most recent excellent book, highlighting how the story of the pandemic was very different for women and that in many ways the story of the pandemic is the story of women. Thank you so much for joining us today to share your insights on this.

**Lauren McKeon:** Yeah, thanks for having me.

**Commissioner Ward:** So, you have covered gender inequalities, gender and power, gender and inclusion, and racialized aspects of both gender and power for working women. What has your research uncovered about women work and equity, broadly speaking?

**Lauren McKeon:** You know I could probably talk about this for hours, but I won't, don't worry, but I think you know there's so much. And this is such rich terrain but also you know such devastating terrain to. And I think, you know, broadly speaking, I can say that I've learned women have fought so many incredible battles over, you know, even the past few years but decades, you know, going back centuries. You know they fought to be in the workplace at all. They fought to gain you know even like a bit of a foothold for what they do have in the workplace across all industries. You know, they've pushed to be in more leadership positions, they've pushed for the equity you know that we do have in the workplace. But, you know, and they're still pushing and I, you know, I don't want to discount those hard wins and those hard victories. But I think, you know, if anything I've learned, you know as we always kind of say in feminist circles, even though we've come so far, we have so much further to go.

**Commissioner Ward:** Absolutely, progress is being made, but it's incremental. Yeah, I mean your research is so rich across these three books and not just the books but also work you've done as a journalist. What are some of the realities of inequity for women at work that you've uncovered in your, in your research that you've told stories about and shared?

**Lauren McKeon:** This is another one of those lists that you know unfortunately can be depressingly long, there are a lot of inequities that persist and that's because it's, it's the systems are so complicated that you know that we have to go against and we see,

particularly a lot of those inequities in the STEM industries of course, where, you know, women, and I would say you know all genders, you know are fighting for equal representation, you know they're fighting for equal pay. they're fighting to be treated well within those workplaces, to have their ideas and their voices heard you know they're fighting for leadership so you know that persist but you know even beyond that we see, you know there are racial inequalities that again are persistent and pervasive and are threaded through STEM certainly, you know, and I've spoken to many women who just have horrific stories to share you know as a journalist but also in my own life you know my, my friends who are in those industries and you know and just face a fight almost every day to you know to get their voices heard to be valued at work, to feel that they are equal, you know, team members. But beyond that, you know, we still see disabled women fighting, you know, to have equal representation on the workforce we see LGBTQ women fighting to have equal representation in the workforce, there are you know those big battles of representation, but then there's also those day to day battles you know that probably a lot of us can have a lot of empathy for where we see you know studies that women are interrupted more work. We see that their ideas are very easily dismissed but then co-opted by male co-workers you know we've seen just the little struggles that we do have. And then you layer, sexism, and harassment, and you know those day to day things that can just bring you down and it's just this messy, stewy place that a lot of us are fighting for success and are fighting to bring other, you know, to make it better for everybody.

**Commissioner Ward:** Yeah, thank you for pointing out the broader sort of structural as you said, you pointed to STEM and that's a sector, right, and there's clearly structural issues that keep women out of those sectors that are very large but then also, as you said, the, the sort of tacit daily ways by you know being interrupted, or ideas not taken seriously the sort of small things that are happening daily which could be dismissed as oh that's just a little thing but it adds up to a very big barrier for women. So, which, you know, brings me to my next question which I know in your books you've addressed a lot of this is sort of restructuring, or shifting the structures of inequality, really calls for restructuring, or shifting several of the complex interrelated systems and you started to talk about that in your previous answer. Can you share more insight and what you've learned, like what are some of those systems and what are the stories you've heard or you've uncovered in your research about those particular larger structural issues that you're talking about?

**Lauren McKeon:** Right, I often think of it like a ball of like messy yarn, like, you know like this big old ball of yarn and you know you start to, to try and unravel one structure, and then you find that you know it's tied to another structure and another knot over here, and you know we see that with the systems that we do have we have systems you know that uphold racism systems, and were built in racism you know systems that were

built in colonialism and I pulled that and then systems of course that uphold sexism and all intertwined together, which is why you know intersectionality is so important and it is so important for us to acknowledge that. You can't try and like unravel one of these knots over here without also addressing one of these other, knots because when we think about you know the progress that we made we also have to be realistic that, you know equality doesn't just mean a bunch of white women like myself, you know, cis gender white women with privilege sitting at the table or you know being finally in positions of leadership and power are being able to have the freedom to pursue the jobs that we want and the careers that we want and the lifestyle we want and you know we need everyone being able to do that. And I think you know spoken to and interviewed, so many you know young women of colour, you know Indigenous women, trans women who are looking at these systems and saying, maybe this one, you know way forward or this one program or this one movement, helps some people, but they, it doesn't necessarily help me which is why a lot of my research focuses on, you know, tearing it all down and really rebuilding something that from the start is built in a different way and it was built in collaboration and kindness and compassion, and, you know, it's built with inclusion in mind, and you know I think that, you know, there's so many young woman across many industries, whether it's film technology, business, government, you know who want to see these things done differently because they do realize that we are working with, you know, that big messy ball of yarn where everything is so deeply intertwined.

**Commissioner Ward:** Absolutely. And I think, you know what you've pointed out that is so interesting when you talk with the several complex interrelated systems is one that we've seen bubbled to the surface now is really race, and sort of the structure and social structure around race and racism and you know if you have racialized women, Indigenous women, and gender now as well right different gender identities. So, even just looking at and tackling those two you know we have to unravel the whole ball but looking at those two I think would, would lead to such significant, significant change. You've talked about in all your books, actually, this is one thing I appreciate about your writing is you point out the problem, but you also point out how things are happening, which I think it's great to know that there's challenges but there are women who are making a difference not just women there's men there's communities and agencies that are doing things to change what are the ways that you've seen in your stories are the areas where women have actually made progress and making these shifts you know what have been the impacts of the progress that you've witnessed or that you've written about and why aren't we talking about these gains. I mean you're a journalist who is you're doing the research and you're saying there's a problem here something happening around it, or you're giving calls to actions but, you know, why isn't that happening more. So, sort of a two parter question on like when you see the progress and the impact of it but, but why aren't we talking about it?

**Lauren McKeon:** You know, yeah, well I answer the progress, let's answer the positive part first. You know the progress and I think you know certainly my second book No More Nice Girls really looked at the ways in which people were changing that structure were unraveling you know that ball of yarn and were finding new ways to lead and finding new meanings of success. And you know that could be I spoke to a group of women who were, you know, had made a new greeting card company so it could be something and they were and you know I was speaking to them and they'd be like, Oh, you're also speaking you know to, you know, business leaders and, you know, government members like what about us, like why us, but I found it so fascinating that these three women had looked at, you know, the back when we could go into stores and browse, you know, had looked at, you know, these walls of cards and said, you know, no one looks like me and these cards, these are, these Hallmark moments are all for like, you know, young white women and they're celebrating things that maybe are not culturally relevant to me. So, you know they made a greeting card company that featured like women of color that you know had cards for things that were maybe not like life moments that we're taught to celebrate the broken of that molds you know cards for, you know, happy breakup from the guy that wasn't any good, or you know, you know, happy you know first job or happy like being happy as a single person, you know it's like breaking the status quo moment. And I thought that was incredible you know we need to stuff like that we need, artists, and you know, people that are doing art differently, and that's a positive story. I spoke to women in tech, one woman in tech, that had made a bot that did the hard work of talking back to you know misogynist gross trolling comments and her bot just went through and did it for her you know and that's, that's another fun way to do it. I spoke to women that were reimagining what their cities look like and how to make safe cities for women, and how that you know the very structure of these places that we walk through need to change in order to make things better for everyone.

**Commissioner Ward:** Absolutely.

**Lauren McKeon:** You know, and I've spoken to businesses that have taken trauma centered business approach and you're like, what, what does that mean? And it's you know women business leaders who want to do business differently and acknowledge that you know there are a lot of women that women have faced trauma and maybe, you know, we should normalize that it's okay to need a mental health day if you went through something really tough, or we should normalize that hey, sometimes maybe you do have to cry at work. That doesn't mean that you know you're weak. Maybe it says, you know, maybe it's a sign of compassion. So, I think, you know, I've just talked to so many people that have looked at the structures and said, that doesn't work for me, you know I don't fit in there. And that have changed it or built something completely new that you know is incredible and inspiring. And I think, you know, why we don't hear about

those stories, though you know why we don't hear about these people doing these things is such a good question, and I think, you know, part of my answer is very cynical because I think that part of the reason we don't hear about them is because they are breaking the status quo. They are doing things differently, and in so many ways, it's a bit of a threat to see, you know like, it is, and I and I shouldn't laugh because you know that is very serious but it you know it's, in some ways, it's like well of course we're not hearing about them, because, you know, these are the ways in which we are going to start tearing down those inequities and we're going to start unraveling that ball of yarn, and I think that, you know, for some people who've had power for so long, and don't want to see that change that's deeply threatening. And it's so much easier to keep us thinking that we can't change and we can't see these positive stories and these new ways of being and leading and doing and finding success.

**Commissioner Ward:** Absolutely. I think in some ways, there is a vested interest in keeping the narrative supporting the status quo right and you well, see it's always been this way and it's going to continue along this trajectory so it takes you know authors like you and hopefully this series to really bring in the alternative narrative that says yes progress is being made it's incremental, but it's happening I think that's one thing I really admire about your work is that as I said you're able to, to find those stories to demonstrate you know where the shifts are happening and where women, are stepping out of status quo and doing something that that shifts it. I'm going to build off of your research in *No More, No More Nice Girls*. I really appreciated that book in it your research notes that when it comes to the complexity of the intersections between gender power and inclusion of women and other excluded communities that the process of, of inclusion and this is a quote is not about demanding a seat at the table at all, it's about building your own table and making it look completely different which you, which you alluded to. So, the inequalities exposed through the pandemic and you know it's been building over the past few decades in many ways have made it apparent that as economic recovery unfolds we've started to shift the way we look at equity, pay equity racial justice, and all of the inequalities going forward. So, you know, linking that to the research of your latest book *Women of the Pandemic*, you know, and, and what you've revealed, about the way women are actually building their own table, as we build back better what are some of those stories, because you really, you know, it was compelling, because you you know you brought the reader to the traumatic space of the nurse and to the unbelievably stressful difficult moments of frontline workers like cashiers and and what the struggles they had. But then you also brought the reader to the other side, where women were starting to build their own tables and really shift the way that even governments were responding to it so you know what are some, some of the some of the things that you've learned through the research in that book?

**Lauren McKeon:** Yeah, it was and it's you know it's interesting that you said, you know, a few years and decades and I think it you know it is and I think the pandemic you know didn't create the inequities that we saw so deeply emerge. But I think what it did is it shone a spotlight on some of these inequities and it made them so undeniable, you know that we cannot look away from the ways in which women sacrificed during the pandemic, the ways in which they lost the most, you know, economically, certainly, but you know the vulnerable positions that they were put in and you know, by and large, it was a lot of women who were those essential workers who were our PSWs, who were our nurses who were put in these places where, you know, we saw that they weren't supported and that that wasn't new, but certainly it became just so undeniable you just couldn't look away from it. And I think that that is what helped or pushed a lot of women to say, well, why do we want to return to normal? Normal wasn't working for us so well, why do we want to return to normal where you know we are just fighting for a seat at the table where we just want to kind of have a voice but not, not necessarily change the narrative. And I think that, you know the pandemic has shown us that, you know, women can change the narrative if there is any silver lining to what has been a horrible time, you know, I think it is that we've seen women leaders emerge in their communities and their workplaces you know in our governments as health leaders. When I wrote No More Nice Girls you know it was all about exploring these alternative ways of leadership and community and success. And I remember thinking, you know, I found these examples, but it's going to be a really long time before we embrace these women leaders and these different ways of leadership and this idea of, you know, building our own table building our own way to lead. And that book came out like a week before the pandemic started. And then, you know, but then we saw those shifts like far faster than I saw. You know we saw Canada, and, you know, world leaders everywhere, or countries embrace their world leaders everywhere, embrace women's leadership. You know we saw Canada embrace people like Dr Bonnie Henry, Dr Dina Hinshaw, we saw them embrace you know this way of compassion and kindness and vulnerability and openness and, you know, we heard that that's what got them through the pandemic. And I think, you know, we have seen now that not only can women leaders succeed in a crisis in a way that you know the narrative was very skeptical about before the mainstream narrative, you know, we've seen that they can excel and they can lead us through and that we can see these different ways of leadership, and these different tables. So, I think, you know, the pandemic has, has, has given us that silver lining and has given us sort of like a you know as collective as a society has given us sort of the push to see like how deeply we do need women leaders and women's sometimes way of doing things differently, you know, it's not only women that do things differently, it's not only women that exhibit these qualities but you know we've come to associate them with women, and now we can see that's actually an incredible thing.

**Commissioner Ward:** Yeah, exactly. Your, the Women of the Pandemic did such a good job of demonstrating and you know this is this is controversial some, you know, women and feminist groups don't want to say oh well you shouldn't talk about women being compassionate empathetic and all this is a sensitive subject but I agree with you that there is there's, you know, research that proves that women lead differently, and in your book you really outline a bit globally, but certainly across Canada, how, especially there was a lot of you know chief, chief doctors who are women across the country who were making very vital and crucial decisions and, you know, in Women of the Pandemic you document, this is a quote from your book "women have never before played such a vital essential role in a global crisis and that also on the other hand that they've also been the ones that suffered most." And you point out, these amazing small acts of leadership like the care monger movement, which everybody read the book just to read about the care mongers so good. But then you also told really personal stories about frontline workers long haul, women in long haul trucking, long term care, nursing, food processing, grocery like all of these essential workplaces that many people just didn't consider right we heard a lot of nursing but other ones so you know how have you seen these, these women, provide that blueprint, you sort of alluded it to, to it in your in your previous answer, but have you seen them provide that blueprint for moving forward more equitably? So essentially what they did is they just started doing things differently in their own way, which was inclusive and equitable.

**Lauren McKeon:** Yeah, I think you know that we've seen, and I think just to speak a little bit to the leadership like yes, it is very controversial to say that women lead differently and I think my hope is and I think the pandemic exposed this too is that you know by embracing so called women's leadership qualities, it'll open the door for all genders, to feel that they can lead differently or feel that you know that leadership isn't put in a tiny box and you can only lead one way and I think that you know that has, we can see how that is rippled out and expanded to other blueprints and I think it's not necessarily that you know women by doing things have built a new blueprint because, you know, a lot of them I've spoken to is like well I've always done this, this is my job you know this is what I want to do, I did this before the pandemic and I'm going to keep doing this, after the pandemic. What I think has changed is that by doing these things by leading and, you know, leading through their communities, the way that they've always done or doing you know the essential vital jobs that they've always done during this particular time we have finally underscored how vital those jobs are, and you know it's the rest of us that weren't paying attention that are starting to see the blueprints and the way forward. And I think, you know, the pandemic, and a lot of women that I spoke to you know have said that you know like you know I these problems exist before they they're going to exist after, but what the pandemic has shown them is that you know everything can unravel in a short amount of time, you know, we've seen that there's also a great potential to rebuild.

**Commissioner Ward:** Yeah.

**Lauren McKeon:** And I think like that's the other side of it is that we're seeing, okay, these systems didn't work they crumbled during the pandemic. We saw them crumble. We saw you know the most vulnerable lose. We saw women in these positions face incredible risk and lose. But what we've also seen is that, you know, now we can build something, a way forward you know once we hear their stories and we honor their stories and we listen to their stories. Their inspiring and devastating stories all kind of, you know, bundled into one, we can build a way forward with those stories in mind. So, I think, you know, that is what has changed is that we have this opportunity right now to rebuild. And now we can do so hearing those stories and building something that puts those people first instead of actively ignores them.

**Commissioner Ward:** Yes, absolutely. Lauren, thank you so much for your research, for the stories you've told in your many books. You know, for the, for the viewers who haven't picked up any of your work I would encourage them to get, I read all three books but *Women of the Pandemic* is a remarkable story it's, you know, a great read on both the unequal toll of the pandemic, but also how women have led the way through COVID 19. This conversation is part of a series published by the Pay Equity Commission of Ontario to examine economics, equity, women, work, and money. You can learn more at [levelthepayingfield.ca](http://levelthepayingfield.ca), and please share this video on your social platforms like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, so we can elevate the equity conversation. Thank you.